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Sound Recording in the Life of Early Arab-American Immigrants*

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Since Edison's invention of the cylinder phonograph in 1877 and Emile Berliner's introduction of the flat disc in 1887, sound recording gradually developed into a subject of scholarly discourse. Topics of interest have included the history of the record industry, the impact of recording upon the musical content, and the industry's economic and social influence upon the recording artists. In my own work, beginning with my doctoral dissertation, written in 1977 (by coincidence exactly one hundred years after Edison's invention), I have studied the role played by the record industry in the music and musical life of Cairo roughly between 1904, when the flat disc began to take hold in the Arab Near East, and 1932, which marked the appearance of the first talking and musical film in Egypt (see Racy 1976, 1977a, 1977b, and 1978). Other studies have also dealt with the history and content of Arab recordings, see for example Lagrange (1996), Abou Mrad (2004), Danielson (1997), Frishkopf (2008), and in the case of Arab-Americans, Rasmussen (1991, 1997a, and 1997b). Recently, however, I have expanded my research to include 78-r.p.m. discs recorded and released by early Arab immigrants in the United States and to some extent Brazil. I have been particularly interested in the musical content and what it can tell us about the immigrants, their history and social life, as well as about their connections with their cultural roots and their experiences in the *mahjar*, literally, place of immigration. In this study, I address these and other related issues on the basis of representative recordings, primarily from the first half of the twentieth century.

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One historic landmark sets the scene for subsequent discussions, namely the famous 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition. Meant to showcase different world cultures and to display America's economic and industrial progress, the Exposition was of interest to ethnologists and scientists, as well as to curious onlookers. Among the specially constructed venues within the exposition was the so-called "Cairo Street," which included a theater where dancers and musicians from Egypt performed (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1

We are told that the dance, namely "*danse du ventre*," or "belly dancing," as it came to be known in the West, horrified the Victorian-minded American public especially the women, to the extent that the exposition authorities considered closing up the Egyptian theater altogether (see *The Dream City,* 1893-94, p. 413 and Racy, 1983, p. 170-173).

In a few decades, however, Arab American immigrants were able to hear Arab music themselves on 78 r.p.m.-discs imported from the homeland. The following illustration (Fig. 2a, 2b, 2c) shows three early twentieth-century discs that had been available for sale at the Rashid Sales Company in Brooklyn, New York. They were all released by the same Lebanese company. The first carried the label Baida (Bayda) Record, Baida Cousins, Beyrouth, Syrie. The other two displayed the later company's label, Baidaphon, which used the picture of a gazelle as its logo. The three featured artists respectively are: the little known folk singer Ilyās Šahwān; the Lebanese singer Farajallāh Bayḍā, who was a close relative of the company founders; and the Beiruti singer and performer on the *buzuq* (long-necked fretted lute) player Muḥyī al-Dīn Ba'yūn.

Figure 2 (a, b, c)

Also, it was not long before the Baida Company announced on its record sleeves that customers in Africa, Australia, and the Americas could save money by ordering their discs directly from Pierre & Gabriel Baida at the company's address in Berlin, where the discs were manufactured.[1] At the same time, local American record companies, such as Victor, included Arab music in their foreign record series, and by the early 1940s, Arab-American immigrants were already recording and producing records themselves featuring their own local artists.[2]

One relatively early Arab-American disc carrying a Maloof (Ma'lūf) label and featuring Ilyās al-Wardīnī, gives us a taste of the early twentieth-century Arab style of singing and instrumental accompanying (see Fig. 3). The content, titled *"Šams al-Šumūsi,"* is a popular song *(ṭaqṭūqa)* originally composed by Egypt's Šaykh Sayyid Darwīš (d. 1923). On the disc, we hear a *taḫt*, the traditional small instrumental ensemble, performing in the typical heterophonic style of the early twentieth century, while the featured artist sings in a highly ornate and metrically flexible style characteristic of that era. The content may have particularly appealed to those early immigrants who were familiar with the urban Arab music of the pre-World War I era.

Recreating the festive mood of the immigrants' own gatherings, as well as evoking the immigrants' nostalgia for the homeland was a recorded instrumental genre known simply as *raqs* (literally, "dance"). However, as demonstrated by various record labels, *raqs* pieces were given specific titles, for example, *"Raqs Layālī al-Faraḥ,"* with the English translation, "Dance – 'Nights of Happiness'"; *"Raqs Kamīl,"* listed in English as "Raks – 'Camille Dance'"; and "Dance Linda." As typically heard on immigrant *raqs* recordings, the content is in the relatively common *maqām* (melodic mode) *Bayyātī*, whose octave scale, in relative pitch, is: *d*, *e* half-flat, *f*, *g*, *a*, *b*-flat (or *b* half-flat), *c′*, *d′*. Usually a precomposed metric ensemble introduction is followed by an improvised, for the most part metrically accentu-

[1] For more information on this and other companies that recorded music in the Arab world, see Racy, 1976 and 1977, p. 79-123.

[2] As Anne Rasmussen explains, "Beginning in the second decade of this [20th] century, Arab immigrant musicians began recording their music on 78-r.p.m. discs at the invitation of such American record companies as Columbia, Victor, and Standard. These American record companies were searching for, and found, new music and new markets in the myriad ethnic communities in America. By the 1940s, however, Arab Americans had taken charge of their own recording industry and several Arab American record labels emerged. Thus, recording music, as both an artistic and a commercial endeavor, made up part of the professional activities of the many musicians of the community" (1997, p. 76).

ated, instrumental solo on the violin, or sometimes in alternation with the *‘ūd*. Normally, the soloist is accompanied by an ensemble *ostinato* pattern that emphasizes the *dirbakki* (in the Levant) —*darabukka* (in Egypt)—, brass or clay hand-drum), which in turn plays a short duple or quadruple metric pattern reminiscent of Levantine folk dances that women or men would have performed at village weddings. Especially when the melody-and-*ostinato* structure is prominently present, the performance reminds us of the music of other immigrants, in particular the Turkish or Greek dance genre known as *chifte telli*.

Figure 3

Music reminiscent of the Levantine *dabki* (or *dabkah*, a traditional village line-dance) appeared in the form of violin imitation of the *mijwiz* (a single-reed double-clarinet), which traditionally accompanies the dance. This is heard on an Usṭuwānāt al-Šarq (literally, “discs of the East”) disc featuring the violinist Sam Sheheen (Šāhīn) and carrying the title *“Kamanjah ‘alā Naġam al-Mijwiz – Dabkah Ba’albakiyyah”* (roughly, “Violin in the Mijwiz Musical Style: Dabkah in the Ba’albak [northern Lebanese town] Dance Style.) Here, the method of violin playing, which is also encountered in some homeland recordings from the same era, is achieved by placing two violin strings very close together and tuning them in unison or an octave apart, thus creating a so-called “beat” effect. Moreover, the playing technique emphasizes sustained bowing, thus suggesting the reed instrument’s continuous sound, which in turn is produced through “circular breathing.” Also, the violinist frequently sounds the note of the open double-course of strings in between the melody notes, thus emulating the characteristic pedal-tone interven-

tions on the *mijwiz*, which are produced by intermittently covering all the holes on the wind instrument.

However, particularly interesting is the multilayered musical profile of Sam Sheheen, whose performance on the other side of this same disc (Fig. 4) seems strikingly modern. Here, Sheheen with his Utica (N.Y.) group performs a Westernized piece titled "Raqs al-'Ayyūqah" (Dance of the Graceful Woman). In this ensemble work, the more Arab sounding passages blend, or at times alternate, with others that use Western harmony and are performed on a variety of Western orchestral instruments. Also, the more virtuosic violin passages bear unmistakable resemblance to East European Gypsy music.

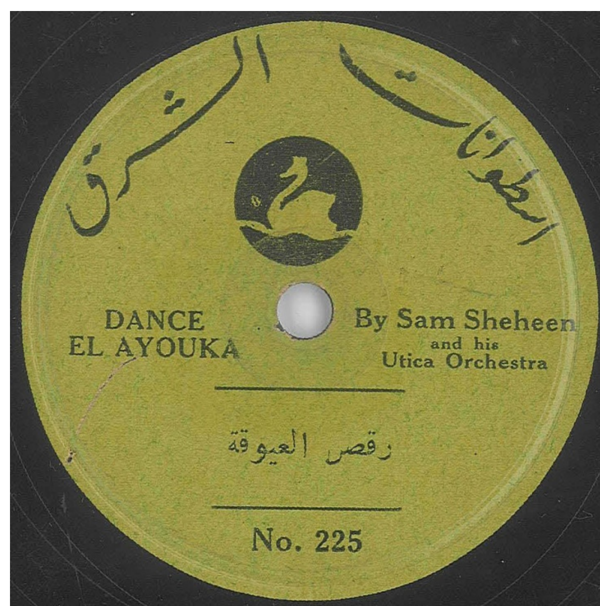

Figure 4

Songs of yearning for the homeland were quite common. Examples include a disc carrying the label Alkawakeb (*al-kawākib,* literally, the Stars) and in Arabic script, Usṭuwānāt al-Kawākib (Discs of the Stars), and featuring the late comedian, singer, and composer Najib Hankash, who in fact spent many years of his life in Brazil (Fig. 5). As the lyrics go, *"Baddī irja' limm zhūr; Min ḥaffit nahri-l-wādī"* (I want to go back to pick flowers; from the banks of the valley river). On this release, as on many others, we hear a strophic song in colloquial Lebanese Arabic. In terms of intonation, instrumentation, and modal structure, the music is typical of folk-inspired urban songs that were released on discs in the Levant region at the time.

Figure 5

Thematically related is another Alkawakeb release that presents the poet-singer Ṭānyus al-Ḥimlāwī in a *qaṣīd* (a Levantine genre of sung poetry) urging immigrants to return to the homeland. The title is *"Ya Mhajirin"* (*Ya Muhajirīn,* literally, "Oh, Immigrants!").

Although numerous recordings spoke about the homeland, many expressed immigrant-related interests and concerns. These include a disc (Fig. 6) featuring the famous Lebanese-American comedian Danny Thomas singing folk songs, including a piece in the Lebanese *'atābā* song-genre, which is typically associated with nostalgia and romance. In this case, however, Thomas, with *'ūd* accompanist Toufic (Tawfiq) Barham, essentially sings in support of his St. Jude Hospital. The record is produced by St. Jude Hospital Foundation.

Comparably, some recordings addressed local social and moral issues. On one Arabphon label (Fig. 7), a female singer complains about the spoiled new generation. The title is *"Šubbān l-'Aṣr bhal-Iyyām"* (roughly, "Youngsters of Today").

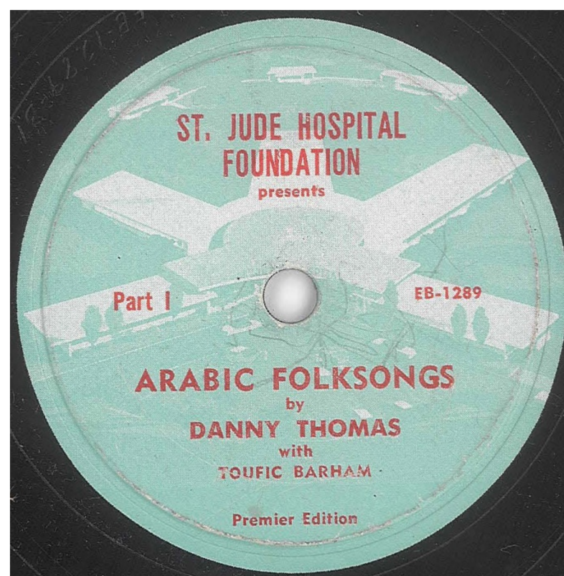

Figure 6

Figure 7

On another label, namely, Star of the East (Fig. 8), we hear a “light” song composed and performed by an immigrant artist whose name is displayed in Arabic as Rizqallah Bunayy and in English as Russell Bunai. In this song, titled “Playing the Horses,” the performer laments wasting his money at the horse races.

Figure 8

Similarly, another singer tells about having difficulty finding a bride, perhaps one of the problems facing young male immigrants at the time.

However, some artists sought to project a new musical image by adding a prominent ingredient of Americana to their music. Eddy Kochak, an American-born New Yorker from an Aleppo immigrant family, sang, played the *dirbakki*, and produced numerous recordings catering to both the American belly-dance community and the local immigrant *ḥaflah* (party) and *mahrajān* (festival) goers in the United States.[3] On a Nilephon 78-r.p.m. disc, probably from the early 1950s (Fig. 9), he performs a piece titled "Yah Habeebie [Yā Ḥabībī] Blues" (literally, Oh, My-Beloved Blues). Here, the singing and the accompanying Western brass and percussion instruments produce a jazz ambience in terms of harmonic texture, rhythm, and intonational inflections. Characteristically, Kochak uses a blend of Arabic and English expressions in his lyrics. He also makes reference to familiar Arab cuisine-items, as well as utters familiar greetings and expressions of endearment.[4]

In addition to this and other relatively late recordings, others featuring homeland artists were quite prevalent. In the United States, one 78-r.p.m. disc sleeve (Fig. 10) displayed photographs of several well-known, mostly Levantine artists: Asmahān, Najāḥ Salām, Ḥalīm al-Rūmī, Muḥammad Salmān, Sihām Rifqī, and Ḥanān, who currently lives in New York city, but had also stayed for some time in Brazil, where she performed for Arab immigrants there and recorded a number of Arab songs on

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[3] For more information on the *ḥaflah*, *mahrajān*, and related Arab-American events, see Rasmussen 1991, especially pages 116-144.

[4] Kochak, Eddie "the Sheik" Kochak, who performed with other immigrant musicians, such as Haqqi Obadia, produced numerous L.P. records that often present a distinctive blend of Arab and American music, including jazz. The records were released on Kochak's Ameraba record label. More biographical information on this and other artists can be found in Rasmussen 1991.

the Brazilian label Continental. Similarly, the recorded hits of such Egyptian celebrities as Umm Kulṯūm and ʻAbd al-Wahhāb, were widely available in immigrant record stores. And furthermore, the musical films of these two artists were viewed by many in North and South America.

Figure 9

Figure 10

Meanwhile, in the Brazilian *mahjar*, comparable patterns of allegiance to the homeland culture and adaptation to the new ways of life can be observed. The history of Arab, largely Syrian-Lebanese, immigrants there shows that Arab recordings, especially in the early decades of the twentieth century, occupied a significant niche in the community's musical life. Although in my research in Saõ Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in 2009 I did not encounter an Arab-immigrant record industry comparable in scope to that of the North American Arab *mahjar*, Arab record imports seemed quite accessible. During the 1920s, Farah Book and Record Store in Saõ Paulo announced that the store was ready to mail Arab 78-r.p.m. discs securely to any place in the country, even to distant towns in the Amazon. As shown by one of the Farah advertisements in the immigrant magazine *al-Jāliyah* (A Colonia), founded in 1922 by Sami Racy[5] in Saõ Paulo, the recording artists included celebrated Egyptian singers such as Yūsuf al-Manyalāwi, Abū l-'Ilā Muḥammad, Salāmah Higāzī, and Umm Kulṯūm, as well as Lebanese artists, such as the singer and Byzantine liturgy specialist Mitrī al-Murr and the singer and *buzuq* player Muhyī al-Dīn Ba'yūn.

However, especially after World War I, the influence of local Brazilian music upon the immigrants' music and musical life became apparent. Judging by community news items in early Arabic journals in Brazil, the Arab immigrants often incorporated Brazilian, as well as Arab, musical components in their social-club events. Nagib Hankach's (Najīb Ḥankaš) musical works in Brazil provide a good example.[6] Thematically, his performances incorporated satire, social critique, and nostalgia for the homeland. However, one of his best known recorded works is a song that uses for lyrics excerpts from a philosophical poem by the Lebanese writer and poet Gibran Khalil Gibran, one that opens with the phrase *"A'tinī n-nāya wa-ġannī"* (Give me the reed flute and sing). The disc was recorded and released on the Brazilian label Continental (Fig. 12). The musical content, a collaboration between Ḥankaš and Brazilian arranger and conductor Gabriel Migliori, presents a carefully worked out synthesis of Eastern and Western components. Among the prominent features are: the use of Western symphonic instruments in addition to an *'ūd*; adherence to the minor tonality; and the application of harmonic textures, particularly in the instrumental passages. Notably, the melody of the refrain was borrowed in part from a verse within the classic tango piece "La Cumparsita."[7]

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[5] Sami Yuwakim Racy (d. 1927), who founded the monumental Arabic journal *al-Jāliyah* (A Colonia), was my paternal uncle. Among my immigrant relatives in Brazil, the Lebanese family name (al-Rāsī) acquired the Portuguese spelling "Racy," and many of my relatives in Lebanon who were closely connected to the Brazilian *Majhar* adopted the spelling as well.

[6] Najīb Ḥankaš was born in the Lebanese town of Zahlah in 1904. He immigrated to Brazil in 1922 and returned to Lebanon in 1947, but subsequently made a short trip to Brazil in 1950, and finally returned to Lebanon, where he lead an active artistic life until his death in 1979 ("Ḥankašiyyāt: Najīb Ḥankaš," *Al-Asser Special*, 2002, p. 99).

[7] This song, which after Ḥankaš's return to Lebanon was sung by Fayrūz and rearranged by the Raḥbānī brothers, became a classic. However, at the time, Ḥankaš also recorded the song himself again. His later rendition was included on his CD album along with humorous anecdotes and other songs by him (see Najib Ḥankaš: *Ḥankašiyyāt Munawwa'ah*, Voix de L'Orient, VDL CD 654, 1997, compact disc).

Figure 11

Conclusion

The story told by early Arab recordings in the West attests to a gradual shift from a time when Arab music and dance were subjects of curiosity and cultural voyeurism, for example at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, to a time when the immigrants were already composing, recording, and listening to their own music. Imported or locally reissued Arab recordings helped maintain the public's musical and cultural connections with the homeland. However, the *mahjar* record industry enabled the immigrants and their descendents to remember, or perhaps recreate a romanticized image of, the homeland. Similarly, their recorded music helped them construct their new sense of community in terms of who they are and what they would like to be. Last, but not least, the record medium gave the immigrant artists an effective outlet for their creativity and eventually provided them with a popular medium for developing a multifaceted immigrant musical sound. Evoking the past and the present, the East and the West, the recorded repertoire appears to have received certain inspirations from other fellow immigrant groups—Greeks, Armenians, Turks, and others. Today, the recordings can shed broader light upon the role played by music in diasporic culture. They can also inform our present discourses on sound recording as a medium for negotiating social and musical identity.

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