Wesleyan University
WesScholar

Division III Faculty Publications | Natural Sciences and Mathematics

1974

Music in Contemporary Afghanistan

Mark Slobin
Wesleyan University, mslobin@wesleyan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/div3facpubs

Part of the Ethnomusicology Commons

Recommended Citation

Slobin, Mark, "Music in Contemporary Afghanistan" (1974). *Division III Faculty Publications.* Paper 98.
http://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/div3facpubs/98

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Natural Sciences and Mathematics at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Division III Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact dschnaidt@wesleyan.edu, ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.

edited by
Louis Dupree
Linette Albert
foreword by
Phillips Talbot

The Praeger Special Studies program—utilizing the most modern and efficient book production techniques and a selective worldwide distribution network—makes available to the academic, government, and business communities significant, timely research in U.S. and international economic, social, and political development.

Afghanistan in the 1970s

PRAEGER SPECIAL STUDIES IN INTERNATIONAL ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

Praeger Publishers New York Washington London

1974

real source of the richness from which the new cultural surge will rise. President Daoud Khan expressed it thus: "Afghanistan is a country in which different brother tribes are living and these inhabitants . . . have had a common destiny in the long history of the country . . . and created a common national culture."

To implement these ideals the Republic has designed an expanded award system to replace one which had been suspended for several years. According to an announcement issued on January 27, 1974, 103 awards will be given for creative works in the natural and social sciences, literature including works for children, art, journalism and other mass media. The Republic Award for the most outstanding work in all fields includes a prize of 100,000 afghanis (ca. $1500 at the current rate of exchange); 20,000 afghanis will be received by the top winners in each field. These special awards have been named to honor Afghans renowned in these fields: Al-Biruni and Avicena (Natural Sciences), Khushal Khan Khatak and Jalaluddin Balkhi (Social Sciences), Jamaluddin Afghani and Rahman Baba (Literature), Behzad (Art) and Mahmud Beg Tarzi (Journalism/Mass Media). In addition, six "encouragement" awards of 2,000 afghanis each will be given for works by the creative young. Another category includes translations, from and into foreign languages, and, from Dari into Pashto and vice versa. In all, the awards will total over a million afghanis.

A special office has been created in the Ministry of Information and Culture to which all works for consideration must be submitted by April 22, the last day of the first month of the Afghan calender. The awards will be announced in July 1974, on the eve of the first anniversary of the founding of the Republic. Most importantly, the winning works will be published by the Baihaqi Book Publishing Institute. The Republic has taken another step towards its national objectives and hopes, that through the promotion of creative works and their creators, it may dispel the major problem of disinterested neglect articulated throughout this chapter and instill new vigor with consequent public support.

NOTE

1. Louis Dupree, Afghanistan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).

CHAPTER

13 MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY AFGHAN SOCIETY

Mark Slobin

The present day situation of Afghan music[1] and musicians is shaped largely by two main factors: an older pattern of musical life incorporating an extensive set of traditional musical attitudes, repertoires, and types of musicians and a newer layer of the music culture, emerging since the 1950s, which in many respects represents a sharp break with the past. This chapter will first survey the traditional place of music and musicians and then move on to discussion of recent changes and outlook for the future.

For a region as ethnically and linguistically diverse as Afghanistan, very few generalizations about a specific cultural aspect such as music will hold for even a majority of the population. My information is most complete for the north, my zone of specialization.

TRADITIONAL ATTITUDES TOWARD MUSIC

Our first area of inquiry is the traditional attitude toward music and its practitioners. Two distinctive strata can be identified: beliefs and practices indicating a strongly negative feeling toward music (and dance) and factors revealing a basically positive outlook on the place of music.

We will begin with the negative component as this is the first to strike the outside observer and the one that has undergone the most far-reaching modification in recent years. The animus against music stems from twin sources: the local interpretation of Islamic beliefs and the traditional social hierarchy of Afghan village and town life. It should immediately be clear from the foregoing that nomads may be exceptions to the negative attitude outlined below, a factor to be detailed separately.

That Islam is inimical to music and dance is somewhat of a truism for large areas of the Near East. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that there is no specific stricture against the performing arts in the Koran itself, the source of basic Islamic belief. It is rather in the Hadith, the body of traditions clustered around the Prophet's name, that such negative attitudes emerge, for example, a quotation to the effect that musical instruments are "the devil's muezzin, serving to call men to his worship."[2] Martin Luther is cited as justifying his adoption of secular tunes into sacred service by asking why the devil should have all the good tunes; Mohammad, on the other hand, is credited by Islamic tradition with admonishing his followers to shed all vestiges of profane music in the interests of piety. However, as the issue was not discussed in the Koran proper, although "the four great legal schools of Islam . . . decided, more or less, against 'listening to music,' a most interesting controversial literature on its permissibility or otherwise grew up,"[3] thus allowing for the possibility that at certain times and places music indeed be considered appropriate in some respects.

In Afghanistan, local religious leaders seem to have stayed on the conservative side of the issue, often exhorting their flock to steer clear of musical temptation. The underlying issue involved in this denial of music is perhaps tied to the close links between music and dance, the latter art being more clearly antithetical to religious morality. Any respectable villager involved too openly in dance has traditionally been liable to censure. For males, the road to ruin lay in the temptation to become a dancing boy, a staple although disapproved fixture of Afghan entertainment associated with moral laxity. For women, a too public display of dance also suggested a career of abandon. In either case, dance and its sister art, music, were bound to become the target of opprobrium on the part of respectable citizens.

The other shadow hanging over musical overindulgence was the fear of loss of social status. In many cases musicians stemmed from a very low stratum of society for whom music was a hereditary craft (more about which below). Under such circumstances, a pillar of society would not like to be associated publicly with the practices of such a lowly group. Thus, while a man might sing or play an instrument at home, he would conceal the fact even from members of his family and certainly from outsiders lest he be the butt of derisive commentary. Collectors of folk music have often run across the situation of the secret musician, usually an older man, who refuses to acknowledge his musical competence even when goaded to play by his friends. A remark such as "People will think I'm a barber" might be made by the embarrassed person. In summary, it can be seen that religious and social factors go hand in hand in discouraging the practice of music in many sectors of traditional Afghan life. In some cases

the sacred and secular guardians of public morality (mullahs and officials) may join in seeing to it that no live music is performed within the precincts of a town, or that local dancing boys are not permitted to flourish, as often happens in the north.

Music has had a strongly positive role in Afghan society as well. The onus of criticism falls mainly on only a small sector of what an outside observer might define as the total sphere of musical activity, principally the practice of mature males is highly public village or urban situations. Outside that basic realm, a considerable amount of traditional music-making finds ample scope for display. This activity falls into two large categories: the music of village or urban females and under-age males, largely associated with domestic festivities, and that of nomads in more general situations. Both spheres are generally omitted in the connotation of the term most frequently used for music in Afghan Persian, _saz_. _Saz_ is defined by F. J. Steingass as a "musical instrument; arms, apparatus"[4] in modern Persian, thus indicating the strong connection in Afghanistan between the actual sound-producing equipment and the music itself. When speaking negatively of music, the man in the street excludes the domestic/nomadic areas of activity just mentioned, which are at least tacitly accepted as a normal, even enjoyable part of life; religious music, on obvious grounds, is similarly excepted from _saz_. Here again, it is probably the intimate association of instrumental music and dance that is decisive.

Some Afghans have gone so far as to tell me that women deliberately prolong and even create occasions for domestic festivity. In the Ghorband region of central Afghanistan, I am told, there are individual celebrations on the third, sixth, tenth, and fortieth days following the birth of a son. All of them turn on the women's position rather than focusing on the appearance of an heir: the _shab-i-shash_ ("sixth evening") involves congratulating the new mother, the _haman-i-dah_ centers on the mother's first post-natal bath, and so on. All the ceremonies involve extensive music-making and minimum ritual. In this way, women maximize their musical opportunities in socially acceptable ways. In so doing, they have a natural ally among young men who, unlike their fathers, have not yet attained the point of respectability that would call forth criticism for a modest amount of musical participation.

Among nomads, music-making seems more acceptable in general, even among adult males. Pushtun nomads form the group most often heard singing out loud in public, and it would seem on the basis of early evidence that the knowledge of Pashto folklore and songs may be part of the overall self-identification of Pushtun. Of particular interest here is the most widespread of Pushtun folk song genres, the _landai_, an almost epigrammatic, stylized couplet sung by Pushtun everywhere. The _landai_, according to one of its principal researchers, Saduddin

Shpoon, is largely composed by women and most typically takes the woman's point of view; nevertheless, unlike the normal village or urban male, Pushtun men feel no hesitation about singing such verses. It may not be accidental that some Pushtun nomads also look down upon the village and urban custom of heavily veiling women. In any case, the nomads' subculture seems to call for more open and casual performance of various types of traditional music.

TRADITIONAL ROLES AND STATUS OF MUSICIANS

Let us now turn to the range and background of musicians available in the traditional context. Of prime importance here is an understanding of how musicians come to their trade, and once again two main channels seem to exist. One includes a considerable body of music-makers whose role is more or less ascribed, that is, their social status or heritage inclines them strongly toward a musical career or sharply delimits their musical role. This category includes the barber-musicians in villages and towns. Gypsy musicians active in certain regions, and most women. Opposed to this ascribed group is the large number of musicians whose role is achieved. It is through the display of talent and the workings of an implicit recruitment procedure that this body of peasants or nomads takes up music as a vocation.

Considering the ascribed group first, it should be noted that barber-musicians (dalaq) are quite a widespread phenomenon in Afghanistan. The joining of the two crafts is perhaps related to the negative feelings toward music outlined earlier. The danger of music may be in spirit related to the other shadowy activities of the barber, who performs circumcisions and some surgery. Pierre Centlivres has noted the ambivalent attitude toward barbers is Tashkurghan: "the barber occupies a special position, linked even to the ambivalence of the sacred," and he adds that "assimilated to the musicians and cooks with whom he often has professional or familial relations he exercises one of the most disreputable crafts of the bazaar."[5]

Gypsies are also a lowly lot across Afghanistan, as in most other areas of the Near East and Europe, and may function as musicians at times. They are also makers of musical instruments in some regions, particularly involved in construction of the tambourine (daira), which is the staple of women's music-making. Women themselves might be considered the largest group of ascribed musicians. Although their activities are largely nonprofessional in the Western sense (outside of clearly censured singer-dancers), women's musical role, as indicated earlier, is sharply delimited.

Achieved musicians fall into a number of widely differing groups practicing music for varying reasons. The most widespread category is that of nomad and peasant amateurs who simply perform for their own entertainment (saat-i-tiri; literally, "passing the hours") or at gatherings. While not strictly musicians in the Western definition of full-time paid performers, this very large body of amateurs forms the talent pool from which the small but active group of professionals will be drawn. In addition, a particular value is placed on such amateur activity, summed up in the term showqi. For villagers and townspeople (from this is drawn my opening caveat regarding generalizations) showqi implies a range of activities encompassing far more than just amateur music-making. All types of hobbies and avocations may be included under this rubric, from kite-flying and gun-collecting to snake-handling. Basically there seems to be a positive aura surrounding showqi pursuits, as it is felt that for life to be lively (zenda), one should maintain some such interests. In the case of certain showqi hobbies, however, there is the possibility of overstepping the bounds of moderation. Such activities deemed potentially dangerous might include gambling, use of narcotics, and interest in dancing boys and, to some extent, music.

When a young man shows a proclivity for music, practices it before an informal audience, and is deemed above average in ability and showmanship, he may leave the ranks of amateur showqi and join what we would call the body of professional musicians. Nevertheless, he himself will insist on the title showqi throughout his career so as not to be confused with the ascribed (barber or Gypsy) performers even though he may be doing exactly their type of musical work. Showqi, then, has little to do with our definition of an amateur-professional continuum largely defined by whether or not services are hired for pay; rather, it serves to delimit the roots of an individual's interest and background in music-making with the traditional music culture.

Two other types of achieved musicians with markedly different orientations should be briefly mentioned. The first of these is the itinerant religious street-singer (mada), who plies his trade in the bazaar. Situating himself strategically near a tea house, this performer recounts tales of the Prophet and his followers, hoping for contributions in the form of small change tossed in his direction. The other variety of musician to be mentioned here is the police/military municipal band performer, a radically different sort of entertainer. Although seemingly belonging to the modern world to which we will shortly turn our attention, the police/military municipal band should more accurately be seen as a continuation of the ensembles that played over the gates of cities such as Bukhara, marking the hours (hence baja-khana or "hour-house") with drum and horn signals or announcing important events. Although they may play European brass instruments

or entertain at weddings, today's provincial Afghan bands are essentially the descendants of earlier official ensembles.

Summarizing the traditional situation of musicians briefly, it appears that, while their role is considered indispensable in village and town for marking festivities or providing background music in tea houses, they inevitably carry the stigma of association with lower social categories or socially injurious behavior. It should be noted that such attitudes toward musicians occur commonly in various parts of the world, including the Euro-American music culture.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE RADIO

The agent of change in this long-held pattern of musical attitudes and practices has been the radio. Begun under King Amanullah in 1928, Radio Afghanistan blossomed into a major cultural force only in the 1950s due to limited broadcasting power. It is nearly impossible to determine the content of early broadcasts as the practice of making master tapes did not begin until 1966; prior to that date all music was transmitted live. Perhaps four main streams of influence can be defined in shaping the music of Radio Afghanistan, which, as we shall see, has had a profound impact on national musical life: (1) the court musicians of Amanullah, consisting of families allegedly brought from India in the late nineteenth century plus imported specialists from Ataturk's Turkey; (2) graduates of the military band training program, who learned Western music notation; (3) the most influential of the great influx of aspiring amateur performers; and (4) the stream of cold war foreign advisers, including Soviets, Americans, Germans, and Englishmen.

While each of these elements has made its contribution, it is difficult to single out lasting influences as the turnover in personnel (both administrative and performing) has been so high that music and musical policy have followed a widely fluctuating line over the last two decades. Perhaps the most constant input has been from the Indianized court music, yet the amount of radio time devoted to this music appears to be declining. The effect of Soviet advisers seemed quite heavy in the early 1960s, leading to the formation of a performers' training institute and large ensembles patterned after those of Soviet Central Asia, home of the advisers. This activity extended at one time to pressing Afghan radio songs on 78 rpm discs in Tashkent, the only specimens of Afghan sound recordings and now prized collectors' items. The entire Soviet effort seemingly went for naught after the advisers left, although bits and pieces of their system surface from time to time.

It seems that establishing an institutional and musical basis for mass consumption entertainment goes deeply against the cultural grain. A quick glance at the highly organized musical machinery of neighboring Persian-speaking Iran and Soviet Tajikistan provides strong contrast to the Afghan situation. In Iran, the state radio itself is divided into two vital segments: the central station in Tehran and provincial stations, both of which make significant contributions to the musical situation and influence each other. Outside the governmental sphere, private industry has moved to create an extensive net-work of recording studios producing large quantities of 45 rpm singles, drawing from Euro-American, Near Eastern, or even Latin American hits for inspiration. The emergent Iranian film industry contributes through soundtrack songs. All of these active and profitable sectors of the mass music culture interrelate, sharing material and personnel, to provide lively mass entertainment. In Tajikistan there is, of course, no private enterprise. Nevertheless, diversity of musical input is assured by the varied activities of the recording industry, radio, and the film studios. A republic-wide network of music schools is designed to bring talent to the forefront, and such incentives as artistic medals of honor and Soviet national recognition serve as added inducements to pop singers.

Bearing this regional background in mind, one can easily see that Afghanistan displays a poverty of resources in the mass media. There is only one recording studio, in Kabul, and the fledgling Afghan Film studio has as yet had no impact. There is scarcely any governmental interest in music education. Tony Freeman, an American adviser to Radio Afghanistan for seven years, described the problem succinctly as of 1965. Writing about organized music projects, he noted:

> They have all begun on a joyous wave of . . . enthusiasm, but they have all dwindled to nothing within a few weeks. It is clear enough that the old unwholesome past associations of music have had much to do with these failures. "Singer" and "musician" are still bad enough words to cause family disapproval of music study or of even nominal participation.[6]

Nevertheless, one can sense the beginnings of change in this seemingly stagnant musical situation. Since Freeman's bleak description, the logjam of disapproval has begun to break up and new energy has begun to stream into the contemporary musical situation. Basically change has been brought about by two factors: First, the cumulative effect of years of radio music, tending towards creation of a star system and upgrading of the performer; second, a resurgence of local interest in music as a vehicle of self-identification.

The testimony of radio singers bears out the impression that the stature of musicians has grown over recent years. One performer told me with satisfaction of the changes in his life brought about by relaxation of public censure. Whereas he was originally disowned by his mother for daring to sing over the airwaves, he now enjoys an actual celebrity status in Kabul and his hometown. Once mocked on the street by children as a performer, he is now invited to parties by aspiring hostesses. The model for this sort of reevaluation is probably a Western one, but filtered strongly through India and Iran, where the musical star system works effectively. All Afghanistan knows how a Radio Afghanistan tune was adopted by a Persian pop singer and became a best-seller, and everyone is outraged over the fact that not one afghani of the extensive royalties came back to Afghanistan. Kabul, Tehran, and Dushanbeh (capital of Tajikistan SSR) regularly exchange performing troupes. This makes the Afghans cognizant of the superior training and showmanship of their neighbors, while at the same time Afghan performers rise to the status of international celebrities. The amateurs who now crowd the Kabul studio for auditions include such high-placed youngsters as the son of the recent prime minister, Dr. Abdul Zahir.

Domestically, the beneficial impact of the radio on music's status is somewhat more indirect in the provinces. Music and performers of the older tradition are no more worthy in the eyes of villagers and townspeople; indeed, to a certain extent they have suffered a reverse due to the spread of transistor radios and the decline of live music. Local musicians adapted to this trend by assimilating radio songs into their already complex multi-ethnic repertoire, to which they had earlier added the music of Indian pop music from scratchy 78 rpm records. Such assimilation proceeded quite naturally in the north, where one genre involves a lute player who strings together tunes of diverse origin to form improvised suites. Elsewhere, casual flute players rely heavily on radio songs for their stock of tunes, as may the melodists of the oboe and drum ensemble of street musicians. I have recorded versions of such radio standbys as "Anar, Anar" (Pomegranate, Pomegranate) from one end of Afghanistan to the other. Frequently the local variants of such tunes take on distinctly regional flavor through instrumentation or changes in melody or rhythm; in such cases, the radio had aided local musicians in enriching their stock in trade.

Of particular note is the growing body of student and middle-class amateurs who take radio styles as their basic source of inspiration. Like their counterparts everywhere, Afghan students model their music-making closely on the latest broadcast stars and hits. They play musical instruments of Kabul origin, such as the harmonium, instead of the local folk instruments. The middle-class musicians

also represent a changeover to the newer musical pattern. These shopkeepers and officials like to think of themselves as up with the times and display their allegiance to Kabul and modernism by composing songs in radio style or hiring musicians of the newer tradition rather than older folk-style performers.

Let us turn briefly to the second factor cited above as part of radio's impact on traditional patterns, that of regional self-identification. Up until 1972, little or no effort was made to cater to local taste. Outside of the short Baluch segment of the heavily political "Pushtunistan" program, no broadcasts were heard in any other than the two official languages, Dari and Pashto. Part of the reason cited by northerners for the decline of local instruments and styles was the fact that they never heard their own performers over the airwaves. Indeed, many northerners preferred to listen to Radio Tashkent, Radio Dushanbeh, or Radio Ashkhabad (Soviet Uzbak, Tajik, and Turkoman radio) where they could hear songs in their own languages. This situation changed sharply when, spurred by northern members of parliament, Radio Afghanistan began broadcasts in local languages. The first director of the <u>program-i-mahali</u> ("folk" or "regional" program), Faizullah Aimaq, is a young Uzbak of Andkhui and a graduate of Kabul University's journalism program. Responsive to the avalanche of mail the regional programming has evoked, Aimaq creates a daily hour of broadcasts in Uzbak, Turkoman, Baluch and Pashai, strongly oriented toward music.

Initial reaction to the <u>program-i-mahali</u> was shown in the strong response to a listeners' poll to select star Uzbak and Turkoman musicians. A large number of field tapes of local music was collected by radio workers and an equally impressive influx of talent was brought into the Kabul studios to provide program material. Under Abdul Wahab Madadi, singing star and radio archivist, the archives have become a well-organized repository of folk traditions. While it is difficult to gauge the long-range impact of the <u>program-i-mahali</u>, early evidence indicates that the broadcasts have helped bring minority group listeners more into Kabul's broadcasting orbit, and that this trend might lead to new local musical pride.

The importance of all this musical activity is not irrelevant to the larger questions of Afghanistan's development. Most obviously, we have already outlined the changes beginning to affect traditional values and patterns of musical practice. One must also consider the radio in the overall social context. Radio Afghanistan is one of the few unifying factors in a country unusually marked by ethnic and linguistic fragmentation. In addition, the radio is one of the only areas in which change, however transitory, is at all evident.

For the Afghan villager or nomad, outside of the difficulties created by the recent disastrous climatic setbacks of 1970-72, little

has changed in his traditional way of life. The modest increments of modern technology have allowed him somewhat greater ease of travel but have otherwise had little impact on how he grows his crops or trades, or whom he will marry. But the radio has drastically reduced the restrictions on the scope of his imagination. Through the broadcasts of parliamentary debate, he has a much clearer notion of his government's workings, and through the international news bulletins he feels at home discussing American politics with an American. He has a chance to hear both the musical styles of his own region and of neighboring countries. Perhaps most important, he shares in the music of the Kabul studio, one of the few manifestations of an emerging pattern of national values and expression that may eventually comprise a pan-ethnic, distinctively Afghan society.

NOTES

1. For recordings of Afghan folk music produced by Mark Slobin, see: Music of the Usbeks, AST 40001; Music of the Pashtoons, Kazakhs and Heratis, AST 4004; Music of the Tajiks, AST 4007; and Music of the Turkmens, in press (New York: Anthology Record and Tape Corporation).
2. Phillip Hitti, History of the Arabs (8th ed; London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 274.
3. H. G. Farmer, "The Music of Islam," in E. Wellesz, ed., The New Oxford History of Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 427.
4. F. J. Steingass, A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary (Beirut: Librairie de Liban, 1970), p. 640.
5. Pierre Centlivres, Un Bazar d'Asie Centrale (Neuchatel: Université de Neuchatel, 1970), p. 90.
6. A. Freeman, "The Music of Kabul," Asia Foundation Program Bulletin, March 1965, pp. 1-3.

CHAPTER 14

AFGHANISTAN: A PERSPECTIVE

Linette Albert

At the close of the nineteenth century, Abdur Rahman, the founder of modern Afghanistan, wrote to his sons and successors, "There is no doubt that Afghanistan will either rise to be a very strong and famous country or will be swept altogether from the surface of the earth."[1]

A rigorous prophecy, perhaps, for that time, but a precocious one from a man whose political acumen anticipated all too accurately the casualties that would occur in the modern day game of nations. Now the twentieth century rushes headlong into its final quarter, driven by the same perilous momentum that along the way has undermined empires, uprooted dynasties, and unshackled colonies; that has juggled the rise and fall of world capitals with seasonal regularity; that has crucified national leaders just as their glory seemed sacred; that has transformed proud and independent governments into meek and subservient satellites; and that has redesigned continental maps with the abandon of abstract art.

In light of his foresight and his awareness of historical uncertainties, it is all the more wonder that Abdur Rahman had the hubris to define Afghanistan's future in such uncompromising terms. Either the country will stand on its own or it will perish. With that imperative, he left his heirs little choice but to perpetuate his own legacy and that of his predecessors—those fierce pawns of the nineteenth century who had steadfastly resisted the manipulations and strategies of the colonial players. To commit twentieth century Afghanistan to such a relentlessly independent posture, to a tradition of doing absolutely no one's bidding, was a difficult assignment indeed in an age when the prosperity, even the preservation of individuals and groups so often has been determined by liaisons and alliances. But as Winston Churchill once said, describing his own solitary childhood, 'The lone