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ROUNDTABLE

Sounding North Africa and the Middle East

Introduction

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Scholars of the Middle East and North Africa in all disciplines can learn much about their favored topics of interest through the study of music and related cultural practices. However, professional and often personal limitations have precluded awareness of the rich potential that music offers for analyses of Middle Eastern and North African societies. Typically music and the performing arts have been the purview of specialists in ethnomusicology, anthropology of music, and performance studies. Music and other sonic phenomena have been routinely marginalized if not ignored by scholars in Middle East studies, who, to a surprising extent, have reproduced conservative Muslim opinion regarding music by leaving it out of their analyses. Even the majority of ethnographic texts on the region depict Middle Easterners as living in near silence.[1] When scholars have explored the ways in which music and expressive culture might shed light on their areas of expertise, they have tended to apply the conceptual tools of their home disciplines to the study of music: hence we have the sociology and anthropology of music, the history and politics of music and performance, and so on. Music in these studies remains a (usually passive) expression of more fundamental forces, reproducing the marginal position that music, and the arts in general, typically enjoy in Western societies—at best serving as an analytic tool but too seldom understood as an agent itself.

Yet, following Iain Chambers,[2] we might turn the tables and aim not for a sociology (or anthropology/economics/history/politics) of music but rather for music *as* sociology (or anthropology/economics/history/politics). Following trends in ethnomusicology and the growing interdisciplinary field of sound studies,[3] we need to analyze music not only as a historical and cultural practice embedded in society but also *as* history, *as* culture, *as* society. That is, music, like other forms of expressive culture, not only expresses the dynamics of societies in history but also actively works to create and recreate them. Music is not only in society: it *is* society, *is* history, *is* politics, and economy and culture and so on.

What about music grants it this quality not only to accompany historical changes but also—as Attali, among other scholars, has noted—to anticipate, even predict, them?[4] There are many reasons why music plays an active role in shaping, and not merely

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reflecting, culture and history. First, music tends to be highly valued culturally even when it occupies an ambiguous status. Music (better, song) not only may express ideas of national and regional identity, but it also fashions them, as Danielson astutely notes in her study of Umm Kulthum, *The Voice of Egypt*.[5] Second, music is eminently portable and thus can be easily transported over time and place. Whether via oral transmission or via analog and digital media, music knows few boundaries and therefore can serve not only as a powerful marker of societies in transition but also as an active agent in promoting or contesting ideas of personhood, community, and nation. Attention to music and the sonic dimensions of everyday life should therefore help us reorient our studies away from the visual and textual bias at the heart of Western modernity, opening the way both for more nuanced analyses of subjectivities and for more serious engagement with the cultural and historical practices held dear by the peoples we study. For nations are not only imagined communities but also sounded ones.

Readers may well ask: Why should historians, economists, political scientists, and anthropologists pay attention to music and musical performance? What can we learn that we do not already know through our own disciplinary practices? Aside from the potential pleasures involved in listening to the musical cultures of the Middle East and North Africa, there are many reasons why scholars in the traditional disciplines should open their ears to music and other sonic phenomena and confront the silence that characterizes the majority of works on the region. Music speaks volumes about the contradictions of societies undergoing rapid change. Turning the analytical tables and using music as a window—an ear—onto society allows the fruitful study of nearly everything in the Middle East and North Africa as musical/sonic objects or processes.

What would a sounded approach to Middle Eastern and North African studies be like? In this roundtable, a collection of scholars of music and culture in the Middle East and North Africa provide some examples. Whether through analysis of how musical practices both structure and reflect cultures of globalization (Jones, Karl, LeVine), social institutions and political mobilization (Davila, Jones, LeVine), gender ideologies (Ciucci, Jones), and spiritual practice (Davila, Jones, Witulski), these essays open our ears to some of the ways we can use music as an analytical tool in our studies of Middle Eastern and North African societies.

Let me give a few examples from my own research on musical practices in Syria and Morocco, which has focused on what we can learn about the contours and contradictions of modern subjectivity through listening to and performing music as well as by analyzing discourse about music. In these contexts, music offers powerful insights into social currents, from the personal to the political, the historical, and the economic.

My main finding in Syria was that modernity is closely linked to the production of affect.[6] Rather than basing subjectivity exclusively in the rational self, Syrians (like many other peoples, Arab and non-Arab) compose their understandings of modernity by accessing rich domains of emotion and affect, often enacted through musical performance. Doing so allows them to formulate modern subjectivities (personal, communal, political) that challenge both universalizing ideals of Western modernity as based in rationality and postcolonial critiques of Orientalist thought that deny the agency of affect in the quest to combat stereotypes of the "emotional Arab." Embracing the contradictions of such terms as *ṭarab* (enchantment or rapture), a key metaphor for understanding not only musical experience but also the textures of everyday life, offers

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deeper insights into the human condition in the Arab world today and suggests how universalist models of "rational" modernity could be analyzed as affective cultures as well.[7] In this way, analysis of music and of discourse about music allows us both to access deep-seated political subjectivities in Syria and to question our own self-image as rational subjects.[8]

Turning to Morocco, my research on the Andalusian music known as *al-āla* reveals deep contradictions in postcolonial Moroccan society that not only confirm but also complexify what we might understand through traditional disciplinary research.[9] Let me outline only two areas where musical analysis can contribute to new understandings of Moroccan society: notions of personhood and of society. As in Syria, music in Morocco accesses a deep register of affect and emotion that forms an important tool in the negotiation of selfhood and person. However, whereas in Syria the emotional tenor of traditional Arab music orients Syrian aficionados toward the East—through metaphors of "Oriental spirit," for example—in Morocco, *al-āla* tends to index what aficionados there consider to be a more refined, *European* affective register, often through the rich metaphorical associations of Moroccan culture with medieval al-Andalus. Concepts such as *ṭarab*—emotional rapture or enchantment in music—operate in both societies as tools of self-fashioning through auditory practices but with often contradictory orientations.

This bears on the ways music sounds social formations as well, because in Morocco fans of *al-āla* tend to be highly educated, middle- to upper-class men organized in clubs and associations patterned on the organization of Sufi confraternities, usually operating under the aegis of state and even royal patronage. By contrast, in Syria, the class associations are more ambiguous and the organization of the musical culture more individualized, usually without official state patronage, reflecting ideologies of Baʿthist modernity as well as the more atomized structure of social relations in contemporary Syrian society. It's not so much that music mirrors society in these cases: music *is* society, bringing together all the social forces and contradictions of culture, politics, and history in a set of performance practices. Music offers important insights into national politics, colonial and postcolonial histories, formal and informal economies, global flows of culture and capital, reform movements, heritage politics, gender dynamics, religion, the peace process, rebellion and revolution, and so on. All of these phenomena can and should be studied as *sounded* phenomena. These are just some of the ways music, musical performance, and other sonic phenomena serve, through their rich associations with all domains of life, as unique vehicles for grasping the complexities of societies in the Middle East and North Africa.

NOTES

[1]John Chernoff, "Ideas of Culture and the Challenge of Music," in *Exotic No More: Anthropology on the Front Lines,* ed. Jeremy MacClancy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 377–98.

[2]Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 47.

[3]Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Steven Feld and Donald Brenneis, "Doing Anthropology in Sound," *American Ethnologist* 31 (2004): 461–74; David Samuels, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa, and Thomas Porcello, "Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 325–45; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

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[4]Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

[5]Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). For an analysis of similar roles for television drama in Egypt, see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[6]Jonathan H. Shannon, *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

[7]Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

[8]See also, among others, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[9]Jonathan H. Shannon, "Performing al-Andalus, Remembering al-Andalus: Mediterranean Soundings from Mashriq to Maghrib," *Journal of American Folklore* 120 (2007): 308–34.

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