
Sarah Hankins

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taking us ever closer to what William James called ‘the bloomin’ buzzin’ confusion’ of life.

Bruce Johnson

Macquarie University, Australia
University of Turku, Finland; University of Glasgow, UK
brujoh@utu.fi

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At a recent musicology conference, I overheard a cadre of Middle Easternists lamenting the omnipresence of certain well-worn tropes in their comfortably established field. ‘If I never hear the word maqam again’, one woman joked, ‘it’ll be too soon’. ‘Same with “radical”’, added another, to chuckles of agreement. If Arab-world musicology has historically venerated ‘tradition’ to the partial exclusion of other musical ideologies, its strong turn towards ‘politics’ in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring has seemingly only displaced one reified category with another. In the face of lingering disciplinary biases, totalising discourses of political conflict and increasingly alarmist media portrayals of regional instability, how might scholars engage responsibly with the musics of the modern Middle East? This crucial question informs the approach of The Arab Avant-Garde, a lively essay collection exploring diverse musical forms and phenomena through a theoretically sophisticated perspective. Combining nuanced musical analysis, history and ethnography with a critical attunement to power relations that comes out of postcolonial and subaltern studies, The Arab Avant-Garde eschews tired binaries like tradition versus modernity, local versus global or aesthetics versus politics, in favour of a strident multifocalism whose time has come.

The editors of this volume have taken on a complex but necessary task in selecting the avant-garde as both the guiding theme and chief object of interrogation. As Kay Dickinson writes in her Introduction, avant-gardism, constituted as a
Euro-American aesthetic impulse, has been dually dependent upon the plunder of Arab cultural material and the ongoing rhetorical erasure of Arab world contributions (pp. 2–3). Despite its legacies of imperialism, however, the avant-garde has resonance for Arab composers, performers and audiences who use it to energise regionally specific discourses of innovation, identity and modernity. Dickinson’s dense, 30-page opener lays out the political ambivalences and cultural stakes of avant-gardism with impressive breadth and precision, giving contributors much to grapple with in the musical case studies that follow. On the whole, these contributors rise admirably to the threefold challenge of problematising the avant-garde’s conceptual history, explicating its genuine progressive potential in Arab contexts, and attending to the details of individual musical genres, activities or scenes.

The book, which is organised into thematic categories of ‘alternative modernities’, ‘roots and routes’ and ‘political deployments of the avant-garde’, certainly covers plenty of music that lends itself to established avant-garde taxonomies, such as musique concrete, free improvisation and electro-acoustic composition. Yet there is no separation between these kinds of contemporary concert music and popular genres like hip-hop, heavy metal or comic song; chapters on art and vernacular music appear side by side in each of the volume’s three sections. The transition between some chapters can feel jarring at first – as, for example, when we move from Kamran Rastegar’s close reading of the work of Iraqi composer Amir Elsaffar to Thomas Burkhalter’s wide-ranging analysis of Beiruti pop in the world music market (including surprising invocations of Afro-futurism and the FIFA World Cup; pp. 90-92). However, any initial discomfiture at such juxtapositions quickly gives way to the awareness of just how staid and reductive our prevalent dichotomies between the avant-garde and the popular are. For, of course, the experimental aesthetic impulses and sociological investments that drive a composer like Halim El-Dabh to create musique concrete from the sounds of the Egyptian zar ceremony (Khoury, p. 121) would undeniably resonate for a Palestinian hip-hopper rapping against armed conflict (Rooney, p. 215), or a Cairo metalhead riffing on the ‘obvious exoticism of maqam hijaz’ via distorted guitar power chords (Harbert, p. 254). In disregarding boundaries between ostensibly separate spheres of cultural production – concert halls, pop radio, religious practices, nightclubs – this volume’s editors and contributors identify a Middle Eastern musical vanguard far richer in complexity and political implications than any one term can encompass.

While musically disparate case studies work together to provide a nuanced picture of the region’s ever-evolving avant-garde, individually they advance different portions of the book’s overall agenda. Some contributors, like Khoury and Rastegar, strive to redress historic elisions in the Eurocentric master narrative of avant-garde development with attention to specific Arab contributions, a project that the Introduction to this volume (and perhaps even its title) indicate as an especially high priority. These and other chapters also give significant space to Arab artists’ own music-theoretical frameworks, an important step in destabilising Western hegemony in avant-garde discourse. Particularly effective in this respect are Marina Peterson’s discussion of free improvisation as US-Middle East cultural diplomacy, which highlights players’ understandings of the geopolitics of ‘traditional’ and ‘experimental’ music (pp. 202-3), and Shayna Silverstein’s chapter (pp. 37-73) on three Syrian composers whose approaches to modal transformation reveal a dialectic relationship between European and Levantine performance norms.
Welcome contributions on turn-of-the-century Egyptian composer Sayyed Darwish (Muhssin, pp. 121–44) and Lebanese favourite son Ziad Rahbani (Asmar, p. 145) reveal the strong strain of avant-gardism that runs throughout Middle Eastern popular music history, and also serve as useful background for the subsequent discussions of hip-hop and heavy metal. These genres, neither wholly avant-garde nor firmly fixed in the popular arena, make for provocative final case studies in a volume dedicated to ‘positively troubling the stability’ of the avant-garde idea (p. 29). I might have wished for more attention to women and gender issues in Harbert’s chapter (‘Alexandrian female heavy metallers’, are the opening words of this book’s Introduction, after all), but his fascinating analysis of timbral noise as nafas dawsha, or ‘ecstatic experience of delocalization’ (pp. 253–4), makes up for the lack.

For musicologists of the Arab world, the venerable maqam system will probably always be around, and so will unwieldy terms like ‘radical’. Fortunately, composers, performers and audiences across the Middle East are working with such familiar concepts in fresh and vital ways. The Arab Avant-Garde keeps up with the region’s dynamism, and points scholars towards new avenues of enquiry.

Sarah Hankins
Harvard University, USA
Email: sarah.e.hankins@gmail.com

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John Richardson’s study of surrealism, or neo-surrealism, in pop, film and related media is an addition to the literature that brings into focus the serious discussion of the phenomenological effect of the collision of popular music and the visually implausible, disjointed or illogical. The process of contextualising and challenging these ‘meaningful transactions [that] can often be located on the edges of discourse’ (p. 16), as Richardson does here, often reads like an exercise in stating the obvious, for surrealism informs and infuses so much popular music, films, music videos and web-based pop discourse that it seems hidden in plain sight. But this is an important book for the same reason: it is a thorough discussion of how surrealism both as a formal movement and as a series of related artistic strands has filtered into the popular aesthetic discourse via a number of clearly illuminated avenues.

The author’s term of choice, ‘neo-surrealism’, is carefully explained, being aligned with what has been similarly called the ‘neo-avant-garde’. Central to his discussion is the role of the surreal in relation to the concept of shock: the capacity to shock, integral to early avant-garde movements like Dada and surrealism, has been superseded in film and pop in recent years by the intention to ‘make audiences wonder’ (p. 57). Moreover, the elements of humour and (crucially) the oneiric as surrealist modes are key to his argument, and it is largely through these channels that Richardson manages to construct a compelling account of how neo-surrealism runs through contemporary pop and film. Indeed, the early chapters, impressively supported with his vast and broad reading in several directions, take as their basic starting point that ‘the entire audio-visual field is undergoing a geological shift in a surreal direction’ (p. 22).