

## Book Review

Lisa Nielson. *Music and Musicians in the Medieval Islamic World: A Social History* (London; New York; Oxford; New Delhi; Sydney: I. B. Tauris, 2021).

ISBN 9780755617890. viii + 296 pp. \$120 cloth. \$35.95 paper. \$35.95 ebook.  
and

Dwight F. Reynolds. *Medieval Arab Music and Musicians: Three Translated Texts* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2022). ISBN 978-90-04-50154-6. xii + 207 pp. \$119 cloth. \$119 ebook.

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Since the general coverage provided by Shiloah and Sawa, academic interest in the premodern history of music in the Arab world has tended to devote more attention to the domain of scale systems, interval definitions, and intonation (culminating in the 2010 volume by Beyhom).<sup>1</sup> Research into the more social and anthropological aspects of music, on the other hand, has been prosecuted primarily with respect to their modern manifestations. These two publications are thus especially welcome as, sidestepping the intricacies of the theoretical domain, they tackle early documentation on music as social activity and, in one case, ethical minefield. Both are aimed at a broad readership and communicate well.

That by Lisa Nielson has the wider range, but despite its title including the capacious “Islamicate,” its geographical and cultural focus is firmly within the eastern Arab world. It does, though, provide an informative introductory survey covering the pre-Islamic Near and Middle East. If inevitably somewhat compressed, this is still perceptive and, with the particular attention it pays to the varied spectrum of gender and, especially, to female musicians and the complexities of their positions within systems of slavery and court patronage, it points to the durability of earlier structural models and signals many of the preoccupations of the following chapters. In these, then, we find a concentration on gender issues, on the position of courtesans and *mukhannathūn* (effeminate men or intersex

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1. Amnon Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1995); George Dimitri Sawa, *Music Performance Practice in the Early ‘Abbāsīd Era, 132–320 AH / 750–932 AD* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1989); Amine Beyhom, *Théories de l’échelle et pratiques mélodiques chez les Arabes: Une approche systématique et diachronique. I. L’échelle générale et les genres. Tome I. Théories gréco-arabes de Kindī (IX<sup>e</sup> siècle) à Ṭūsī (XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris: Geuthner, 2010).

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performers), and on the room for negotiation across social lines of demarcation (with due reference to al-Jāhīz’s penetrating analysis of the “wiles” of enslaved female singers). Even if the detailed treatment of slavery tends to drift away from musical specifics, much of this is enlightening.

Literary sources are again called upon for nine brief illustrative biographies of representative court musicians, a cross-section of free and unfree, of women and men (including *mukhannathūn*). Here, once more, there are acute observations on status, agency, and reputation, although as the work begins with a vivid vignette of the Umayyad-era songstress Jamīla’s famous musical *hajj*, it is rather a pity not to see her included here too, especially given the status she acquired as an arbiter and as a shrewd judge of the qualities of her male contemporaries.

Throughout, it is the probing attention to questions of gender, status, and power that impresses, with Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī’s tenth-century *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (The book of songs) as the crucial source for the vivid account presented of performance and patronage at the Abbasid court and of the lifestyles and rivalries of the musicians who served it. Of lesser importance to a social history, perhaps, are traditional musicological concerns, but the handling of these leaves something to be desired. For example, it is unclear what is meant, in relation to the Ancient Near East, by “rhythm was likely modal and capable of transposition” (p. 27); the early Arab modal system is unlikely to have been as complex as is implied; and the emphasis on the centrality of improvisation is difficult to reconcile with the textual evidence for the creation, memorization, transmission, and reliable replication of an extensive repertoire. There are also various slips in the rather hurried exploration of the tricky terrain of instruments, most spectacularly that regarding the gruesome story of Lamak/Lamech’s creation, for rather than hanging the body of his dead son on a tree, here he hangs himself and models the instrument on his own bones and sinews.

The latter part of the book is dominated by an analysis of attitudes to *samāʿ* (i.e., the permissibility of listening to music). The topic is inescapable, but the approach a little lop-sided, concentrating as it does on straightforwardly negative appraisals. It begins, perhaps inevitably, with the depressingly unsubtle Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, but then only touches in passing the intellectually far richer counter arguments of al-Ghazālī before exploring in some depth, in a chapter that amplifies research appearing in a previous publication, a mixed bag of texts held in Jerusalem. All are equally negative, even if expressed with greater finesse. Such case studies have their virtues, but in the present context a discursive survey of themes (as in the final *Reflections* summary) might have served the uninitiated better as an introduction to the complexities of the *samāʿ* controversy, particularly given its perennial relevance.

Finally, two appendices include (a) a useful collection of relevant *ḥadīth* and (b) a glossary of terms, mainly of the instruments previously mentioned. The bibliography is substantial, but one may still regret the absence from it of Fāyid al-ʿUmrūsī, *al-Jawārī al-mughanniyyāt* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.), and Mika Paraskeva, *Entre la música y el eros. Artes y vida de las cantoras en el Oriente medieval según El libro de las canciones (Kitāb al-agānī)* (Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2016).

Occasional philological infelicities occur (*zammāra*, for example, is regarded as a verb as well as a noun; and we have mention of “the participle *mim*”), but above all there is an unwelcome waywardness with transliteration that characterizes the whole book: at one point we are even offered the unintelligible *ghanihū al-mughiyya ḍaraba* (“roughly” glossed by the author on p. 252 as “singers striking song”). Proofreading appears to have been negligent in the extreme, so that missing diacritics are too numerous to mention, although some slips, such as *rashīdūn* for *rāshidūn*, al-Mas’ūdī for al-Mas’ūdī, Dūnya for Duniyā, or Diya for Ḍiyā’ are maintained consistently. It is a pity to see such blemishes disfiguring a generally stimulating and thought-provoking study.

The very different work by Dwight Reynolds is interesting and valuable in its own right, but may also be seen as a complement to Nielson’s. It does not attempt a similar synthesis or overview but rather presents essential source material in the form of annotated translations of three substantial texts, each provided with a lucid and informative introduction. The first two consist of extensive biographical material on two pre-eminent musicians, demonstrating their importance as performers and teachers, and covering their outstanding contributions to court life. They are approachable, informative, and entertaining, and helpfully cover the complementary but distinct cultural poles of Abbasid Baghdad and Umayyad Cordova. The third, more technical, is concerned with the textual intricacies of a poetic genre, the *muwashshaḥ*, demonstrating in the process that it was at the same time a song form. It provides a geographical mid-point by revealing the popularity of the *muwashshaḥ* in twelfth-century Cairo, but is not really a link, as in both subject matter and approach it stands rather apart from the other two.

The first text is the substantial section in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* concerned with Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī that also serves as the basis for Nielson’s biographical sketch. It amply fills out the salient points made there, providing a compelling narrative of the vicissitudes in the colorful life of one of the major figures in the early history of Arab music. Perhaps of even greater significance for the corresponding musical tradition in al-Andalus is Ziryāb, the subject of the second text, by the eleventh-century historian Ibn Ḥayyān. Although much earlier than al-Maqqarī’s better-known account, it is still not sufficiently close to its subject to avoid some of the accretions that produce the mythical account of Ziryāb as the arbiter of taste at the Umayyad court, not just in music but in everything from food to fashion. Reynolds’ introduction judiciously evaluates these problems and addresses the musical innovations attributed to him. Although not, like Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī, a distinguished composer, he appears, through his performances and, especially, through his influence as a teacher, to have established a dominant repertoire and style, including conventions of ordering items in performance. The third text, perhaps inevitably, is tougher going, presenting the reader with a catalogue of complex rhyme schemes before allowing musical vocabulary to intrude, and even here it does little more than demonstrate the presence of musical elements as integral to the genre. Nevertheless, this is still enough to show that, in concentrating on questions of prosody, language register, origins, and possible influences, the abundant scholarly literature on the *muwashshaḥ* has downplayed or missed an essential element by not recognizing the centrality of music to both performance and composition.

All three translations cope extremely well with what is sometimes quite tricky material: they demonstrate expertise, read smoothly, and are often deft and vivid. For the non-Arabist, they will be an invaluable recourse. Comments are correspondingly few. Regarding style, the occasional archaic expression (p. 41: “Sire, that song, by your life, ...”) could perhaps have been avoided, while colloquialisms, although generally welcome, sometimes result in shifts of tone that jar; and the one-size-fits-all rendering of *wayḥak* as “Blast it!” although clearly an improvement on “Woe unto you!,” is still not always felicitous. Diacritics, especially subscript dots, are supplied inconsistently.

On points of detail:

- p. 31 *nadmān*. In this context, prefer “fellow-drinker” to “regretful one.”
- p. 42 To “gave him” prefer “was given” (in parallel with the following “was dismissed”).
- p. 45 To “in the end your departure made my surrender clear” (وإذا هجرتك شفني هجراني) prefer “but when I am away from you, I am emaciated by separation.”
- p. 73 To “He [al-Rashīd] reached out towards her” (استدناها) prefer “He asked her to/bade her come closer.”
- p. 183 To *Innā l-ḥammāmu // fī aykihā tashdū* prefer *Inna l-ḥamāma ...*