

MUSIC AND TRADITIONS OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA: SAUDI ARABIA, KUWAIT, BAHRAIN, AND QATAR. By Lisa Urkevich. New York, Routledge, 2015. Pp. xiv+356. ISBN: 9780415888721.

This is a truly remarkable publication. Professor Lisa Urkevich starts this opus with St. John Philby's rather blithe comment that Arabia was a 'musicless land' and deftly explains how much this reflects the limitations of his personal experiences more than anything else. It will come as no surprise to regular visitors to the peninsula that the area has a very rich musical history, albeit one that is indeed somewhat more socially compartmentalised by Western standards, which traditionally emphasised melody and rhythm rather than vocal harmonies. Above all, it makes such a change to read something about Arabian music that does not fall into stereotypical discourses about *Raqş Sharqī* or *Raqş Baladī* (belly dancing), or overly pious sermons about *Tala'a al Badru 'Alaynā*.

The tome is divided into two main parts, following a brief introduction, covering the Najd and Gulf regions and States, and then the Hijaz and districts of southern Arabia. Every chapter (19 in all) gives ample coverage of both the musical traditions of men and women, different tribes and social groups. Each chapter contains helpful boxed interpolations elucidating specific points of interest. The entire text is interspersed with accurate maps and followed by an excellent glossary. In addition to nearly 200 colour and black and white photographs, there are 77 formal music transcriptions for Western readers.

Most significantly there is an MP3 audio CD containing 32 samples of music performed variously by formal bands, singers (male and female), tribes and other distinct social groups. All the musical samples are between 30 seconds to four minutes, so there is no wearying the listener with endless cacophony and all the textual expositions are helpfully concise. The recordings are a real delight and almost eclipse the book itself. These have all been taken *in situ* rather than artificially inside a sterile urban studio and they benefit enormously. Although some may be rough to the untrained ear, they do vividly convey a measure of authenticity and liveliness that create a wondrous and unparalleled ambience. It should be noted that there are a lot of references to camels here. Quite a lot! Professor Urkevich discusses not only the widespread belief that the beasts enjoy the music and will sway to it but she also explores the complex role of camels in the native production of polyrhythmic music. In track 2 *Dahla* singers even raucously emulate the sounds of the animals in a performance for the Saudi king. Elsewhere, Western audiences will, I suspect, hear some familiar resonances. For example the guitar and bass on track 8 *Habb as-Sa'ad* would not be out of place on an

album by the Carpenters. The percussion on track 18 *Hadri* almost sounds Spanish and similarly track 19 *Qalim Al-Jumay'i* echoes the works of George Harrison's "Indian period".

Inside chapter one a section demarcated "Stigma of Performing Music: Culture and Religion" outlines the primary reasons Arabian music is not well known (either in Arabia or internationally). Professor Urkevich argues convincingly that within the complex social framework of pre-modern Arabia the entire subject and field was considered lower class – the profession of poor urban folk, fishermen, slaves and their descendants, and women of questionable morals. Traditional Bedouin culture, which in turn influenced urban areas, emphasised the allegedly manly virtues of camel breeding and trade. 'All jobs related to manual labour are degrading.' (p. 6) Certain religious perspectives took a dim view as well and this has contributed to an environment where music is usually undertaken and pursued privately and discreetly rather than flamboyantly or ostentatiously. Since the 1980s however there have been strenuous efforts to preserve aspects of the historic culture of the peninsula in view of the onslaught of popular Egyptian or Western musical forms, and attitudes are slowly shifting.

As with any major publication there are always a few minor, almost trivial criticisms. A separate chapter on the instruments might have been instructive, especially for readers unfamiliar with Arabian culture or history. The font used in the glossary is far too small. The list and explanation of the audio samples should perhaps have been closer to the CD itself rather than at the front of the book. Also the regrettable drawback to keeping the recording samples fairly short is that the music often fades out well before it is finished, sometimes leaving the listener very curious as to where that particular aural example was leading.

In the final analysis Professor Urkevich has written an informative, entertaining and, above all, charming account of the music of Arabia that provides both readers and listeners with a wonderful insight into the realities of contemporary Arab culture and society. It may be something of a cliché to write that any particular book is, or will become, the standard text for the next generation, but in this case the point is entirely justified and one is hard pressed to think of any other comparable book in the English language. This magnificent volume will primarily be of greatest interest to anthropologists and academics but in fact should appeal to a very broad audience as the language employed is very accessible, the recordings are profoundly sincere and the subject matter is very engaging.