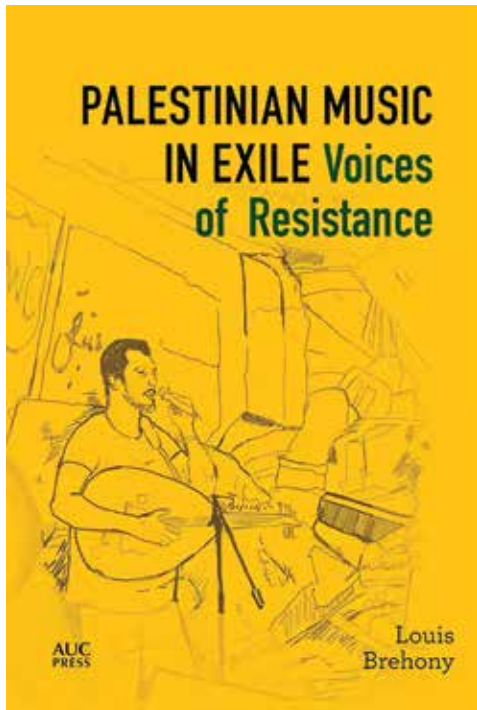


REVIEW

Musical Narratives of Resistance: An Ethnomusicological Review

Review by Ruba Totah

Louis Brehony, *Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance* (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2023). 318 pages. \$59.95 hardcover, \$58.99 ebook.



Abstract

Louis Brehony's monograph raises new questions regarding the role of music in the Palestinian liberation struggle. Focused mainly on the life journeys of Palestinian musicians from several generations, various backgrounds, and geographic locations, the book provides an ethnomusicological understanding of their musical narratives and is a valuable document on music in Palestinian history making.

Keywords:

Ethnomusicology; migratory aesthetics; cosmopolitanism; Palestinian musicians; Arab musical modalities.

Music has long been a medium of expression for Palestinian identity, serving as a poignant reminder of the past and a resilient force in the present. Palestinian musicians have played an important role in mediating these identity narratives by producing, reproducing, and reinterpreting music for Palestinians and other communities. It can also be said that Palestinian musicians have contributed to the raising of Palestinian national consciousness and promotion of Palestinian narratives, given the diverse styles, modalities, themes and performativity that characterize their work.

In his monograph *Palestinian Music in Exile*, Louis Brehony offers a thoughtful exploration of the intricate relationship between music and resistance in Palestinian culture. The study explores the aesthetics of the revolution in music, raising themes such as the connection between musical

aesthetics and politics to examine Palestinian musical practice today through ethnographic fieldwork and oral histories gathered from musicians. Brehony analyzes Palestinian musicians' agency through steadfastness (*sumud*), a mechanism that allows them to challenge forms of exile (*ghurba*) they encounter. The study is a product of twelve years of ethnographic fieldwork from 2010 to 2022, in Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. The ethnography is a significant contribution to studies of connections between music and collective political identity making, exploring music's role in promoting collective liberation narratives.

Brehony draws on the terminology used by the artists to expand on *ghurba* as a concept to illustrate the artists' state of exile. From their narratives, he understands *ghurba* as the anguish and loss of being separated from one's homeland but also as an experience of exile for artists living inside Palestine under colonialism. The author decides not to use alternative translations of exile, such as "diaspora" or "dispersed existence" or the term *hijra*, which signifies a journey away. His primary rationale for employing the term *ghurba* is its prevalence in the narratives of musicians, song titles, and lyrics of traditional folk songs. However, the monograph could benefit from dedicating more attention to the legal status of these musicians within the societies in which they reside and how this influences their self-identification, interpretations of *ghurba*, and accessibility to musical resources and means of learning and exchange. By doing that, further analysis of individual identity making could enrich the study of collective liberation narratives and the role of transcultural practices within it.

The book's conceptual framework draws inspiration from Palestinian Marxist figures such as novelist Ghassan Kanafani, artist Naji al-'Ali, and national liberation fighter Leila Khaled. It relies on their understanding of revolution and *sumud* in art as a form of cultural resistance within liberation movements. By understanding the musicians' experiences as revolutionary, the analysis centers an anti-imperialist approach to cultural analysis. Within this, Palestinians' shared understanding of *sumud* across several geographical locations enriches and reverses a capitalist-based understanding of cosmopolitanism. At the heart of this understanding lies the acknowledgement of a common project of resistance in which both Palestinian and non-Palestinian musicians participate, presenting an alternative vision of international struggle.

From his ethnographic work, Brehony proposes a definition of Palestinian music as "an oral tradition, harking back to poetic song-forms, troubadour wedding singers, and accompaniments to the yarns of the *hakawati* (storyteller) in social gatherings" (6). Providing that the lyrics set to Palestinian music are filled with political messages, the book demonstrates that music and politics are intertwined, enabling exiled musicians to act as powerful agents of resistance. The agency of the musicians translates alternative political visions through their musical narratives, which is an important contribution to the anti-colonial struggle.

Such an in-depth view of musicians' agency converses with scholarship in the discipline of ethnomusicology, in which numerous scholars have studied the connection between identity and music making.¹ The study does not ground itself

within ethnomusicology; instead, it conducts a political analysis of Palestinian musical practice primarily through musical historiography. For example, the book engages in a section that offers a chronology of critical moments in the history of Palestinian music making and how it influences Palestinian narratives of *sumud*. In addition to this chronology, the author provides historical background to music making in several geographical locations inside and outside Palestine. Despite this, however, the study could have benefited from a deeper investigation of the connection between music and individual identity making to enrich the analysis and speak directly to literature and debates within ethnomusicology.

Each chapter provides a detailed historical examination of Arab regimes' political stance concerning the Palestinian cause. It also offers a comprehensive account of Palestinian cultural activism under these regimes, drawing upon oral history gathered from musicians. In doing so, Brehony's work sheds light on the role of music making as a form of resistance, alongside the literary and artistic resistance of Kanafani and al-'Ali, among others, and as a contributor to the historical narrative of Palestinian displaced communities.

In each chapter, Brehony provides an ethnomusicology of Palestinian musicians in a state of exile. The chapters describe the exilic route of the musicians, their connections with home, and the social circles and artistic networks in their current residence. As the chapters progress, comparisons are drawn between the various Palestinian musicians. This provides a multi-sited examination of musicians' narratives and their revolutionary motivation through music. The chapters also focus on how the musicians acquired their musical knowledge through training or cultural context, which is an important addition. While not within the book's purview, a musicological analysis focusing on how *ghurba* shaped the characteristics of Palestinian musicians' tonality would have enhanced the study.

Chapter one charts Reem Kilani's migratory trajectory from Palestine to Kuwait and then London, demonstrating the development of her innovative musical repertoire, which draws upon traditions of Eastern music in Lebanon and Egypt, as well as Western music. Chapters two, four, and five follow a similar pattern, tracing the journeys of Ahmad al-Khatib, Tareq Salhia, Baha' al-Juma', Tamer Abu Ghazaleh, and Huda Asfour in Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon. The life journeys of these individuals illustrate the transnational connections between exiled communities and those in Palestine, explaining the social and political context of their upbringing in these countries and its contribution to their musical learning and pathways. Here, we learn the extent to which their life journeys have impacted their awareness and choices regarding the politicization of their music.

Importantly, these chapters provide the book's ethnomusicological foundations, illustrating each musician's path and situating their work within an underexplored layer of transnational dialogue between Arab musical schools. These connections have significant potential for developing a critique of cosmopolitanism analogous to that which emerged following the Arab Music Conference in 1932 concerning modernism. At the conference, a call for modernizing Arab music included an attempt to diminish

Indigenous musical tonalities and the diversity of musical experiences of communities in the region, favoring enhanced connections with Western musical styles.

Moreover, these chapters continue the critique of modernism by re-examining the institutionalization of musical teaching and the rise of music conservatories in the Arab region. Brehony criticizes them as overly traditional or oriented toward the West and uses Khaled Jubran's term "Breaking the Pyramids" (130) and the accompanying movement of musicians to critique established Arab musical pedagogy in the past century to do so. "Breaking the Pyramids" advocates for a distinctive musical narrative with a transformative approach to Eastern music, and, further, lays a foundation for postmodern analysis in Arab music. Postmodern musical practices call for a bottom-up understanding of identity formations and their impact on music, withstanding Western theories and critics.

Brehony engages with this postmodern critique through ethnomusicology. For example, the chapters examine the concept of "repetition" (134), as emphasized by Edward Said as a measure of literary worldliness and by Kanafani as a means of reiteration and *sumud* against colonialism and betrayal of reactionary regimes in literature. Brehony's work offers insights into the role of musical repetition in traditional music and Arab *maqams*, the distinctive Arab tonal framework, achieved by the Palestinian musicians – something still attempted in exile through transnational connections. He also discusses the potential for innovation in indigenous musical forms through improvisation, providing an example in his analysis of Tamer Abu Ghazaleh's approach (133).

Chapters three, six and seven present a detailed analysis of the social challenges of pursuing *sumud* as a transformative musical practice. The musical routes of Umm 'Ali, Umm Jabr and other people from internally displaced communities across historic Palestine during the first intifada are examined as experiences of *sumud*. The book explains *sumud* as a form of resilience against the multifaceted sociopolitical challenges faced by Saied Silbak, Said Fadel, Reem and Fares Anbar, Rawan Okasha, and Ahmed Haddad within the context of conservative, gender-based, and colonial regimes during the first intifada inside Palestine. It engages with some of the challenges these artists face when crossing Arab countries' borders and encountering their regimes. These chapters demonstrate that musicians grapple with the same identity markers generation after generation, particularly those associated with class and gender roles. Brehony describes how these markers expand the political meaning of *sumud* in ways that illustrate the intersection between politics, class and gender.

The book's examination of the life experiences of Palestinian musicians alongside their musical forms reveals that *ghurba* has given rise to a multitude of imaginative and politically charged responses through music. These include forming connections to other schools of Arab musicality, exposure to global sounds through the dissemination of cassettes, and the reconfiguration of meanings when musically reinterpreting earlier songs (233). Furthermore, the study concludes that *sumud* is conceptualized through the musical experiences of the musicians in question as "the preservation of narratives pertaining to the land, the dissemination of hope and ingenuity among the masses,

and the pivotal role played by women in its transmission” (237). The conjunction of sumud and the musical practices of Palestinian musicians gives rise to a novel interpretation of musical internationalism, which is both vital and radically subverts the conventional Western notion of cosmopolitanism by elevating the oppressed Palestinian and non-Palestinian musicians’ agency internationally.

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Endnotes

1 See: Ursula Hemetek and Marko Kölbl, “On Definitions and Guiding Principles in Ethnomusicological Minority Research,” *PULS* 8 (May 2023): 23–29, online at doi.org/10.62779/puls.v8i.19222; A. P. Merriam, “Ethnomusicology Revisited,” *Ethnomusicology* 13, no. 2 (May 1969): 213–29, online at doi.org/10.2307/850146; Guilnard Moufarrej, “Maronite Music: History, Transmission, and Performance Practice,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 196–215;

Timothy Rice, “Toward the Remodeling of Ethnomusicology,” *Ethnomusicology* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 469–88, online at doi.org/10.2307/851667; Timothy Rice, “Reflections on Music and Identity in Ethnomusicology,” in Timothy Rice, *Modeling Ethnomusicology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 139–60; and Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).