

"Music of Egypt's Gypsies"

Introduction

This book is the second in a two-part study on Gypsy music. Almost ten years ago I completed an extensive study on the subject of "The Unity and Diversity of Musical Performance Practices Accompanying the Narration of the Bani Helal Epic (El Helaliyya)." Most of these practices are attributed to the Gypsies. Ever since the first book came out, it was my intention to present the rest of the musical legacy these poets have contributed to popular Egyptian culture. In this book, I explore other aspects of their distinguished musical achievements.

The Gypsies portrayed here are identified in popular Egyptian culture as the musicians who roamed the village markets and festivals, singing and playing the rababa and the tambourine, hanging around street corners and in front of houses asking for contributions. Those possessed of particularly fine voices or who were good performers were in demand as wedding entertainers, or were invited to recite poetry in cafés and at local gatherings.

What must not be overlooked is that Gypsy musicians in Egypt have not received their due recognition and appreciation for the role they have played in the popular art scene. Most people are not aware that it is the Gypsies who have spread both the distinct musical traditions of epic poetry, ballads, poems of praise, and other traditional genres (e.g. the *ta'tou'a*¹ and the *mawwal*²) on the one hand, and the musical instruments, melodies and styles of popular Egyptian music on the other throughout the country.

In this book, I have insisted on adhering to the methodology I have always used in my studies of traditional music; a comprehensive approach touching all aspects related to these artists, whether on the artistic or the cultural level. I have tried to avoid the tendency, common among musicologists, to treat the artistic product independently of the artist, claiming that a work of art is enough to represent its author, or that there is lack of information, or even that the subject of Gypsies is such a delicate one that it must be approached with extreme caution. In this book I have, therefore, insisted on acquainting the reader with this group of people whose creativity is so fertile, but who are usually ignored, their identity submerged under the vague and general term of "Popular Artists."

This book is based on artistic material collected through fieldwork with Gypsy narrators during the 1970's of the last century. At the time, some of these traditional musicians were still performing their art. As much as possible, I have included the full text, as well as transcriptions of basic musical themes and phrases which characterize each topic. I consider it important to present all the material available to me, to help the reader who rarely finds such comprehensive material in a single reference. This becomes especially important when we realize that this material, poetry and music is no longer performed, but belongs to the past.

The reader will not fail to realize that the artistic and cultural life of Gypsies merits more extensive study. Scholarly approaches that attempt to dispel all the reserve, uneasiness and myths regarding Gypsies and their mysterious world which have accumulated in our imagination still remain to be found; it is a world that is yet to be discovered and revealed. Although I have tried to come closer to their world, I do not pretend that this book accords Gypsies all the appreciation they deserve, nor have I exhausted all possible studies that may be conducted about them. Finally, I

wish to add that any attempt to portray Gypsy life, history and music, no matter how careful, objective and clear, may still display some shortcomings.

The author

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