Jonathan Holt Shannon

Performing al-Andalus: Music and Nostalgia across the Mediterranean. Part of the series Public Cultures of the Middle East and North Africa, eds. Paul A. Silverstein, Susan Slyomovics, and Ted Swedenburg. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 231 pages. Paperback \$26.00.

In *Performing al-Andalus: Music and Nostalgia across the Mediterranean*, cultural anthropologist Jonathan Holt Shannon addresses one of the most durable problems in the Mediterranean region, namely the memory of al-Andalus through the twenty-first century. The product of his inquiry is a sensitive and probing book on how music-making, audience reception, cultural history, and identity shapes the modern legacy of al-Andalus. Although there has been no shortage of monographs overlapping with Shannon's, he makes a substantial intervention in existing literature. Beyond the music-related sources with which *Performing al-Andalus* carefully engages, the book implicitly speaks to literary and historical studies by Mercedes García-Arenal, Stephan Milich, and Jeffrey Sacks; and to creative works by Etel Adnan and Wāsinī al-A'raj. Modern retrospect on al-Andalus, it seems, is becoming its own interdisciplinary subfield—a welcome sign for Arabic literary studies.

Shannon alludes to some of the more potent forms of Andalusī nostalgia by structuring his book so that it begins with Syria. From its dedication page, lamenting “the innumerable Syrian victims of systematic brutality” and offering hope for peace, to chapters that move from the Levant westward, *Performing al-Andalus* reminds us of how popular the Umayyad trans-Mediterranean story remains in our historical narrative of Arab culture in Iberia (v). ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II was, famously, an exile when he arrived in Cordoba, having fled the ‘Abbāsīd regime as it took over his caliphate in Damascus. Modern Syrian refugees might lack the royal pedigree and Classical Arabic court of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān but, Shannon insists, the urgency of their flight recalls the long history of Arabic laments for the homeland. Throughout, the book benefits from its author's broad view on historiography. Shannon offers an introduction and an initial chapter, both of them outlining his anthropological study with a thorough literature review. His fieldwork then takes its central position in chapters two to four, examining, in order, contemporary urban music-making in Syria, Morocco, and Spain. Those ethnomusicological chapters then make way for Shannon's conclusion, a succinct, impressive coda, or *finalis* as he calls it.

In the introduction, the book considers the aesthetics and politics of nostalgia. Of particular interest to Arabists is the political history that Shannon offers as he walks us through his musical study. It is not just composers and

performers who gesture toward Iberian Islam as a tolerant idyll; large, authoritative institutions in Syria, the Maghreb, and Spain are intensely interested in recalling al-Andalus. Shannon demonstrates their tendency to echo the theories of multiculturalist scholars such as Américo Castro and his followers over the past seventy years. (We might add to Shannon's review of such rhetorical campaigns the 2009 speech in which Barack Obama admiringly cited medieval Cordoba to his Egyptian audience at Cairo University.) During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, ministries of culture and non-governmental organizations alike have consistently sponsored cultural events dedicated to al-Andalus. Syria's Asad regime, not surprisingly, emphasizes the well-loved narrative of 'Abd al-Rahmān II, highlighting it in state-sponsored music events; later in the book we learn of Spain's officially sanctioned nostalgia, embracing multilingual *muwashshah* songs and mournful lyrics of a lost Granada. Now, spokesmen for religious groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State promise to retrieve al-Andalus for a new caliphate. In other words, the twenty-first century's version of al-Andalus is at once a peaceful utopia and a means of explaining political violence, whether secular or religious.

To approach this complex picture, Shannon makes key distinctions between Syria's "old-new Andalusian" figure of medieval righteousness who maps out a glorious Arab future; Moroccan musicians' imagined genealogical link to al-Andalus; and finally the Spanish case, which the book presents as the most fraught site of musical nostalgia (71). As the book arrives in Spain, the geographic center of Shannon's "nostalgic dwelling," the firsthand accounts of musicianship that make up the book's core also seem to become richer (13). Even though Shannon is an established expert on Syrian expressive culture, and this book reflects the high quality of his fieldwork in that country, the chapters on Morocco and Spain convey the most gripping, interesting details on contemporary music-making to be found in the work as a whole. It would be irresponsible to conjecture here upon why this might be the case, and indeed not all of the book's readers will agree that it is. But *Performing al-Andalus* seems to build a progressively more compelling set of anthropological stories drawn from musicians, especially Moroccans living in their home country and in Granada, where icons like Alhambra and the Albaicín district attract self-styled "Andalusi" performers of *zajal* and *muwashshah* lyric. A minor complaint is that the book uses the terms *Andalusi* and *Andalusian* without making a case for each term's applicability—we know that they are different, but experts and generalists alike would have been well served by a brief discussion of each word's valences.

In chapter four, "The Rhetoric of al-Andalus in Spain: Nostalgic Dwelling among the Children of Ziryab," Shannon builds upon the genealogical claims

of his Moroccan case studies. Here, he fascinates the reader by showing how Andalusí nostalgia requires ‘Abbāsīd historical figures like the great musician Ziryāb, and is not just the stuff of Umayyad historical narratives favored in Syria. More than any other in the book, this chapter showcases its author’s sensitivity to the rifts between an imagined al-Andalus and the daily realities of making music. The Spanish government has for decades promoted al-Andalus in official culture, with festivals celebrating the Iberian Middle Ages, even while some federal laws and politicians single out the country’s Muslims as a national threat. Against this complicated tapestry of music, memory and the law, the proprietor of a CD shop in Granada blithely tells Shannon that all of them involved in Classical Arabic or multilingual Andalusí music are *hijos de Ziryab*: “children of Ziryāb,” referring to the legendary ‘Abbāsīd musician who traveled from Iraq to North Africa and then enjoyed great success in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II’s Cordoban court during the ninth century CE (third century H) (23, 142). For Shannon, the popular notion of Ziryāb as an ambassadorial musical great allows for all sorts of modern crossings-over, from self-consciously Classical categories of the Arabic canon, to Spanish flamenco, to Roma/Gypsy music. Ziryāb’s sketchy, partial biography and our seriously lacking tonal data from the Middle Ages are enabling factors, not just epistemological limits. They allow musicians to inhabit what Shannon calls “an ersatz ancestral home” in sometimes harsh capitalist material conditions (143). At the point at which *Performing al-Andalus* begins to take stock of its anthropological work, the book makes some of its most elegant conceptual moves.

There are two ways in which the book could be improved. The first has to do with how the work has been published, and the second is a question of the work’s structure.

It would be most helpful if Indiana University Press were to offer online sound, or even video, recordings of the music discussed in *Performing al-Andalus*. Readers, including this reviewer, unfamiliar with the songs and performance venues would benefit from opportunities to refer back to each chapter on music, and Shannon’s profound written reflections upon his field work would become all the more memorable with that accompanying material. The reader pines for more on the individuals Shannon worked with—their roles in performances and/or recordings, their musical backgrounds, their attitudes toward al-Andalus, etc.—in order to more fully access these modern Andalusí soundscapes.

The structural revision that could strengthen the book draws from the force of Shannon’s conclusion, or *Finalis*, as he terms it. There, *Performing al-Andalus* begins to pull away from the frames of existing theories to which it makes consistent reference. That important synthesis and delineation of argument could

have begun as early as the book's introduction. At the book's outset, Shannon cites dozens of major thinkers—Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Amanda Lagerkvist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and María Rosa Menocal, to name just a few. On Menocal specifically, Shannon astutely shows the strengths and weaknesses of her evaluative model of Iberia's medieval historiography. Toward the beginning of *Performing al-Andalus*, however, he uses her as a source on Umayyad history despite the fact that she was prone to errors and exaggerations on that topic. While his reading of their work is erudite and he mostly succeeds in demonstrating their relevance to his study, Shannon packs the introduction with so many such references that it is difficult for the reader sometimes to distinguish the book's own intervention. As the book progresses, the scope and conceptual novelty of the thesis emerges, but as a bold study *Performing al-Andalus* could have departed from other scholars' language from the outset and moved forward with its own critical phrasing.

Perhaps the greatest service that Shannon has done for the field is to show just how central the idea of the Middle Ages is to contemporary music and, in turn, how central music is to cultural politics. As he concludes *Performing al-Andalus*, he notes the popular revival of Castro's idealized picture of al-Andalus, espoused not only by enterprising musicians but also but by the Spanish government, even while it engages in heavy-handed security policies targeting Arabs. The painful, troubling picture that Shannon draws in his *Finalis*—forced migration, rising Islamophobia in Spain and throughout Europe, even while Arabo-Islamic cultural traditions like Andalusi music remain popular—still offers room for optimism. He brings the book to a close by quoting the late musician and professor Pauline Oliveros, who famously advocated “deep listening,” a dialogic way of understanding composers, performers, and an active audience. Shannon is an admirably deep academic listener who, one hopes, will continue to teach us about Mediterranean musical traditions.

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