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Syriac Chant and the Limits of Modality

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Sense and Sadness: Syriac Chant in Aleppo, by Tala Jarjour. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 250 pp. ISBN: 978-0-190-63525-1.

In the northern Iraqi town of Bartella, just outside of Mosul, a Syriac Orthodox Christian priest returns to his church after Iraqi forces have retaken the town from the Islamic State. As he sifts through the wreckage, salvaging what remains of his church's liturgical texts, someone films his search on a mobile phone and circulates the images among social media groups around the world—reaching those kin who have fled the violence but remain intimately connected to their churches in not only Iraq but Syria, southeastern Turkey, Lebanon, and other parts of the Middle East. This story occurs midway through Tala Jarjour's painstakingly researched and conceptually nuanced ethnomusicological study of Syriac Orthodox—or Suryani, as it is referred to in Arabic—chant in Aleppo. While the scene takes place many hundreds of miles away from her fieldsite in Syria, the account conveys both the urgency and the scale of her story. Syriac chant, the indispensable and ubiquitous bedrock of Suryani ritual and social life, is more than a locally grounded musical tradition or doctrinally defined ritual practice. It is, rather, both a world unto itself and the connective tissue that holds a world together: vast, complex, largely ignored, and poorly understood, comprised of regional schools and diasporic revivals, peripatetic sonic lineages, and an ancient archive of ritual knowledge turning to ash as I write this.

As far as I know, Jarjour is the first Western-trained scholar of ethnomusicology or religious studies writing in English to fully grasp in this broad ontological sense what Syriac chant is and how it works for the communities who practice it. Such an

undertaking as hers requires not only a reattunement of scholarly intuitions about what counts as music and what counts as religion, but also a gritty resourcefulness and tenacity as a fieldworker. *Sense and Sadness* documents the incongruities of sound and incongruities of theory that shape the tradition of Syriac chant as it was practiced at St. George's Church in Aleppo before the outbreak of the civil war. She unpacks the origins and implications of such incongruities, tracing the regional histories of migration, musical dispersal, and colonial scholarship that have come to inflect certain strands of Syriac musicological discourse in this corner of a global diaspora.

The book's primary aim is the ethnomusicological analysis of a single mode of Syriac chant unique to this Aleppine congregation and sung exclusively during Holy Week. St. George's congregation alone know and practice this mode, which they call *Ḥasho*, a term that both signifies and elicits the deep sadness that comes of remembering Christ's Passion in the week prior to Easter. This mode was first brought to Aleppo when the whole of the Syriac population of the Ottoman city of Urfa (formerly Edessa, a famous center of Syriac culture in late antiquity) fled to Syria during World War I. In chanting and listening to the *Ḥasho*, the sorrow of recent memory merges with more ancient sorrows, and with the suffering of Christ, producing a shared social-emotional experience that Jarjour calls an emotional economy of aesthetics.

As a term of art, the notion of an emotional economy of aesthetics struck me at first as cumbersome, and I wondered whether the conceptual tools of affect theory, in the vein of a Brian Massumi or a Kathleen Stewart, or of the sensory ethnography of a Paul Stoller

or a Nadia Seremetakis might have aided in formulating her argument more seamlessly than the cognitive-perceptual approach upon which she draws. Each of these traditions' concern for local epistemo-logies and the untranslatability of Western categories anticipate Jarjour's own, and they also enable one to theorize how shared emotions might fashion subjects and social worlds. And yet as I worked through her logic, I found myself persuaded by her account of what is, indeed, a dynamic system of exchange among shifting yet related parts. The parts that make up this economy are contestable and situationally defined experiences of aesthetic value, authority, authenticity, knowledge, and feeling invested in the sounds of *Hasbo*: each part works and builds upon the other in the multiday performance of the Passion Week. Together these constitute a mode of being that is as religiously transcendent as it is ethnically exclusive—not even other Suryani are able to access this parish-bound mode of being. The notion of an economy works well here because it not only denotes the reciprocity of exchange, but also has a theological valence in Syriac Christianity, referring to a divine arrangement of earthly affairs, which is often understood to be mirrored or instantiated in the *ordo*, or divine order, of the liturgy.¹

Structurally, the emotional economy of aesthetics is the answer to the analytical question that animates much of the book. The burning question is whether Syriac chant does indeed constitute a modal system comparable to that of Arabic and Turkish *maqam*, to which it is generally compared, and even at times linked genealogically, without much substantiation. The reasons for this assumed

commensurability have to do with a history of cultural power dynamics and Orientalist scholarship: the local language of *maqam* has had an outsized influence on how even some Suryani themselves describe the chant.

Most liturgical hymns in the *Beth Gazzo*, the repertoire of Syriac melodies used in the liturgy, can be sung in eight different versions depending on when in the eight-week liturgical cycle they appear; thus there are not only hundreds of chants to memorize, but eight melodic variations of each chant. These eight categories are often assumed to be close equivalents of Arabic or Turkish *maqam*, and to work in a similarly systematic way. And yet Jarjour's attentive ear impelled her to question the received wisdom that these eight categories themselves constitute such a commensurable modal system at all. The sections she devotes to answering this question are as exciting as any detective novel, as she doggedly pursues her suspicions across the global diaspora in interviews with Syriac liturgical experts in New Jersey, Lebanon, and ultimately the monasteries of Tur Abdin, the heartland of Syriac Orthodoxy in southeast Turkey. Jarjour solves the mystery in a striking ethnographic scene: after dinner on an outdoor patio of the Mor Gabriel Monastery, in what is nothing less than a fieldwork coup for a female researcher working alone among Syriac monastics, she navigates a conversation with the abbott, a young deacon, and a handful of seminarians and local visitors in English, Arabic, and Turoyo (the neo-Aramaic vernacular spoken in Tur Abdin):

"Is there any relation between this, and this?"

I would ask, pointing . . . to the first of a particular eightfold group and the first of another, which I chose based on how the sources define the first mode and classify its groupings. The priest would reply: "No, none." (87)

¹ Varghese, Baby. 2004. *West Syriac Liturgical Theology*. Ashgate: Aldershot, UK.

At the end of the discussion, it is clear that there are not eight modes but 240. Each song variation is its own mode. The eightfold system is numerical, a method of keeping track of when which songs are meant to be sung at which point in the eight-week liturgical cycle, and its melodies can only be mastered through years of repetition and memorization. For those of us invested in the mechanics of Syriac chant, this is a major finding.

Sense and Sadness is an indispensable account of aurality's central role in organizing the social and ritual lives of Syriac Orthodox Christians. It is not meant to be the final word on the subject but rather a dynamic picture of "what thinking about Syriac chant—in the Suryani terms of practice—should involve" (83). To that end, I hope that it will inspire a groundswell of interest among scholars of music and religion in this fascinating tradition before its treasures have been lost entirely.

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