

**Sylvia Angelique Alajaji.** *Music and the Armenian Diaspora: Searching for Home in Exile.* Public Cultures of the Middle East and North Africa Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 216 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-01761-1.

**Reviewed by** Margaret Sarkissian

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**Commissioned by** Lars Fischer (UCL Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies)

*Music and the Armenian Diaspora: Searching for Home in Exile* is an elegant account of the complex history—or rather, histories—of the Armenian people. As the title suggests, music is the lens through which the author brings into focus divergent ways in which Armenians have searched for—and constructed—notions of home/Home in specific exile locations. Music, Sylvia Angelique Alajaji argues, clarifies multifaceted shifts in what it has meant to be Armenian in different times and places.

Alajaji begins her preface with the question, “What is Armenian music?” (p. ix). She ends the book—176 pages later—by stating that “the only possible answer to ‘What is Armenian music?,’ if one is to be given, is a simple ‘Well, that all depends’” (p. 166). In between, she takes seriously Edward Said’s reflection that exiles, unlike people who live in only one culture, have a plurality of vision, an awareness that, “to borrow a phrase from music, is *contrapuntal*” (quoted with emphasis on p. 1). She weaves together personal narrative and the voices of her interview subjects, engaging deftly with the work of major thinkers in the fields of postmodern and postcolonial studies, to create a richly nuanced composition that illuminates the evolving distinction between “past home (the villages in the Ottoman Empire from

which their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents escaped), present home (whether Lebanon or the United States), and symbolic/spiritual Home (Armenia)” (p. 9).

As beautiful as her counterpoint is, it is that of a two-part fugue and not a fully fledged symphony. Alajaji’s emphasis is squarely on the western Armenians who trace their roots back to the Ottoman Empire, survived the genocide, and found new lives in Lebanon and the United States. She weaves their stories together masterfully, but in so doing—despite her own recognition of “multiple orientations” and “Armeniannesses” (p. 11)—she marginalizes the narratives of other Armenians, most notably the eastern Armenians, whose dialect distinguishes them and whose journeys took other routes through Russian (later Soviet) Armenia and Iran, before converging (after 1979) in the United States and Canada.

The book comprises an introduction and five chapters, called “musical snapshots” (p. 3). Each chapter is rooted in a different pivotal time and/or place: the Ottoman Empire, 1890–1915; New York City, 1932–58; Beirut, 1932–58; Beirut, 1958–80; and California. While it is clear that the first chapter contextualizes the 1915 genocide, the significance of the dates 1932, 1958, and 1980 is less clear and detracts from both the metaphor of

“snapshots” (New York City and the first wave of immigrants, Beirut at two generational moments, and the undated Californian encounter of Armenian Americans and re-displaced exiles) and her own historical narrative, which effortlessly transcends these chronological boundaries.

In chapter 1, Alajaji boldly deconstructs the narrative of Komitas, the cultural icon venerated by all Armenians. A priest, composer, and musicologist, Komitas Vartabed (1869–1935) collected folk songs from mountain areas of Russian Armenia and remote country villages, claiming these to be the “true Armenian music” (p. 26). His arrest on April 24, 1915, and the subsequent tragedy of his survival and mental breakdown (he was institutionalized in Paris until his death) have become deeply embedded in the Armenian narrative. Alajaji suggests that in a period of growing nationalism, “the folk songs Komitas recovered, from their musical language to the narratives they embodied,” combined with his own biographical narrative, “became a crucial component of the substantiation needed in the Armenians’ claims as a people and a nation” (p. 48). The songs became symbolic capital, defining what “Armenian” music was. They were, in other words, by no means simply an Anatolian amalgam of texts, melodies, instruments, and musical styles. As we will see, this distinction would have considerable repercussions going forward.

Chapter 2 shifts our attention to New York City as Alajaji focuses on the lively Eighth Avenue music scene where displaced Armenians played Anatolian music with Middle Eastern, Greek, and Jewish musicians in clubs and cabarets. “This comfortable linguistic and cultural mixture would mark the identities of the generation of Armenians newly arrived from the Ottoman Empire and their descendants, as can be seen in the music that was popularized at the time and in the music that would later develop among their U.S.-born children” (p. 66). Using historical recordings reissued by Harold G. Hagopian on his Traditional

Crossroads label (examples are included in the online media site at <https://ethnomultimedia.org/book.html?bid=36>), Alajaji demonstrates that “the only thing immediately ‘Armenian’ about [this music] is the ethnicity of the performers” (p. 71).

The melting-pot experience of Armenians in New York starkly contrasted that of their compatriots who settled in Beirut. As detailed in chapter 3, the “political independence afforded by the Lebanese government together with the strength of Armenian cultural, political, and religious institutions in Lebanon allowed the Armenian community there a semblance of autonomy, which in turn allowed for a mobilization and rise in nationalistic consciousness not unlike that seen in the Ottoman Empire in the years just preceding the genocide.” Community choirs, affiliated with cultural organizations or political parties, were established; some of the earliest were even directed by students of Komitas. They drew on his biographical narrative “as martyr and savior of Armenian music” and used his music “to separate ‘us’ from ‘them’ and to forge a space in which Armenians could envision Home” (p. 83). In the politically divided community of Beirut, “Armenian” national identity was (re)constructed: “the songs of these choirs ... musically and linguistically distinguished the Armenian community not only from its immediate surroundings (that is, Lebanon) but also from its past in the Ottoman Empire, and allowed for a reimagining of present-day possibilities” (p. 105).

By the mid-1960s, the next generation of Lebanese Armenians found that neither Turkish nor Armenian music “connected to the experience of the ever-growing youth culture, whose preferred music had no connection to either home or Home” (p. 118). Young musicians joined bands that played covers of European pop, but “as they became more famous, they slowly began to incorporate markers of their Armenian background” (p. 117). The term *estradayin* was “used to describe the transcontinental (but largely French-in-

fluenced) *boulevardier* style of Armenian popular music that arose in Lebanon in the late 1960s” (p. 172n3). By singing these songs in Armenian, Adiss Harmandian became the first Armenian pop superstar.

The location of Alajaji’s final “snapshot” is California, where the well-established American Armenian community has come face to face with waves of newly re-diasporized Armenians: from Lebanon, after the onset of the civil war in 1975; from Iran, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979; and even from Armenia in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990. As she observes, “Here is where all the pieces come together and overlap and where the struggle over what it means to be Armenian is felt most acutely. While the struggle has played out in a number of arenas, namely politics and the church, it has also played out over music” (p. 139). Alajaji carefully documents moments of social drama—that, on occasion, devolved into violence—during which Armenian Americans (whose *kef* bands, like their Eighth Avenue predecessors, played Anatolian music and sang Turkish lyrics) and *estradayin*-loving displaced Beirutis confronted each other over what it meant to be Armenian. Her conclusion, that “they exist now in a contrapuntal simultaneity—at times in consonance, at times in dissonance, yet existing just the same” (p. 164), brings us back full circle to the question asked at the beginning: “What is Armenian music?”

Alajaji presents a fascinating and beautifully written narrative. My deep reservations about her western Armenian-centrism aside, I wish Alajaji had referred to more of Ron Suny’s work beyond the single, rather old source she cites. His most recent account of the genocide, published around the same time as this book (the centenary of the Armenian genocide), provides a crucial rethinking of the era, including the role of the Armenian intelligentsia and their connections with the Young Turks.[1] Though Alajaji may well not have

had access to this book, Suny has been presenting his evolving work elsewhere in recent years.

From the perspective of interested non-Armenian readers, I think *Music and the Armenian Diaspora* would have been greatly enhanced by the inclusion of maps; a complete discography (with full citations and label numbers of all mentioned recordings); more interesting illustrations (apart from the poignant photograph on the front cover, there are only five visuals: a film poster, the front cover of a piece of sheet music, two printed concert posters, and one photograph of Richard Hagopian’s oud and arms); and more substantive footnotes documenting and supplementing information, especially statistics and dates, discussed in the text. I also wish more attention had been paid to editorial details. There is no excuse for a whole paragraph appearing in two places (pp. 67, 69) or for incorrect bibliographic attributions: a long quotation on page 151 comes from a different text by Harold Hagopian than the one referenced.[2] Similarly, the reference to my 1987 article on Armenians in Southeast Asia (p. 167n2) leads to the wrong bibliographic entry (my master’s thesis on Armenian choirs in Toronto).[3]

Finally, as an insatiably curious reader, I find the number of tantalizing details that were not documented or further clarified in footnotes frustrating. I will content myself with one example: at the start of chapter 2, Ara Dinkjian (the famous Armenian oud player) describes a version of “Yankee Doodle” played by one Joe Bedrosian on a zurna and recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell in California in 1939 as his favorite piece in the Library of Congress-held collection, and asks Alajaji, “What performance better captures who they were than that?” (p. 56). When Alajaji revisited the recording that, on first hearing, she “hadn’t been able to sit through,” she recognized this “makam-based [version as] a sonic intertwining of aesthetic landscapes, each evocative of the multiple consciousnesses of the diaspora” and describes the 1:33 minute recording at length (p. 57).

I mention this not to highlight her occasionally purple prose but because there is no footnote to this fascinating nugget. Although the collection is mentioned again later (pp. 148–149), and quotations from Cowell’s comments on the recordings are cited in the bibliography, no further information is given about this veritable treasure trove of material.[4]

These minor reservations aside, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora* is a wonderful contribution to the study of Armenian music and a sophisticated exploration of what it means (and has meant) to be Armenian in the world.

#### Notes

[1]. Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); and Ronald Grigor Suny, *“They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else”: A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[2]. The quotation comes not from Harold G. Hagopian’s Liner Notes for *Armenians on 8th Avenue*. Traditional Crossroads CD 4279 (1996) but from his Liner Notes for *Kef Time: Exciting Sounds of the Middle East*. Traditional Crossroads CD 4269 (1994), 3. These are not listed in the bibliography.

[3]. Margaret Sarkissian, “Armenians in South-East Asia,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3, nos. 2-3 (1987): 1–33.

[4]. For the curious, “Yankee Doodle,” #80 of 105 Armenian items in the Library of Congress collection, is “part of a group of field materials documenting Joe Bedrosian performing Armenian and Armeno-Turkish music on the zurna on April 24, 1939, collected by Sidney Robertson Cowell in Fresno, California” (CALL NUMBER: AFC 1940/001: AFS 4241 A2; DIGITAL ID: afccc a4241a2, <https://memory.loc.gov/afc/afccc/audio/a424/a4241a2.mp3> [accessed January 29, 2017]). April

24, now known as “Armenian Martyr’s Day” or “Genocide Remembrance Day,” has always held special significance for the community. According to the Library of Congress website, “From 1938 to 1940, while in her thirties, Sidney Robertson, ethnographer and collector of traditional American music, single-handedly organized and directed a California Work Projects Administration project designed to survey musical traditions in Northern California” (<https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afccchtml/cowsonnek.html>). In 1941, she married the American composer Henry Cowell. The whole collection can be accessed at <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cowell-bib:armenian>.

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