Clara Wenz. *Music from Aleppo during the Syrian War: Displacement and Memory in Hello Psychaleppo's Electro-Tarab*. Elements in Music and the City. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 58 pp., figures, audio examples, references. ISBN 978-1009073004 (paperback), 978-1009071765 (e-book).

Review

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Can there be new homes for *tarab* outside Syria? What happens to musical traditions rooted in specific social relations, urban spaces, and listening communities when those worlds are fractured by war and displacement? These questions lie at the heart of Clara Wenz's concise yet richly textured Cambridge Elements,[1] *Music from Aleppo during the Syrian War: Displacement and Memory in Hello Psychaleppo's Electro-Tarab*. Focusing on the music of the US-based Syrian producer and DJ Hello Psychaleppo (Samer Saem Eldahr), Wenz offers a compelling exploration of how musical memory is reactivated through practices of sampling, and how displaced musicians negotiate belonging, loss, and creativity through sound.

At first glance, the book appears to be a study of a single artist and genre. However, Wenz's intervention extends far beyond Hello Psychaleppo's musical output. Through an analysis of electro-tarab, a style that combines electronic dance music genres such as dubstep, drum and bass, trap, and trip-hop with digitally mediated Arab musical aesthetics and sampled recordings from the Arab musical canon, she develops a broader

[1] The Elements in Music and the City series published by Cambridge University Press aims to expand thinking about music in an urban context through shorter but rigorously peer-reviewed texts written by leading scholars in their fields. The series promotes easily accessible, quality texts that can be used for teaching and research. Each Element presents extended case studies within a comparative perspective, offering challenging approaches in a fast-developing area of music research (music and sound in cities across the world).

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argument about music's capacity to sustain connections to place in contexts of displacement. Her central claim is that sampling functions not merely as an aesthetic technique but as a form of memory work through which fragments of Aleppo's musical past are reassembled into new sonic imaginaries of home.

The study makes a valuable contribution to growing scholarship on Syrian music and displacement. As Wenz notes, existing research on Syrian musical life in exile has focused predominantly on communities in Istanbul (3). By contrast, her attention to the circulation of musical memories through electronic production and transnational networks opens new avenues for understanding the cultural consequences of displacement. More broadly, the book contributes to discussions of music, migration, and memory by foregrounding the productive possibilities of creative experimentation during times of profound social rupture.

One of the Element's greatest strengths lies in its treatment of tarab. Wenz begins by acknowledging the complexity of a term that has no straightforward equivalent in English (1). While often translated as "ecstasy" or "enchantment," tarab refers both to particular Arab urban art music repertoires and to the emotional states these traditions are believed to evoke in its performers and listeners. Importantly, Wenz demonstrates that tarab is not merely a musical category but also a powerful cultural imaginary through which Aleppo's musical reputation has long been articulated: "tarab has also, as we shall see, been mythologised as Aleppo's endemic musical tradition" (1).

The book provides an exceptionally clear and concise overview of major scholarship on tarab, engaging with the work of scholars such as Ali Jihad Racy, Virginia Danielson, Michael Frishkopf, Charles Hirschkind, and Jonathan Shannon. Given the brevity of the Element format, the sophistication of this literature review is particularly impressive (see 5–6 in particular). Wenz succeeds in synthesising diverse theoretical approaches while clearly identifying the gap that motivates her study: "despite these diverse and wide-ranging approaches, no scholarly publication has yet been dedicated to the role of tarab in contemporary (electronic) popular music cultures across the Middle East and its diasporas" (5). By examining how Hello Psychaleppo mobilises the concept and soundworld of tarab through sampling and electronic production, Wenz makes an important intervention into both tarab studies and contemporary scholarship on Arab popular music.

The historical sections offer equally valuable insights into Aleppo's musical life. Here, Wenz combines archival research, oral histories, and ethnographic encounters to illuminate the social worlds that have long sustained the city's reputation as a centre of musical excellence. Particularly memorable are her discussions of the *sammi'ah* (see section 2.2, 13–17), the highly knowledgeable listeners celebrated in Aleppian musical culture as exemplary connoisseurs and what Judith Becker calls "deep listeners" (15). Through stories shared by former residents of Aleppo, Wenz demonstrates how these figures continue to occupy a prominent place within collective memories of the city's musical past.

Some of the most compelling moments emerge from these ethnographic encounters. Conversations with displaced Aleppians reveal not only the persistence of musical memory but also the affective attachments through which memories of place are maintained. An especially evocative example is Wenz's account of Abu Farraj recalling his youthful encounters with the renowned religious chanter Sheikh Sabri Moudallal (see 16). Such narratives bring Aleppo's musical worlds vividly to life while illustrating the broader argument that musical memory is sustained through personal stories, embodied experiences, and affective relationships as much as through recordings and archives. Wenz's prose is particularly effective in these sections. Descriptions of musicians, cafés, and everyday social encounters create a vivid sense of place that helps readers understand why Aleppo occupies such a powerful position within Syrian musical imaginaries. The study is also enriched by numerous references to recordings, documentaries, interviews, and online media. Her use of YouTube comments highlights her deep engagement with a variety of materials across the study: "as one YouTube commenter stated, 'it really describes how most Syrians are longing to go back to Shahba'" (22). The inclusion of links to YouTube videos and musical examples is especially valuable, allowing readers to engage directly with the sounds under discussion and transforming the Element into a genuinely multimodal scholarly experience.

The conceptual centre of the book lies in its analysis of sampling. Rather than treating samples as aesthetic quotations or markers of stylistic hybridity, Wenz argues that they function as vehicles of memory. Through the incorporation of recordings by artists such as Sabah Fakhri, Asmahan, and other figures associated with Arab musical heritage, Hello Psychaleppo's work creates new relationships between past and present, homeland and diaspora, memory and imagination. This argument is developed most effectively in the third chapter titled "*Shahba*: An Aesthetic of Displacement." Wenz opens with a richly detailed description of Hello Psychaleppo's music video, immersing readers in the visual and sonic landscape of the artist's work (20–21). After reading her description, I immediately followed the link to watch it on YouTube and was struck by the accurate and effective depiction provided by Wenz. Her analysis of the video was even more impressive, helping me connect to the message in ways I would not have seen upon first watch. She demonstrates how samples operate as fragments of remembered worlds, carrying traces of places, voices, and social relations that have been disrupted by war. Importantly, these fragments are not simply preserved; they are transformed through new musical contexts and listening practices.

One of the study's most significant achievements is its refusal to romanticise these processes. While Wenz is clearly attentive to the creative possibilities of musical remembrance, she also acknowledges the tensions and contradictions that accompany the transformation of collective trauma into dance music. Particularly valuable is her discussion of critiques directed at electro-tarab and related forms of electronic music (see 31–34). As she notes, some listeners view these practices as evidence of escapism or as products of elite cultural consumption:

> To some, smoothening out the memory of someone's ruined home into a generalised mode of musical ecstasy may offer evidence of the defusing seductions of a clubbing culture and the aesthetic imperatives of a dancing elite. To some, it may even give credit to the kind of negative views on tarab culture that Jonathan Shannon (2006: 185) has documented in his monograph on music in Syria, including criticism of it as "emotional escapism" from reality and a sign of political passiveness in times of national struggle. (33)

By engaging these critiques directly, Wenz avoids celebratory narratives and instead presents a nuanced account of the contested meanings attached to contemporary Syrian musical production.

The book is especially strong when discussing displacement as a condition that extends beyond physical movement. One of its most insightful passages concerns the uneven possibilities of return available to different Syrians. Reflecting on the contrasting circumstances of musicians who have remained in or returned to Aleppo and those who continue to live in exile, Wenz argues for a more complex understanding of displacement that exceeds simple binaries of presence and absence. The following quote from this section is especially perceptive and illuminating:

> Boshoco's comment, together with social media content that suggests that they have recently been able to return to make music in Aleppo while the sampled Sheikh Habboush, as one of the few musicians who openly aligned himself with the city's oppositional forces, is probably unlikely to return in the near future, may indeed serve as an example of a society torn apart by war, separated not only by frontlines but divided into those who left/are unable to return and those who stayed/are able to return. Such a view, I argue, must be complexified through a reading that maps "displacement" onto spaces that go beyond the material. (34)

Even where physical return is possible, experiences of displacement may persist through fractured social relationships, political divisions, and transformed urban environments. This observation offers an important corrective to simplistic narratives of return and contributes meaningfully to broader discussions within migration and diaspora studies.

Similarly compelling is Wenz's exploration of musical spaces as sites where Syrians may temporarily suspend the political pressures associated with the conflict. Her discussion of nightlife, dance culture, and musical consumption highlights the importance of pleasure within contexts often analysed primarily through the lenses of trauma and suffering (see especially section 3.3 "Lost Homes: Music, Memory and Pleasure," 31–34). For example, she states that "many Syrians have found themselves neither engaged in revolutionary action, nor actively supporting the Syrian regime, but united instead by the wish to temporarily suspend the pressures of asserting their political belonging and engage in all the pleasurable seductions that dance, musical consumption and night life culture have to offer" (34). I found myself grappling with this insight as I never thought before to associate Syrian nightlife culture with a negotiation of political belonging in this fraught context. Through such critical discussions, Wenz joins a growing body of

scholarship that seeks to understand displaced populations not solely through experiences of victimhood but also through creativity, desire, and everyday forms of sociality.

The book's few limitations stem largely from its brevity. Readers may wish for a more extensive discussion of methodology and fieldwork practice. While Wenz's ethnographic material is consistently engaging, greater detail regarding the scope of her fieldwork, the contexts in which encounters took place, and the processes through which participants were identified and recruited would have strengthened the study. Similarly, a more explicit discussion of the author's positionality and relationship to the field might have provided additional insight into the production of the ethnographic knowledge presented throughout the text. These concerns, however, should be understood within the constraints of the Cambridge Elements format, which prioritises concise interventions over comprehensive monographic treatment. Indeed, one of the remarkable achievements of the book is the density of insight it manages to convey within fewer than fifty pages. Wenz combines historical contextualisation, theoretical sophistication, ethnographic sensitivity, and musical analysis with impressive economy and clarity.

The epilogue, "Diasporas of Hope," provides a particularly fitting conclusion. Here, Wenz reflects on receiving a copy of Hello Psychaleppo's 2017 album *TOYOUR*, using this encounter as an opportunity to consider the broader implications of her argument. The discussion of the album's references to Farid al-Din Attar's *Conference of the Birds* is especially illuminating (48–50). By tracing connections between the album's avian imagery, sampled recordings of Asmahan singing "Ya Tuyur!" ("O Birds!"), and longer histories of literary and musical symbolism, Wenz demonstrates the richness of the associative worlds created through sampling. The analysis serves as a powerful reminder that samples do not merely reference the past; they generate new constellations of meaning that connect disparate times, places, and traditions. In fact, on a personal level, her analysis helped me understand the album in a completely new light. For example, I was unaware the avian theme and imagery was in reference to Attar's famous poem, a work I have explored deeply in the past year as a way of reconnecting with Islamic literary traditions. Seeing these connections made her claim about the generative effects of sampling practices come to life for me. After reading this, I raced to play the song on Spotify and found myself awestruck by the sample of Asmahan singing the phrase "Ya Tuyur" with her deep and resonant voice. In this moment, I understood the genius of Hello Psychaleppo and Wenz's reverence for his creativity and experimentation.

Notably, the epilogue also contains some of the book's most personal writing. Wenz's description of opening the package and "finding not only the CD but also a shimmering hologram sticker of a feather" (48) offers a glimpse of her own place within the research process. Such moments of ethnographic reflexivity are highly effective and leave readers wishing they had appeared more frequently throughout the text.

The Element concludes with a persuasive argument that Hello Psychaleppo's project is not ultimately about questions of musical authenticity. Rather, it concerns the socio-political imaginaries of home that emerge through acts of musical remembrance.

Through sampling, displaced musicians can temporarily collapse distances between people and places, making audible forms of belonging that persist despite war, displacement, and political fragmentation. In this sense, Wenz demonstrates that electro-tarab is not simply a contemporary musical genre but also a mode of engaging with memory, loss, and possibility.

As Syria enters a new political moment following the collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024, many of the questions raised by Wenz's study acquire renewed urgency. What happens to musical memories of home when return becomes imaginable once again? How might relationships between displacement, nostalgia, and belonging change as Syrians renegotiate their connections to places long accessible only through memory and sound? As a Syrian who grew up in the diaspora and lost access to the homeland after 2011, and who is now planning the first return trip to Damascus this autumn, I find these questions – and Wenz's study – of utmost importance. While such developments lie beyond the scope of her study, they underscore the enduring relevance of her intervention. Richly researched, theoretically sophisticated, and deeply attentive to the creative lives of displaced musicians, *Music from Aleppo during the Syrian War* offers a significant contribution to scholarship on music, memory, and displacement and will be of interest to scholars of ethnomusicology, Middle Eastern studies, migration, and diaspora alike.

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Author Biography

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