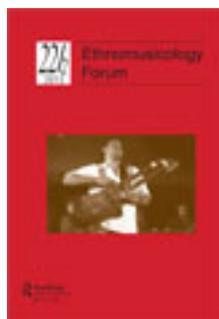


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Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut

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Review

Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut

THOMAS BURKHALTER

New York, Routledge, 2013

xiv + 304 pp., ISBN 978-0-4158-0813-2 (£80.00, hardback)

The past couple of years have seen a wave of new scholarship—monographs, edited collections and articles—on contemporary popular musics in the Middle East. If some genres—notably including Palestinian rap—have received a lion's share of this scholarly attention, others—including the subject matter of this book—have received far less exposure. In this welcome volume, Burkhalter introduces the reader to a string of flourishing, cosmopolitan alternative music scenes in Beirut, via a survey of several musical genres (electronica, jazz, rap, metal and others), an in-depth discussion of several tracks and a contextual history of Lebanese popular music.

As his title suggests, Burkhalter focuses his analysis on local and international networks of production and consumption. He explores how Lebanese musicians engage with transnational musical practices, often hoping to participate in global 'niche' musical scenes—yet their music and the circumstances of its production also intimately reflect the complex and often tragic political and social history of conflict-torn Beirut. This combination of international musical rhetoric and intensely local discourses leads Burkhalter to reflect at length on questions of positionality, both that of musicians and his own. As a Swiss music journalist and producer 'on the search for intense and distinct music' (3) who does not speak Arabic, Burkhalter positions himself as both an insider and outsider:

when working with Lebanese musicians, I share parts of their 'music culture' knowledge but nothing of their knowledge of being Lebanese citizens [...] in this book, I hear and judge their music through this 'music culture' knowledge; this allows me, a scholar from Europe, to use an insider approach to Beirut music. (22)

The most important achievement of *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut* is the in-depth survey it presents of a variety of musical scenes, based on substantial fieldwork and interview material. For readers unfamiliar with contemporary life in Beirut, the inclusion of substantial, relatively unedited interview quotations, including intimate descriptions by musicians of their experiences of wartime soundscapes, helps to contextualise artistic practices and generates a lively sense of encounter; a useful list of resources at the back of the book

directs the reader towards further, primarily internet-based, musical and discursive material. While most of the musicians surveyed here work within cosmopolitan creative paradigms, and many of them have spent substantial periods of time abroad, an insightful and substantial thread of discussion explores differences between the creative goals of these musicians, who want to be able to compete internationally without falling into stereotypes of the Arab world, and the interests of European and American funders and promoters, who seek exotic manifestations of ‘difference’. Tellingly, comments drawn from reviews in the international music press of a CD compilation of alternative Lebanese music released by Burkhalter reveal a gulf between how these musicians are perceived by their international audiences and how they would like to be heard (236–7).

A more problematic aspect of the book is the arrangement of material—Burkhalter’s decision to divide the discussion into 30 very short chapters (some barely two pages long) grouped into five themes breaks up the discussion and works against sustained engagement with theoretical issues, which at times seem to be tacked on to the discussion rather than an integral part of it. Some analytical paradigms seem rather naïve, including an uncritical use of field notes as primary sources; concepts such as ‘avant-garde’ and ‘world music’ could also further be critiqued. Engagement with wider sources contextualising life in Beirut (Burkhalter is over-reliant on Jean Said Makdisi’s memoirs—an author he notes is of an older generation than the musicians discussed here) and theoretical work on art and violence might further help the author to draw stronger conclusions from his work.

The discussion is at its most effective when Burkhalter is on musical home territory; he clearly feels at home in the various ‘alternative’ musical scenes he portrays, establishing a close rapport with musicians; he helpfully deconstructs stereotypes of a ‘typical’ Arab listener by pointing out that many of the musicians he cites disdain mainstream Arabic popular music and have little knowledge of *maqam*-based music, and uses literature on popular music effectively to contextualise his subject matter. Unfortunately, however, his comments on other genres sometimes fall more into stereotype than serious academic discussion; his comments on ‘David Beckham or Latin Lover types’ in commercial Arabic pop music (188), the ‘disturbing sound experience’ and ‘patriotic and bloodthirsty’ lyrics of Hizbullah songs (190), and Marcel Khalife’s ‘melodic clichés’ (177), and his disdain for the rehearsal methods of the Lebanese National Arabic Oriental Orchestra (196), seem to reveal more about cosmopolitan, elitist western conceptions of musical authenticity than about the subjects of the discussion, and would usefully be tempered by more sustained engagement with relevant literature (Ali Jihad Racy on musical borrowings from western music and Charles Hirshkind on the auditory experience of Islamic materials spring immediately to mind), as well as with the possibility that, like the ‘alternative’ musicians upon whom he focuses, these other artists also participate in the production and negotiation of diverse Lebanese modernities.

The centrepiece of the book (both literally and in analytical substance) is a set of case studies that present six key musical tracks. It is here that both the merits and a

shortcoming of the book stand most sharply in relief. In-depth discussions of core repertory, including background information about artists and lyrics, are an invaluable resource, particularly welcome for those seeking to incorporate this material into teaching. Burkhalter's discussions of each track are wide ranging, covering topics including circumstances of production, meanings embedded in lyrics, detailed descriptions of the music itself and first-hand reflections by musicians on the tracks. In some cases, he also includes the 'blind' reactions of European, American and Middle Eastern listeners to whom he sent the unlabelled recordings. Nevertheless, it is difficult to read about music without hearing it, and via brief Internet searches I could only find recordings of two of the six songs Burkhalter discusses in depth; and one of these two was a different recorded version to that described here. Without reference to the music itself, it is very difficult to make any meaningful sense of the verbal descriptions and timeline analyses of the songs included here. Given that Burkhalter himself recently released a compilation of alternative Lebanese music on his Norient label (*Golden Beirut—New Sounds from Lebanon*, 2011), globally available via amazon.com and iTunes, the lack of correspondence between the tracks released on the CD and those discussed in the book seems a remarkable lost opportunity.

In the end, the juxtaposition of the transnational aspirations of the musicians Burkhalter discusses, coupled with the relative difficulty in finding their music, highlights still further the reliance of these musicians upon intermediaries for international exposure, complicating the question of globalisation from which the title of this book sets out. Burkhalter makes a convincing case that the work of these and other 'alternative' musicians across the Middle East deserves attention no less than the highly politicised or 'exotic' genres that have merited more sustained attention from western listening publics and scholars alike. His concluding words point out the fragility of the position of Lebanese musicians who, like their counterparts in many countries, face significant challenges in pursuing musical careers, particularly when attempting to reach beyond local boundaries: music often circulates more easily than musicians. However, the recent success of young Lebanese alternative band Mashrou' Leila (a favourite of this reviewer) in the international scene provides a corresponding note of optimism, and the reader is left hoping that this volume will bring wider exposure for the scene that Burkhalter so carefully and enthusiastically describes.

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