Review: [untitled]

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Reviewed work(s):
Soufis d’algérie: Mostaganem [Algeria: The Sufis of Mostaganem] by Charles Duvelle
Jeremy Drake
Chant soufi de Syrie: Dhikr Qâdirî Khâlwâti de la Zâwiya Hilaliya, Alep [Sufi Chanting
Front Syria: Dhikr Qâdirî Khâlwâti of the Zâwiya Hilaliya, Aleppo by Pierre Bois :Arwad
Esber;Kiam Hamoui; Frank Kane

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record and share the repertory—hundreds of *maqam* have already been lost or forgotten over the centuries. Further, the notes include copies of his letter to Sayyed Nasreddine Haydari Guran, the Yarsan spiritual leader of Guran (a mountainous territory on the Iran-Iraq border where many Ahl-e Haqq sacred places are located), requesting permission to pursue this recording project, and a reply from Sayyed Nasreddine, granting his approval.

This collection features compelling performance, good recording quality and informative liner notes. It promises to fulfill the artist’s preservation objectives and serves as an important resource for researchers and students of Kurdish sacred musics.

Reference cited
Mir-Hosseini, Ziba
1994

WINNIE LEE


Sufis (Muslim mystics) often reconcile the diversity of their ways (*tariqas*) with the one Divine reality (*haqîqa*) by likening the former to a wheel’s spokes, and the latter to its hub. Some may consider Sufi CDs (sorted in “world music” bins) and staged performances as far from those “ways”. Yet, there is nothing essentially new about a representation self-consciously designed to attract “foreigners”; this is something Sufis have always done. These three CDs, though presenting diverse sounds, and occupying contrastive positions within Sufi “tradition”, nevertheless serve to illustrate its remarkable unity.
Sufi music conjoins aesthetics and spirituality. To promote spiritual growth, Sufis deploy corporate rituals (dhikr, hadra) featuring textual recitations, often tonally modulated. Musicality increases with melodic performance of devotional poetry (sama’), sometimes with instruments. Unifying Sufi practices across regions, poetic genres and themes (supplications; praise; love; intoxication) are remarkably consistent. So are performative features, such as acceleration or tonal ascent, designed to facilitate spiritual emotion (wajd). But the musical dimension of Sufism is also rooted in local musical traditions. In times of change, it helps preserve them. Presenting Sufi-musical sounds of Algeria, Syria and Morocco, these CDs provide instances of these phenomena.

All three discs include background notes containing information on Sufism (general, historical, local), Sufis (relevant saints, shaykhs, performers), rituals, and poetic and musical traditions. Though abbreviated, notes are on the whole accurate and useful. All but Soufis d’algérie provide at least some poetic texts and translations, though unfortunately not transliterations. None adequately explains musical traditions in such a way that components (modes, rhythms, textures, forms) could be appreciated and linked to broader currents of Arab music. All but Maroc: L’art du samâ’ à Fès provide individual track notes.

Soufis d’algérie focuses on performances of three orders (tariqas) of Mostaganem, Algeria: the ‘Alawiyya, ‘Issawiyya, and Buabdaliyya. An explicitly-stated concern for authenticity—replicating the experience of “authentic” events (not driven by world music markets) through respect for ambient sound and natural temporal boundaries—shapes recorded representations in both rural and urban settings. Two distinctive tracks of women performers (faqirat) help illuminate this crucial but oft-ignored area of Sufi practice. The disc’s centrepiece is the remarkable ‘imara, an extended 30-minute recording of an ‘Alawiyya ritual, enabling a truly immersive experience of dizzying intensity. This clear recording, respecting ritual boundaries and recorded in situ, exemplifies ritual documentation at its finest. Three specific shortcomings: (1) lack of texts or translations—a critical omission in poetry-centric Sufism; (2) lack of musical contextualisation, falsely implying an isolated Sufi music; (3) missed opportunity to interpret performative differences between orders. But this is a wonderful disc.

Chant soufi de Syrie presents a representation of the complete dhikr of the Qadiri Khalwati order (Aleppo, Syria), a crystal-clear recording of a mock-ritual performance staged in Paris, clearly intended for aesthetic more than spiritual appreciation. However, from the standpoint of repertoire, sequencing and pacing, this staged version is faithful to the spiritual ceremony of the zawiyah (prayer room). The cycle contains a full complement of Sufi musical types. Notable is the use of ambiguous love poetry, close proximity (in use of muwashshahat and qasidas) to the broader urban Levantine musical heritage, and remarkable examples of ascending tonal motion (tracks 4, 5), suggestive of a parallel spiritual one (at-taraqqi), though these significant facts are given scant attention in the notes. Commendably, all poetry is translated.

Moving one representational step further afield, Maroc: L’art du samâ’ à Fès presents musical aspects of the general Moroccan Sufi tradition, detached
from any particular order or ritual, as performed by the Ahl-Fas orchestra. Professionalised trans-tariqa musical performance has a long history in Sufism. Though Si Muhammad Bennis’ broadly preservationist agenda is perhaps new, and the prominence of instrumental resources is surely related to the group’s concert-going audiences in the Arab world and in Europe, the basic repertoire of qasidas, muwashshahat, zajals and mawwals, overlapping with secular urban art music (ala), is essentially traditional. Sufi poets whose work is performed—for example, Shushtari and Ibn al-Farid—are sung across the Arab world. Detailed track-by-track examples, translated (Arabic texts are available in the French notes section).

Sufism’s ubiquity, inherent conservatism and appreciation of music’s spiritual power have enabled it to preserve traditions of musical-poetic performance, while modulating them according to its purposes. These discs, providing outstanding examples, are superb resources for students of Islam, Sufism and Arab music, as well as for all who wish to understand the important historical, aesthetic and spiritual connections among these domains. They also enable, for the listener who is so inclined, a taste of the Sufi experience itself.

MICHAEL FRISHKOPF


This is an expanded reissue of an LP originally published by Lyricichord (LLST 7384) in 1985 under the title Music of the Tihama: The Afro-Arabian Crossroad. The recordings were made by Anderson Bakewell as part of the Tihamah Expedition, a multidisciplinary project that brought together scholars and artists for two months in 1982 (see my review of the LP, Lambert 1987). As in the original, the CD includes mainly instrumental music from Tihama: lyres, reed clarinet, flutes and, above all, percussion ensembles. Most of the pieces are meant to accompany dance, some trance dances. The African influences emphasised in the 1985 subtitle are still noticeable in the CD. As these recordings were made in the field, they have great documentary value, especially since this region is not easily accessible. By comparison with the LP, the CD has been augmented (tracks 6-9 and 12-13 comprise new material) and re-mastered with the original tracks in a different sequence.

The six new tracks include a song from the zār possession cult played on the tānbūra (a large lyre locally called tunbara; track 6); a special rhythm, tahdira, played for pilgrimages to the shrine of the holy man Shamsi al-Ahdal (track 7; track 15 provides another example of this rhythm); and two additional examples of drumming from the saint’s day festival of Shamsi al-Ahdal (tracks 11 and 12). Track 9, “Sharah Dance”, ought to be another piece named after its rhythmic pattern. However, the sharah rhythm (a polyphonic 2 against 3) does