

BOOK REVIEW

Brehony, Louis. *Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance*.

American University in Cairo Press, 2023.

340 pages. Hardcover \$59.95

Reviewed by Thomas Hofland

Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance by Louis Brehony provides a unique historical research of Palestinian music in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Its extensive grassroots perspective fieldwork and analysis form a major contribution to our knowledge about Palestinian music that constructs a necessary counternarrative against ongoing Zionist attempts to destroy Palestinian culture.

Brehony's focus on Palestinian music in the MENA region stands out in a field where most recent English-language publications primarily deal with Palestinian music in Europe, North America or Palestine. The book also fills an academic gap of little engagement with modern patriotic and revolutionary Arab and Palestinian music, as they form the majority of featured songs. Brehony reminds the audience that Palestinian music is intimately linked with resistance *on the ground* in and around Palestine, practiced by workers, women, students, refugees, and *fida'iyyin* (*freedom fighters*).

Brehony starts from the point that Palestinian music research is itself a form of political activism. In the context of the ongoing Nakba (Palestinian Catastrophe of 1948) against the Palestinian people and their culture, ethnomusicology is pioneered by musicians, activists, and academics as “a survivalist field of study against the grain of cultural Zionism” (23). To this end, Brehony develops a theoretical framework informed by Marxist analysis of Palestinian revolutionaries such as Ghassan Kanafani, Leila Khaled and Naji al-Ali, and the cultural theories of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and György Lukács, among others.

The research explores different *lahajat musiqiya* (“musical dialects”) of Palestinians in exile from 1967 to 2021, arguing that they are “politicized tool[s] for representing Palestinian collectivity in times of acute crisis” (59). Through engaging case studies and in-depth interviews with grassroots artists who do not possess recording contracts except for one, the book brings to life the stories of musicians who have become cultural strugglers for the Palestinian cause.

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A red thread throughout the book is Brehony's conceptualization of "*sumud*-as-critique," building on various notions of *sumud* ("steadfastness") in Palestinian music and life, such as that of Lena Meari. *Sumud*-as-critique reflects on the revolutionary collectivity, ruthless criticism, and popular intervention of Palestinian music. Brehony develops an understanding of Palestinian music as a means of struggle against Zionism, Israel, imperialism, and Arab reaction, with each dialect adapting to its specific environment of exile.

Two key elements studied by Brehony are the oral tradition of Palestinian music and the instruments played. The *oud* forms a central instrument, but the *ney*, electric guitar and bagpipes (left by British occupying forces) are also covered within their particular localities of Palestinian *ghurba* ("exile"). And while Brehony agrees with Issa Boulos' (50)¹ assertion that Palestinian music is mainly vocal and orally transmitted, the author also examines the power of nonvocal music and its ability to express sociopolitical messages of resistance.

Brehony's book is organized into seven chronological chapters covering different *lahajat musiqiya*. They form an intricate mix of storytelling and music analysis covering lyrics, compositions, instruments, and performances. Tying everything together is a thorough Marxist analysis of political developments at the Palestinian, Arab, and world levels.

In Chapter one, music in exile is explored through vocalist Reem Kelani, who grew up in post-1967 Kuwait, and the increasingly important role of women in preserving and developing Palestinian revolutionary culture. Brehony analyzes how Western music styles are incorporated through "cosmopolitan betrayal," weaponizing them for anti-imperialist struggle in settings of exile and local disenfranchisement.

Chapter two analyzes Palestinian music in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Stories of Ahmad Al Khatib (*oud*), Tareq Salhia (guitar), and Ziad Hbouss Ali; and Mustapha Dakhoul and Bahaa Joumaa (all bagpipes) assess the collective development of different *lahajat musiqiya* through Palestinian refugee experiences as part of reinvigorating the liberation struggle in times of crisis.

Developing an analysis of female leadership in *sumud*, the third chapter centers on Umm Ali, an amateur singer growing up in Gaza during the First Intifada of 1987–1993. Brehony argues that besides the mass participation of women in the intifada, "music of *sumud* and resistance opened up a certain space for the participation of young girls, paving the way for the involvement of a later generation of female musicians" (94).

In Chapter four, we follow the story of Tamer Abu Ghazaleh musical exploration and experimentation in Cairo, looking for ways to connect Palestinian music with social and political movements in Egypt and Palestine from 2002 onwards. Brehony analyzes the revolutionary aspect of repetition in relation to renewal, a musical struggle constantly present in the work of Abu Ghazaleh and his peers.

Investigating the potentialities of instrumental or nonvocal music within the struggle for Palestine, Chapter five centers on *oud* player Saied Silbak and the experiences of the internally displaced in Palestine in 1948 (Israel). Thwarting the pressure to collaborate with Israeli artists and Israeli state repression of Palestinian national and cultural expressions, Brehony argues that Palestinian anti-normalization music in the interior “represent [s] a response to their experiences of internal otherness” (155).

In Chapter six, musical ethnographies of Gaza’s Reem Anbar (*oud*), Rawan Okasha (vocals), and Said Fadel (keyboard, *oud*, and vocals) are placed against the backdrop of the “post-Oslo field shaped by widespread NGOization and by extreme conditions of Zionist war and political-economic blockade” (171). Brehony provides important theorizations of three Palestinian musical traditions, namely *tarab*, *watani*, and *turathi*.

The final chapter deals with Palestinian musicians Fares Anbar (percussion) and Ahmed Haddad (vocals, guitar), who recently fled from Gaza to Istanbul, becoming refugees for the second time. Combining this experience of exile with leftist music circles in the Turkish migrant community, Brehony expands on the collective and comradely relations created by and instilled through revolutionary music.

In conclusion, *Palestinian Music in Exile* is an indispensable contribution to the study of Palestinian music and the broader field of diasporic musical expressions. Brehony’s long-term research and passionate storytelling as an involved supporter create a compelling narrative that not only informs but also inspires a deeper appreciation for the resilience and creativity of Palestinian musicians in exile. It is difficult to overstate the importance of his documentation and analysis of the historic development of Palestinian music in exile that has mostly remained confined to oral history. This book is a must-read for anyone seeking a nuanced understanding of the intersection of music, displacement and revolutionary struggle.

Note

1. Boulos, I. (2020). *The Palestinian Music-Making Experience in the West Bank, 1920s to 1959: Nationalism, Colonialism, and Identity*. PhD dissertation., Leiden University.