


BOOK REVIEWS

Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance

Louis Brehony (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2023). Pp. 340.
\$59.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781649033048

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It is hard to imagine a more tragically opportune moment for the publication of a book about Palestinian music, especially the music of Gaza, than today. As I write this, Israeli troops are bombarding Rafah in the midst of a genocidal campaign that began with the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023. Israel's campaign has not only killed upward of 50,000 people but also displaced over a million Gazans, reopening one of the most painful wounds of ethnic cleansing in modern history.

Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance is a book that needed to be published, because it lays out a road map for archiving the near-term future of Palestinians who are experiencing their third mass catastrophe in less than a century. The knowledge it preserves, the artists it discusses, and the musical styles, trends, and debates it analyzes are all elements of preserving the near future of a Palestinian society that is once again facing massive long-term displacement and exile. Brehony brings a unique combination of the aesthetic and the political, the musicological and the sociological, combining as he does a PhD in music with a deeply sociological, ethnographic, and also politically committed appreciation for the music and those performing it. Together, this enables the book to speak to multiple audiences. Brehony's book also reminds us of the importance of having scholars who also are practitioners—whether of music, film, theater, or the visual arts—engaged in deep ethnographic research, because of the close bonds they form with the artists with whom they both study and collaborate.

As the subtitle suggests, the central focus of the book is on Palestinian musicians in exile, however in this case exile includes displacement within the boundaries of mandate-era Palestine. Grounded in a materialist and Marxist reading of the intertwining of culture, politics, and history, its nine chapters (including the Introduction and Conclusion) focus on such diverse locations as Kuwait, Syria, Egypt, and Turkey, as well as Gaza and the *dākhil* or internal exile of 1948 Palestine (i.e., within the boundaries of Israel between 1948 and 1967). Although the book focuses on the role of music in social spaces of Palestinian exile, the analysis reveals those spaces to be increasingly globalized and at the same time under ever more severe siege. Indeed, if the Preface begins with a discussion of the recent Israeli assault on Gaza in May 2021, its publication in late 2023 coincided with the far worse violence of the ongoing war initiated in October of that year.

From the start, the artists Brehony engages stress that, however important the individual singers, musicians, or composers, “the most important figures in Palestinian music are the Palestinian people,” (___) as the late Nazareth-born singer Rim Banna explains on the book's first page. This is a crucial starting point; it contextualizes the reception of the music and the social and political roles it has long played, for the most part outside the commercial considerations that have long dominated Arab popular music and absorbed talented artists

like the 2013 *Arab Idol* winner Mohammed Assaf. Although Brehony rightly hones in on the importance of the lyrics of *ṣumūd* (steadfastness and perseverance) and revolution, his exploration of the political musicology of Palestine is to me equally if not more interesting because it details and illuminates the nuanced aesthetic embeddedness of everything from individual modes to styles of performance and the ethics of collaboration and of boycott. Indeed, reading the book during the finals of the 2024 Eurovision contest, in which a Russian-Israeli singer was a favorite but an LGBTQ+ singer from Gaza, Bashar Murad, saw his hopes to represent Palestine through his present home in Iceland dashed after BDS supporters called on people not to vote, illustrates just how complicated the political calculus becomes, and how difficult it remains to musicalize the “profound pain interlaced with ecstatic hope” at the core of *ṣumūd*, as singer Reem Kelani eloquently describes it (p. 51), in a global context in which so many considerations intersect and often compete.

In Chapter 2, *Palestinian Music in Exile* really hits its innovative stride. Here, Brehony explores three examples of musical innovation in the near exile, or *ghurba*, of Bilad al-Sham. Focusing on the Jordanian-born oud maestro Ahmed Al Khatib, the Damascene guitarist Tareq Salhia, and three bagpipers from the Borj al-Shemali camp in Lebanon, Brehony illuminates how debates over heritage and authenticity shape and sometimes stymie political as well as musical innovation, with culturally conservative state policies and ideologies of host countries of refugee musicians often acting as a check on the freedom of musical expression. At the same time, retaining a unique Palestinian sound amid surrounding national styles has helped preserve Palestinian identity in exile, even as governments in Jordan and Syria inevitably have seen Palestinians as potentially unfaithful, if not treasonous.

Yet the homeland–exile binary does not do justice to the richness and broad stylistic reach of Palestinian music. Indeed, while reading *Palestinian Music in Exile* it becomes clear that Palestinian music is inherently transnational precisely because Palestine is the symbol of the still unrealized dreams of the Arab nation as a whole. Equally, the materiality of affect—the intersection and mutual production of aesthetic and political force—of the oud as a “revolutionary instrument” reminds us that the AK-47, sling shot, and hang glider are not the only weapons in the arsenal of resistance. Most clearly, Brehony’s materially grounded discussion lays out the innumerable ways in which rebellious music, whether traditional or ultra-modern, has served as “a bridge” to greater political involvement for so many people, musicians and fans alike (p. 105).

Throughout the book, Brehony offers numerous examples of how Palestinian music is “sounded to ongoing resistance,” embodying unswerving commitment (*iltizām*) to the nationalist cause in novel ways (p. 233). In so doing, the music challenges long-accepted binaries such as authentic–inauthentic, political–commercial, traditional–modern, and pop–art music, showing how Palestinian musicians, singers, and composers, inside the entirety of the country and outside it as well, have creatively played with, reinforced, and subverted these terms.

The conflict surrounding these processes surfaces strongly whether in Gaza, where the first Intifada also saw a musical revolution, as militant youth consumed literature from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and cassettes from traditional leftist groups and the fusion pioneers Sabreen, or inside the 1967 borders of Israel, where some of the most innovative contemporary Palestinian music, from hip hop to electronic dance music to metal (the latter of which the author does not address) has been produced. What is most striking about the discussions of music in Gaza is how the increasing experience of siege by the inhabitants of the Strip intersects with their “energetic audience response and rebellious reputation” (p. 96).

At the same time, more mundane dynamics, like the increased availability of paying gigs for modern musicians in cities like Damascus, and the popular commercial styles they

involve, also have played a role in shaping the music, much as they have done across the Levant at least as far back as Egyptian popular and art music (*ṭarab*) pioneer Sayed Darwish at the turn of the last century. Finally, the way Palestinian musicians have appropriated an instrument like the British bagpipes, brought to Palestine thanks to the Balfour Declaration and the British occupation of the country during World War I, reminds us how cultural and political intersection in a space of colonial contestation over the course of a century has created the tableau on which Palestinian social, cultural, and political history are forged through the various *lahjāt mūsīqiyya* (musical dialects) developed by musicians in the course of their everyday musical and political lives.


One of the most interesting cases of these dialects, or as Brehony calls them, “socio-musical aesthetics” (p. 170), comes from the instrumental work of Gazan musicians like female oudist Reem Anbar or the Arab pop rock group Sol Band, founded in 2012, which the author spends significant time discussing because of its important role in the artistic (*ṭarab*), national (*waṭani*), and cultural (*thaqāfi*) aspects of the larger music scene. What is most noteworthy about Sol Band, aside from its impressive rotating roster of members, is how it has managed to address all three imperatives while also appealing to a wider international audience. This is best evidenced by its superb performances at the 2019 Palestine Music Expo in Ramallah, as well as the deeply anguished recording and video for the song “*Iftah ‘Azā yā lisān*” (Let an Elegy Awake from My Tongue), composed and performed by lead singer Hamadah Nasrallah during Israel’s full-on bombardment of Gaza in late fall 2023.

Perhaps the most powerful contribution of this immensely timely book is its clear demonstration that, regardless of its official or recognized status as a state (or lack thereof), Palestine is a culture whose roots run as deep as they do wide. Its music is not just routinely culturally, aesthetically, and politically avant-garde, but it is at the forefront of change in seemingly the most unlikely places, such as Khan Younis. Whether reengaging tradition or innovating at the front lines of electronica, music across Palestine and in its forced diasporas enables imagination of a liberated future on their land even in the worst of times. For that reason alone, this book will be read by scholars of Palestine and anyone interested in the dynamics of revolutionary artistic praxis for years to come.

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Stateless: The Politics of the Armenian Language in Exile

Talar Chahinian (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2023). Pp. 296.
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Talar Chahinian offers an excellent and timely reassessment of 20th-century Western Armenian literary history along a political axis in *Stateless: The Politics of the Armenian Language in Exile*. She does this by shedding light on two pivotal literary movements that developed out of the wake of different world wars. The first movement, known as Menk (We), was established in Paris by a loose cohort of male novelists who were, in many cases, orphaned literally and figuratively by genocide. These figures, including luminaries such as Shahan Shahnur, Zareh Vorpuni, Hrach Zartarian, and Nigoghos Sarafian, loosely tracked