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The Palestinian music-making experience in the West Bank, 1920s to 1959: Nationalism, colonialism, and identity

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Summary

Before 1936, musical practices in Palestine relied heavily on colloquial poetry, especially in rural communities, which constituted most of the population. The transcriptions of Dalman, the Jessups, Iṣṭifān, Foley, and Ford explored some of the music and folk poetry that existed among Palestinian communities in Bedouin, peasant, and urban settings. These records, along with the writings of al-Jawhariyyeh and Lachmann, and some historical recordings, reveal many differences and similarities between these song types. Such observations can be seen through poetry, dialects, *maqām*, and form, and point not only to the musical diversity that existed at that time in Palestine but also to a demographic one. Between Ottoman influences, the activities of European and American Christian missionaries, the Arab Renaissance, and the British Mandate, Palestinian music evolved as a reflection of the social, cultural, and political evolution of Palestinians.

Records show that during the 1920s, Palestinians became an extension to the Arab Renaissance and immersed themselves in literature and music. Some of the prominent musicians who emerged during this period were Thurayya Qaddūra, Rajab al-Akḥal, and Ilyās ‘Awaḍ. Their songs demonstrate outstanding musicianship and exhibit local characteristics and sensibilities. They referenced the emblems of Arab literature such as Salma and highlighted the cultural and historical connections to regional poets. Steering gender spaces, Qaddūra sang the poems of ‘Ā’ishah Taymūr, one the leading feminists of the time highlighting the importance of women in society as well as their ability to contribute to building the nation. However, evidence shows that these artists engaged only in apolitical expressions, which points to how they responded to the colonial discourses in both Egypt and Palestine, which were heavily influenced and controlled by the British.

In the mid-1930s, Nūḥ Ibrāhīm and Nimir Nāṣir wrote political songs that spoke of resistance and solidarity among Arabs as well as Muslims and Christians, not Jewish or Druze. Rural and, to a lesser extent, urban communities accepted these songs and interacted with them as attested to and witnessed by Zu‘aytir. Meanwhile, epic poems such as Nūf, and folk songs such as those of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barghūfī, reflected how Bedouin and rural communities positioned themselves politically at odds with the Ottomans, the British, and the Zionists.

The British Mandate defined how demographic classes interacted with one another, namely peasant, urban, notable, poor, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish. Stanton shows that as early as 1928, discussions about how to set up the PBS had a religious overtone (Stanton 2014). Her examination of the period points to the activities of the Christian mission being supported by the fact that Great Britain had a state religion, which is the Church of England. In her assessment, this dynamic was considered the basis for the establishment of the PBS by the British (ibid.). Willson also illustrates that such efforts were led by dissenting British Protestants in the late eighteenth century, whose missionaries disseminated their moral and social ideals worldwide (Willson 2013).

Upon the establishment of PBS in 1936, the Arab Section classified song types and music genres and kept them separate from each other, including Bedouin, peasant, urban, Western, religious, educational, and patriotic. PBS upheld these distinctions and exposed older differences and divisions between Palestinian communities, thus mirroring the social hierarchy and promoting a vision for a nation that would sustain such attributes. Meanwhile, the Arab Section did not engage in politics or discussions of nationalist ideologies in its broadcasts or publications, a strategy that was reflected in all its programs, including music. It advocated for unity among all Arabs and presented itself as an advocate of diversity. The Arab Section in PBS

perceived itself as a bridge between Arabs and the West, and a vehicle for broader regional progress of the Arab region, particularly al-Mashriq. The type of rhetoric that it hinted at up until 1948 was patriotic and unterritorial and had a wider reach within the scope of al-Mashriq. Its conceptualization of what Arab nationalism meant did not seem to conflict with that of the British. It also aligned well with the monarchies of Transjordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Musically, PBS reflected this approach through the daily broadcasting of a variety of songs that originated from its immediate surroundings.

During this period, Palestinian music-making evolved exponentially, resulting in the expansion of various folk tunes into sha‘bī songs, the creation of the Palestinian qaṣīda song genre, new compositions of instrumental music for traditional and Western music formations, the establishment of choirs and children music programing, and active engagement in composing in the styles of the dominant Egyptian genres of the time as well as muwashshaḥāt.

Historically, Western music practices among Palestinians were already in motion since the mid nineteenth century but were limited to European and American Christian mission institutions, including schools. In such settings, Christian liturgy and hymns as well as secular songs were mostly European but were sung in standard Arabic and revolved around choirs (see Willson 2013). These practices were apolitical and focused on religious topics or were used for educational purposes, especially at mission schools. Direct contacts between Christian missionaries and local Christian populations essentially resulted in developing local talent in Western music such as Lama, al-Batrūnī, and ‘Arnīṭa (Willson 2013). It was after 1936 when Arab Christian composers of Western music started to write patriotic songs, mostly through PBS and other mission or Christian organizations.

From the perspective of PBS being a contact zone, there are several profound impacts of PBS and the British Mandate on music-making in Palestine, which include:

1. the scaling of Western music practices from Anglican Christian religious settings to secular contexts;
2. the apoliticization of songs;
3. the systematic filtering and censorship of traditional lyrics that included sexual references (see Işţifān 1928 and Nuwayhiḍ 1993);
4. the establishment of modernization efforts of local musical practices as a notion of progress; and
5. the emphasis on music pedagogy as a matter of cultural and political hierarchy.

After 1948, Palestinians preserved some aspects of their peasant and Bedouin musical cultures and identity in refugee camps, villages, town, and urban pockets in and outside of Palestine (see Foley 1956). In the West Bank, musicians engaged in making primarily folk and sha‘bī songs, which were favored by the government of Jordan. Western music productions, on the other hand, were not sustained by the Jordan Radio (previously PBS). Subsequently, Western music practices went back to being confined to private and Christian mission organizations. Although al-Batrūnī and ‘Arnīṭa continued to compose patriotic songs, such engagements were restricted to much smaller social circles in and outside of Palestine.

Palestinian musicians found themselves at the frontier of implementing a new political and cultural vision in Jordan. As a dynamic instrument for transformation in the region, they engaged in the development of music not only in Jordan but also in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. However, and despite being among the most educated of their peers, the continuation of an urban musical narrative like that of PBS and NEBS did not seem attainable in Palestine proper.

Since the mid-1940s, Palestinian musicians and intellectuals realized that Egyptian music was not able to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers in Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. Although there are common forms of emotional communication between the inhabitants of the Near East, including Egypt, the Egyptian music industry and media were not able to condition the region into becoming musically Egyptian. By the early 1950s, it was apparent that some musicians and intellectuals such as al-Rūmī, al-Sharīf, al-Bandak, al-Khammāsh, and Ṣabrī al-Sharīf were determined to develop a vocabulary that reflected the topography, scenery, culture, dialects, and history of al-Mashriq, one that was independent of Egypt's. At that point, the nationalization of musical practices in al-Mashriq was moving at a fast rate, and musicians working the scene navigated all such trends simultaneously. Al-Sharīf and al-Rūmī in Lebanon, al-Khammāsh in Iraq, al-Bandak in Syria, and al-‘Āṣ in Jordan all took advantage of their positions and launched a renaissance of music-making throughout al-Mashriq. Al-Sharīf's input, intuition, experience, and convictions stand out as one of the most pioneering achievements of Palestinian musicians outside of their homeland. Operating in nongovernmental realms, he helped to make the music scene in Lebanon what it is today.