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BARTOK IN THE DESERT:
CHALLENGES TO A EUROPEAN CONDUCTING
RESEARCH IN NORTH AFRICA
IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY*

RIGGS, Kristy K.**

The Musical Quarterly, 2007, Vol. 90, No. 1, Spring, pp. 72–89.

Although Bela Bartok is most often viewed as a composer whose music derived many of its features from his study of Eastern European folk elements, the composer also had a longtime fascination with the music of the Arab world. Notably, Bartok's travels to the Biskra region of present-day Algeria in 1913 and his attendance at the Cairo Conference of Arab Folk Music in 1932 provided him with unique perspectives that greatly informed a number of his subsequent compositions. While his reputation as an ethnomusicologist engenders the thought that these trips were only due to his interest in folk music, the implications for North Africa as a target for colonization, a remnant of ancient civilization, and a representative of the exotic "other" obfuscates Bartok's true intentions. His interest in North Africa also brings into question whether he held an "Orientalist" view of the Near East.¹ In this paper I will examine his travels throughout

* This paper was presented on 3 June 2006 at the Bartok Symposium at Bard College. The symposium was made possible by a generous gift from Laszlo Bito. This paper was also presented on 23 March 2006 at "Bartok's Orbit: The Context and Sphere of Influence of His Work, 1881–2006" in Budapest.

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¹ In his book *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), Edward Said defined the term as a "European invention, [that] had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes [and] remarkable experiences" (1). Homi Bhabha furthers this definition, stating that "Orientalism is on the one hand, a topic of learning, discovery, practice; on the other, it is the site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsessions and

the Arabian desert as a comparative musicologist, the obstacles and controversies encountered during his research in this region, and his desire to understand the "overlapping and displacement of domains of difference that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nation-ness, community interest or cultural value ... negotiated."²

Most beneficial to this study are the primary sources written by Bartok himself. His letters to various authorities, family members, and friends reveal many of his reasons for visiting North Africa as well as his thoughts and findings during these trips.³ A letter from Bartok's first wife, Marta Ziegler, reveals pithy details about their success and misfortune during their journeys in Algeria.⁴ Bartok's findings from his trip to Biskra were published four years later in the Hungarian periodical *Szimfónia*.⁵ So important was this that in 1920 a more comprehensive German translation appeared in *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* under the title "Die Volksmusik der Araber von Biskra and Umgebung."⁶ The article is also translated in Benjamin Suchoff's edition of *Bela Bartok: Studies in Ethnomusicology*.⁷ All three publications include selected melodies transcribed by Bartok, Arab musical organology, and theoretical analyses of Arab music. Bartok had planned to write a series of articles for *Szimfónia*. The last autograph entry ended with the remark "To be continued," but the journal ceased publication before any subsequent articles were submitted.⁸ In addition to these publications, there is the extant

requirements" (Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* [London: Routledge, 1994], 102).

² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2.

³ These are published in two separate sources: Bela Bartok, *Letters*, ed. Janos Demeny (London: Faber and Faber, 1971); and *Bartok, Bela, Csaladi levelei*, ed. Bela Bartok, Jr. (Budapest: Zenemukiado, 1981).

⁴ Marta Ziegler, "Bartok's Reise nach Biskra," *Dokumenta Bartokiana 11*, ed. Denijs Dille (Budapest: Edition Musica, 1965), 9–12.

⁵ Bela Bartok, "A Biskra-vidéki arabok népzenéje," *Szimfonia 1*, nos. 12–13 (Sep. 1917): 308–23.

⁶ Bela Bartok, "Die Volksmusik der Araber von Biskra and Umgebung," *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 9, no. 2 (June 1920): 489–522.

⁷ Bela Bartok, *Studies in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

⁸ Janos Karpati, "Bartok in North Africa: A Unique Fieldwork and Its Impact on His Music," in *Bartok Perspectives: Man, Composer, and Ethno-*

collection of Bartók's Algerian melody transcriptions, housed at the Peter Bartok Archives in Florida. This compilation includes 110 melodies and scales in the composer's manuscript. Also included is a chart of the melodies divided by meter/rhythm and instrumentation. Each transcription details information such as song title, genre, region, tonality, tempo and metronome markings, and performers' names. The letters "F.A." appear in the top right-hand corner of almost every transcription, followed by disparate numerals. The abbreviation stands for the Hungarian word *felvétel* [recording], while the letter A denotes the cylinders used in recording. Bartok omits the abbreviation "F.A." on some transcriptions and includes only the number in the top right-hand corner. The collection is notated in French, Hungarian, and transliterated Arabic, providing ample information regarding instrumentation and performance practice. Of the 110 melodies, only forty-six appear in Bartók's publication "Die Volksmusik der Araber von Biskra and Umgebung," with a few discrepancies regarding rhythmic notation, meter, and metronome marking. The published transcriptions appear to be of the author's own choosing, perhaps to represent a wide array of genres.

Bartók's first interest in exploring North Africa began during a trip to Spain in 1906 as the accompanist of violinist Franz von Vecsey. While there, Bartok had the opportunity to visit Tangiers, Morocco – just across the shore from Cadiz, Spain – where he was introduced to some of the regional folk music in an Arab tavern. Bartok was determined to return to North Africa, and on 13 June 1913 he and his wife, Marta, traveled from France to the Biskra district of Algeria. The trip was not easy, however, and required various documents and paperwork from both the French and Algerian authorities (Figure 1).

Due to the high temperatures and subsequent illness, Bartok and his wife left Algeria on 6 July 1913, and returned to Budapest via

musicologist, ed. Elliot Antokoletz, Victoria Fischer, and Benjamin Suchoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175.

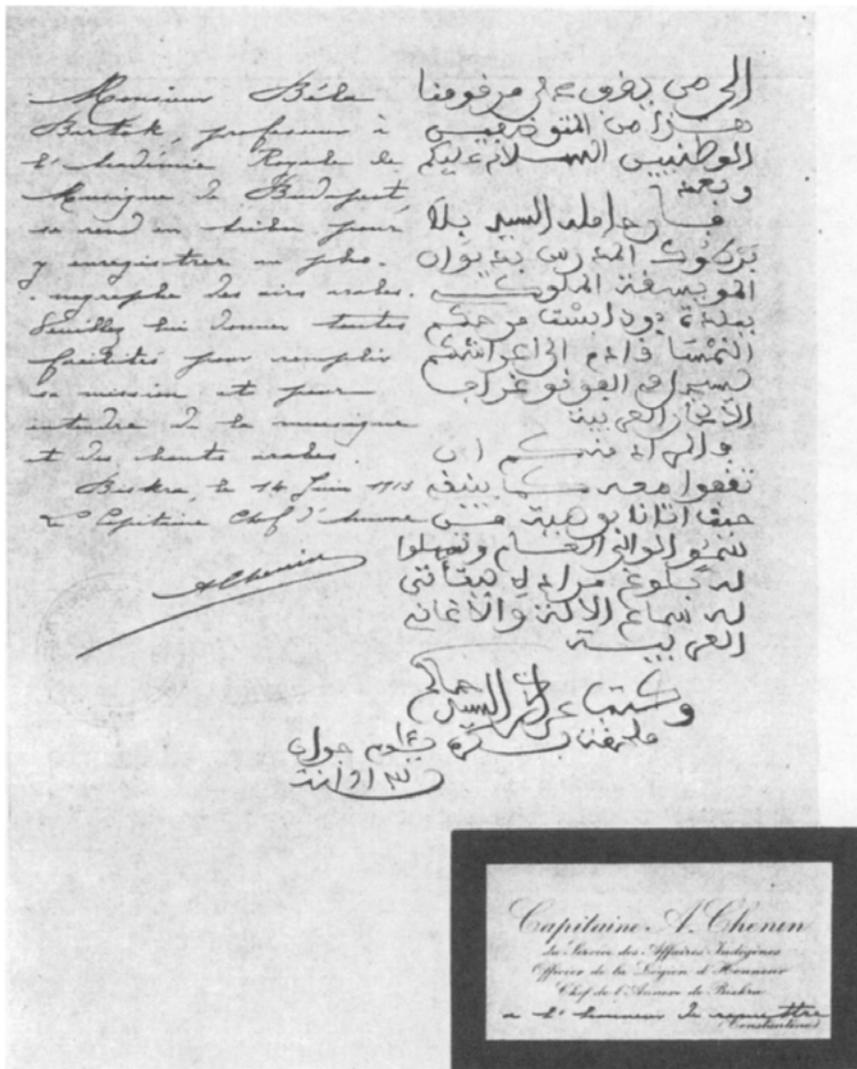


Figure 1.: Letter of recommendation from Captain A. Chenin. From *Documenta Bartokiana II*, p. 150. English translation of Arabic: To whichever civil servant views this document of ours, peace be upon you, etc. ... Let it be known that the bearer [of this letter], Mr. Bela Bartok, professor of the Royal Music Academy of the city of Budapest, under Austrian protection, is coming to your villages and recording Arab melodies on his phonograph. Since he brought us a recommendation from his Highness the Governor General, we request

that you help him in all that is required. Help him to reach his objective by allowing him to listen to the instruments and Arabic songs. Written by Mr. Sayyid Salah, Biskra, 14 June 1913.

Marseille, Switzerland, and Venice. Bartók hoped to return to the region the following year but due to the political climate and outbreak of the Great War, this desire was never fulfilled.

Bartók's second major endeavor in the Arab world was his participation at the Cairo Conference of Arab Folk Music from 29 March 1932 through 3 April 1932 at L'Institut de Musique Orientale. The conference was a collaborative effort, organized by several individuals, including Baron François Rodolphe d'Erlanger, Mahmud Ahmad Al-Hifni, and King Ahmad Fuad Pasha, who inaugurated the Academy of Oriental Music, a catalyst for the conference. The purposes of the conference were to

organize Arab music on a stable foundation that is scientific and technical and suits all of the Arab countries; study the ways in which Arab music has been allowed to develop; decide on musical scales; establish music notation; codify the organization of songs and composition; study the appropriate musical instruments; organize music education; record the songs and melodies of all the countries; study the musical works, printed or manuscript.⁹

Bartók was a member of the Recording Committee under the chairman-ship of Robert Lachmann.

While the Algerian and Cairo excursions comprise Bartók's main experiences in the Arab world, he did spend some time in northern Syria during his trip to Turkey in 1936—several months during the winter collecting songs in the cities of Aleppo, Rakka, and Hama. His

⁹ *Recueil des Travaux du Congrès de Musique Arabe, Cairo, 1932* (Cairo: Imprint nationale, Boulac, 1934), 50. "La mission de ce Congrès est d'organiser la musique arabe sur une base stable, scientifique et technique dont conviendront tous les pays arabes; d'étudier les moyens permettant à la musique arabe d'évoluer; de fixer l'échelle musicale; d'établir la notation musicale; de codifier les règles de la composition et du chant; d'étudier les instruments de musique appropriés; d'organiser l'enseignement musical; d'enregistrer les chants et les mélodies de tous ces pays; d'étudier les ouvrages de musique, imprimés ou manuscrits."

interest in Asia Minor was not new, and may be traced back to his time in Paris where he participated, unsuccessfully, in the Rubinstein Competition in 1905. His primary reasons were to continue his studies of the nomadic Turkmenian tribes, but his subsequent desire to develop stronger Arabic language skills prompts speculation that he also encountered Arab musicians.¹⁰ The tensions between "East" and "West" required great diplomacy for any foreign researcher, and the Cairo conference illustrates the many skirmishes that ensued from opposing cultural mentalities between Arab and European participants. During his travels in the Arab world, Bartók encountered various difficulties that impacted his ethnomusicological research.

Bartók's experience in Algeria greatly tested his stamina and endurance to heat and resulted in a curtailed excursion. A letter written by his wife, Márta, stated that "it was a cool, rainy summer in Europe which affected the African temperature. However the people there said it's not that hot, it's barely 40 degrees [C, 104 degrees F] in the shade."¹¹ Bartók acquired an intestinal infection at an overpriced hotel in Tolga that served bitter water, soup, and sour milk, losing several pounds from his already feeble body. Though having been once defeated by the harsh climate, Bartók resolved to return the following year. Marta continued:

B. was planning to return to Africa the next year and to continue the collected work that he had not finished. He was planning to be better prepared for it by having a diet so that he would gain weight so that he could lose a quarter of a kilo every day when he was in Africa.¹²

¹⁰ János Sipos, *In the Wake of Bartok in Anatolia* (Budapest: European Folklore Institute, 2000), 176.

¹¹ Ziegler, "Bartók's Reise," 9. "Es war in Europa ein kühler, regnerischer Sommer, der auch die afrikanische Temperatur beeinflusste. Die Leute dort sagten wenigstens, es sei keine große Hitze, es sind kaum 40° im Schatten!"

¹² Ziegler, "Bartók's Reise" 13. "B. hatte die feste Absicht, im nächsten Jahr wieder nach Afrika zu reisen und die vorzeitig abgebrochene Sammelarbeit fortzusetzen. Dazu wollte er sich besser vorbereiten: vorher eine Mastkur halten und so dick werden, daß er in Afrika täglich ein Viertelkilo abgeben könne."

Bartók's interest in both the music and the overall culture of Algeria is also related in Marta's letter:

In front of a house, there were mats on the balcony floor and the Sheikh was on the floor of the balcony and 3 Arabs sat on the balcony. Across from them B. sat in a chair and in front of them on a bench was a coffee can and a bowl. I took a seat next to him and was also given a pot, a bowl, and sugar. Everything was covered in fly dirt and even the coffee was certainly not particularly sterile, considering we had seen the only stream off Sidi Okba in which ducks swam, women did their laundry, and little Arab boys and girls played. The coffee was evidently made with similar water. It required much effort to drink it but B. said we had to do it even if it were to kill us because to reject it would have been a terrible insult, especially for an Arab as pure as our host in Sidi Okba. By the way, the coffee was delicious.¹³

As illustrated in this narrative, Bartok's gracious understanding of Arab culture abetted his ethnomusicological research. It is astonishing that Bartok planned to return, considering a final misfortune while in Algeria. After returning to Algiers from Al Kantara, Bartok injured himself while entering a hotel elevator. Regarding the incident, his wife wrote:

B. had to take a rest because when he entered the hotel elevator, he slid up to his knee into the elevator shaft and suffered on both sides of

¹³ Ziegler, "Bartók's Reise," 12. "Vor einem Haus saßen auf einer mattenbelegten Estrade drei Araber, darunter der alte Scheich. Ihnen gegenüber auf einem Stuhl B., vor ihm auf einer Bank eine Kaffeekanne und eine Schale. Ich nahm neben ihm Platz, bekam eine Kanne, Schale und Zucker, alles voller Fliegenschmutz, und auch der Kaffee war sicherlich nicht ausgesprochen steril, hatten wir doch den einzigen Bach von Sidi Okba gesehen, in dem Enten schwammen, Frauen wuschen und ausgelassene kleine Araber planschten. Und der Kaffee war selbstverständlich aus dem gleichen Wasser bereitet. Es kostete uns eine große Überwindung, ihn zu trinken, aber B. sagte, es müsse sein, und wenn es uns das Leben koste, denn eine Ablehnung wäre eine ungeheure Beleidigung gewesen, besonders für einen so reinen Araber wie unseren Gastgeber in Sidi Okba. Übrigens war der Kaffee ganz vorzüglich."

the knee an extremely painful periostitis. He had to be treated with cool compresses for days so we stayed in Algier for 9–10 days.¹⁴

Despite all of these calamities, Bartok exhibited tenacity and resiliency as he continued his field research in Eastern Europe, Egypt, Turkey, and Cairo.

Bartók was fluent in many Eastern European languages, believing that one must be adept in the language of a region to be able to comprehensively study its music. Bartók attempted to learn Arabic, buying a grammar book in France before his journey to Algeria. After this trip, he bought a Kabyle grammar book in hopes of returning to the region to study the Berber tribes. Another obstacle that language presented to Bartók is related in a letter to Brigitte Schiffer-Oelsner¹⁵ dated 14 July 1936, where he confessed:

Let me say that my little collection from the Biskra region suffers from [the absence of song texts] (just like many of Hornbostel's publications and others too). Being wholly ignorant of the Arab language, I was totally incapable of putting down even a single line; my hope was to repair the omission on some future occasion—a hope which, alas, has never been fulfilled. For I think that to determine the structure of the melodies sung, it is all important to know the subject-matter.¹⁶

Bartók's admission is hyperbolic when he claimed that he was "totally incapable of putting down even a single line." His Algerian transcriptions attest that he did transliterate some Arabic song texts, including words for four out of the 110 melodies (Figure 2).

¹⁴ Ziegler, "Bartók's Reise," 13. "B. mußte indessen vorderhand noch eine Zwangsrufe einschalten, denn beim Betreten des Hotelaufzugs rutschte er bis zum Knie in den Liftschacht und zog sich dabei beiderseits des Knies eine äußerst schmerzhaft Knochenhautenzündung zu. Er mußte tagelang mit kühlenden Umschlägen liegen, so daß wir etwa neun bis zehn Tage in Algier verweilten."

¹⁵ Schiffer-Oelsner received her doctor of Philosophy from the University of Berlin. Her dissertation topic concerned the music of Siwa Oasis, an area in western Egypt. At the time of the letter, she was conducting research in Cairo.

¹⁶ Bartók, Letters, 251.

While in Algeria, Bartók and his wife enjoyed the patronage of their translator, "M'hammad," who was fluent in French and Arabic.

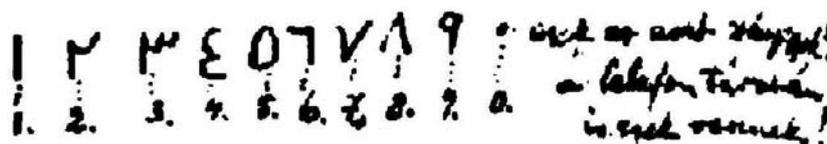


Figure 4. Arabic numbers from Cairo letter. "These are the Arabic numerals! They are on the telephone dials, too!"

During the Cairo conference, Bartók worked alongside Robert Lachmann, who was proficient in Arabic.²⁰ In Turkey and Syria he traveled with Ahmed Adnan Saygun,²¹ who served as a translator and guide to the region. Working with a translator, however, could not replace a strong, firsthand knowledge of the language. Bartók acknowledged his frustration with the languages of Asia Minor, stating, "I was greatly handicapped in my work by not being able to talk to people myself but only through an interpreter."²² Ostensibly, Bartók's deficiency in Arabic and Turkish caused his larger focus on the music of Eastern Europe, although the political climate of the time period greatly limited Bartók's ability to travel as well. Regardless of this conjecture, Bartók's interest in the Arab world was great enough for him to persevere with the language difficulties, providing a rich amount of knowledge regarding the music of the Near East.

Procuring access to various regions and countries proved difficult for Bartók, particularly for his voyage to Algeria. He encountered obstacles in acquiring a visa and other necessary paperwork for the

²⁰ The spelling of M'hammad is according to Bartók's own transliteration of the Arabic name.

²¹ Ahmed Adnan Saygun (1907–91) was a Turkish composer and ethnomusicologist who taught at the Music Instructors' School in Ankara and at the Municipal Conservatory of Istanbul.

²² Béla Bartók, "On Collecting Folk Songs in Turkey," in *Béla Bartók*, ed. Serge Moreux (London: Harvill Press, 1953), 255.

trip. Travel during this time also required long trips by boat, car, and train and the endurance to navigate the foreign transportation systems. While in Syria and Algeria, Bartok made many stops at checkpoints to display his travel documents. Bartok also made many inquiries to acquaintances in France to procure the necessary travel documents for Algeria. His entry into Egypt was less problematic due to the aid of conference organizers. His arrival at Cairo, however, entailed many delays and points of detainment for passport checks, medical examinations, and customs searches.²³ The patience and persistence needed to gain access to the Arab world was well worth the musical value that each trip afforded Bartok's research, as he later noted the Arab influence in many of his own compositions.²⁴

During his investigations into Arabic music, Bartok experienced hindrances in finding willing volunteers to perform and discuss their music. The modern technology of the phonograph, unknown in much of Asia Minor, alarmed some folk musicians. During his time in Turkey and Syria, Bartok related that "my good singer was frightened he might lose his voice by singing into a machine obviously driven by a devil; this instrument, he thought, might not only take down his voice, but take it away altogether. It took me long to dispel his fright."²⁵ Using the phonograph was also problematic due to its immoderate size. Marta wrote that while conducting research in Biskrian residences, "there was no room to use the phonograph."²⁶ It appears that Bartók had less difficulty in Algeria than in Turkey and Syria, however. He wrote in a letter to Ion Birlea that his trip to Algeria "brought me into close contact with the natives. The sheiks were most obliging; they simply ordered people to come in and sing. One very striking thing: there was no trace of shame in these people, not even in the women."²⁷ Bartók was determined to investigate every music type while in the Arab world. He believed he could leave "no

²³ Bartók, "Travel Reports from Three Continents," 213.

²⁴ One example of Bartok's admitted Arab influence is included in a letter written on 10 January 1931 to the Romanian ethnomusicologist Octavian Beu. Bartok related that in regards to his *Táncszvit*, or *Dance Suite*, BB 86a, "No. 1 is partly, and No. 4 entirely of an Oriental (Arab) character" (Bartok, *Letters*, 382).

²⁵ Bartók, "On Collecting Folk Songs in Turkey," 254.

²⁶ Ziegler, "Bartók's Reise," 9.

²⁷ Bartók, *Letters*, 126.

stone unturned" in order that he might ascertain an accurate picture of Arab music. His goal was to compare and learn from the music traditions of both urban and rural regions. Bartók's previous knowledge from his fieldwork in Eastern Europe gave him the insights to explore the music of all genders, nationalities, and age groups of the Near East.

The practice of Islam, ubiquitous in the Arab world, limited Bartók's research, particularly as he sought to examine the music of Arab women. According to the Qur'an, women should "not display their charms except what is apparent outwardly, and cover their bosoms with their veils and not to show their finery except to their husbands or their fathers or fathers-in-law, their sons or stepsons, brothers, or their brothers' and sisters' sons, or their women attendants."²⁸ When inquiring after female musicians in Algeria, Bartók was permitted to collect "songs from women 'under police surveillance,' as respectable women [were] forbidden to speak with strange men."²⁹ These women were actually Algerian prostitutes, *ouled-naïls*, and Bartók obtained a certificate of permission to gain access to their street (Figures 5 and 6). Marta elucidated:

the Arab women were not allowed to sing in front of foreign men. The police, however, allowed the prostitutes, who were strictly forbidden from leaving their quarters, to come to our hotel and sing for us. ... We went to their street which consisted of small, uniform clay huts and a dangerously steep staircase on the back wall of the house led up to the flat roof. On this roof terrace, each girl was holding a tame, small gazelle the way one would hold a cat or a dog back home. Interestingly none of these girls was wearing a veil.³⁰

²⁸ Sura 24:31, *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* by Ahmed Ali (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 300–301.

وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَى جُيُوبِهِنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ إِبْنَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنَاتِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ حُكَّامٍ مِمَّنْ لَا يَجْعَلُ الْمَالَ عِشْرًا

²⁹ Bartók, *Letters*, 126.

³⁰ Ziegler, "Bartók's Reise," 9. "Die arabischen Frauen von Biskra aber durften vor fremden Männern nicht singen. Die Polizeibehörde gestattete jedoch den Ouled-Naïls, den Freudenmädchen, denen es streng verboten war, ihre Gasse zu verlassen, in unser Hotel zu kommen und dort zu singen.... Wir begaben uns in ihre Gasse, die aus winzigen, gleichförmigen Lehmhäuschen bestand, auf denen flaches Dach eine in die Ruckmauer

Bartók's determination to experience the music of women in Sidi Okba also caused some altercations. His wife related:

The recording of the songs happened in a cheerful mood; in other places the singers had been much more serious and almost seemed depressed.

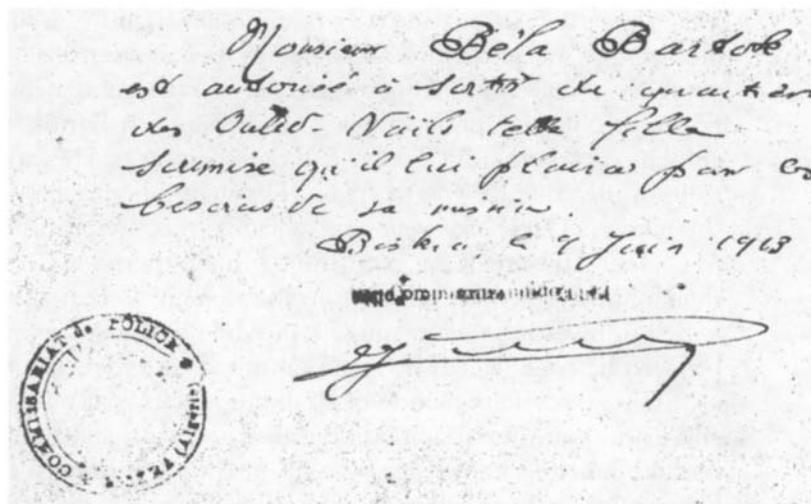


Figure 5. Permission from the Biskra Police to meet with the "ouled-naïls" for musical research. *Dokumenta Bartókiana II*, p. 151.

gehauene, halsbrecherisch steile Treppe führte. Auf dieser Dachterrasse hielt jedes der Mädchen eine zahme kleine Gazelle, wie man bei uns Hunde oder Katzen halt. Übrigens trugen diese Mädchen auf der Straße keinen Schleier."

Figure 6. "Dance of the desert (of the Ouled nail)." From Bartók, "Algerian Melody Transcription."

Here, however, there was a cheerful, cross-eyed little extraordinary singer who was able to engage the crowd. There was, however, an unpleasant incident: the husband of a woman found out that she was singing for foreigners. He ran into the room angry and insulted his wife (by the way, in that Oasis women did not wear veils) and calmed down only when he saw me and after the representatives of the Sheikh spoke to him.³¹

³¹ Ziegler, "Bartók's Reise," 11-12. "Die Aufnahme der Lieder ging in fröhlichster Stimmung vor sich; anderswo waren die Sänger viel ernsthafter, ja geradezu duster von Gemüt. Hier aber war ein munterer, etwas schielender, großartiger Sänger, der auch den übrigen Lust zu machen verstand. Einen unangenehmen Zwischenfall gab es dennoch: Der Ehemann einer Frau hatte erfahren, daß seine Gattin Fremden vorsinge, er stürzte höchst erbost in den Raum und beschimpfte die Frau (nebenbei bemerkt, in dieser Oase trugen die Frauen keinen Schleier) und beruhigte sich erst, als er mich sah, und wohl auch, nachdem ihm der Beauftragte des Scheichs gut zugesprochen hatte."

Bartók was undeterred by obstacles and forged ahead, procuring every musical opportunity possible. His persistence allowed him to realize the intricacies and distinctions of Arab music.

The "Orientalist" mentality created enormous divides for Western ethnomusicologists. These rifts are particularly evident during the Cairo conference of 1932. The condescending attitude of Western Europe toward the rest of the world during the nineteenth century carried over into the twentieth, albeit to a lesser degree, giving the Western representatives at the conference the belief that they could make officious requisitions that were, naturally, met with hostility on the Arab side. The condescension of Western Europe to the rest of the world influenced many of the Arab scholars and musicians, who viewed the conference as an opportunity for their native music to progress and develop more Western qualities. The Cairo conference is an illustration of the longstanding polemics between "East" and "West" and raises the greater implications of "Western" dominance and "Eastern" response.

Bartók's position at the Cairo conference sided with the preservation of Arab music in its "purest" form, that is to say music that was "uncontaminated" by outside influences, the belief in a "untouched" or "uncontaminated" by outside influences, the belief in a solely indigenous Arab form of folk music. His participation in the Recording Committee illustrates his desire to preserve Arab folk music, believing that this music was susceptible to extinction. As Julie Brown writes:

Bartók joined the Recording (Sub) Committee where he took a characteristically Western view of the matter. Consistent with his own internally Orientalist position in relation to East European folk music, he exhorted his hosts to collect on disc as much music as possible, but only those melodies devoid of any traces of Western music. It would be interesting to know how he would have responded if asked to advise on the way forward for contemporary Arab music. Would he have similarly drawn a distinction between "theirs" and "ours"? Would he have advised them to avoid Western influences, even though he freely borrowed from the East?³²

³² Julie Brown, "Bartók, the Gypsies, and Hybridity," in *Western Music and Its Others*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 141.

Each member of the conference was permitted to choose his committee, and Bartók possibly chose the Recording Committee due to his expertise in phonograph recording and transcription writing. It is also plausible that Bartók decided on this committee to avoid the great debates that took place in the more controversial committees that addressed scales and notation. In a letter written on 20 March 1932, Lachmann remarked that

in my commission (the recording commission) everything evolves satisfactorily. Hombostel and the famous Hungarian composer Bela Bartok are also members, the rest mostly French. Relations are highly amicable ... The Directors of the Congress appear to be very satisfied with the work of, in particular, this Commission.³³

The Recording Commission did encounter disputes, including those that directly involved Bartok. Scheherazade Qassim Hassan³⁴ relates that

Bartok had suggested that a portion of the disks be reserved to sell in order to make the work of the Congress known to the larger public. But the musicians themselves refused this proposition and would not agree to participate in the recordings except under the condition that they would not be sold.³⁵

Ali Jihad Racy's description reinforces the tension between the Recording Committee and the musicians, stating that the committee "supported Bartok's idea that the Congress recordings be sold without

³³ Robert Lachmann, "'Liebe Eltem' – Robert Lachmann's Letters to his Parents," in *The Lachmann Problem: An Unsung Chapter in Comparative Musicology*, ed. Ruth Katz (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2003), 311.

³⁴ Scheherazade Qassim Hassan was a French organologist of Iraqi instruments and organizer of some of the proceedings from the Cairo conference.

³⁵ S. Qassim Hassan, "Présentation," in *Musique Arabe: Le Congrès du Caire de 1932*, ed. Philippe Vigneux (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1992), 29. "Bartok avait suggéré de réserver une partie des Disques à vente afin de faire connaître les travaux du Congrès à un plus large public. Mais les musiciens eux-mêmes refusèrent cette proposition et n'acceptèrent de participer aux enregistrements qu'à la condition qu'ils ne soient pas vendus."

profit for the purpose of educating the public at large."³⁶ Lachmann's claim that relations within the Recording Committee were "highly amicable," therefore, is an overstatement. In a letter he wrote from Cairo, Bartók recounted that "in our group there are a lot of debates, but in some of the other subcommittees they've nearly come to blows. The Arabs want to modernize everything, and the Europeans (with a few exceptions) want to preserve the old".³⁷ In his letter, Bartok does not mention his opinion regarding the debates, even though he is writing to his wife, to whom he divulges many of his estimations regarding the city and people. Further in the letter, however, he wrote that "the old city is, in some places, pure Orient: garbage, excrement, other rubbish in the narrow streets."³⁸ Regarding the predominantly judgmental attitude of Europe toward non-European culture, Said noted that "it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures."³⁹ Despite Bartok's judgmental observations, he was obviously very taken with the opportunity to study Arab music and to incorporate it into his own compositions. While Bartok was influenced by his nineteenth-century predecessors, he also believed that Arab music embodied many admirable qualities and ideas worthy of research. Bartok, thus, served as a bridge from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, viewing certain aspects of Arab culture as inferior to European customs while still admiring other facets of Arab music and society.

The Cairo conference brought to light many thorny issues that dealt with music and the larger issues of the East versus the West. While there is a dearth of information regarding Bartok's interaction with these debates during the conference, it is certain that he had to deal with them on some level. This being the case, it is necessary to broaden our focus to examine the Cairo Congress in a larger context.

³⁶ Ali Jihad Racy, "Historical Worldviews of Early Ethnomusicologists: An East-West Encounter in Cairo, 1932," in *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History*, ed. Stephen Blum, Philip V. Bohlman, and Daniel M. Neuman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 73.

³⁷ Bartók, "Travel Reports from Three Continents," 214.

³⁸ Bartók, "Travel Reports from Three Continents," 215.

³⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

Colonial rule was evident throughout the entire conference, as "the nationalist agenda was clear ... in the musical delegations, which represented 'nations' not 'cultures' or even 'traditions.'⁴⁰ Benedict Anderson challenges the idea of "nation" and "nationalism," noting that nations are an "imagined political community, further revealing the complexity surrounding the idea of nation-ness."⁴¹ Each nation in the present-day Near East is a product of European land division that mixes multifarious cultures and ethnicities. Instead of recognizing the importance and diversity of the ethnically rich Arab world, the Congress consolidated the region into efficient Western-style nations. Baron Bernard Carra de Vaux referred to the national outlook and organization during the conference's closing sessions, mentioning the orchestras of Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Sudan.⁴² The Berbers are the only indigenous group referred to without any delineation to the varying sects of the culture, possibly due to French colonization and scholarly interest in North Africa and Berbers specifically. The emphasis on the Arab world as nations led to the neglect of venerable musicians and important variants of Arab folk music, since several indigenous groups often comprised various nations in the Middle East. The initial invitation from the Congress excluded indigenous groups such as Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds, and Chaldeans. Although possibly viewed as not "purely" Arab, each group serves as a vital part in the overall cultural makeup of the Middle East and obscures the idea of racial purity in music and other cultural means of expression. The inclusion of Turkey further exemplifies the Congress's focus on nations instead of ethnic groups.

⁴⁰ Philip V. Bohlman, *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 49.

⁴¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Press, 1983), 6.

⁴² *Recueil des Travaux du Congrès*, 61. "L'enregistrement, grâce au dévouement et au zèle des orchestres venus des différents pays, du Maroc, de Tunis, d'Alger, de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l'Iraq et à celui de vos musiciens d'Egypte, a déjà donné une belle collection de disques; mais combien sont encore à recueillir chez vous et dans d'autres pays, notamment dans les oasis, en Arabie et aux frontières du monde Arabe comme au Soudan et chez les Berbères." Although Turkey is not considered a part of the present-day Arab world, the Arab world was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1517 to 1918, allowing the Congress to still include Turkey in the conference.

While Turkey is not an Arabic-speaking country or technically part of the Arab world, Carra de Vaux mentioned its participation, while other non-Arabic-speaking ethnic groups living in the Middle East, such as those mentioned above, were not originally invited. In an effort to remedy this, an open invitation was extended to all musicians for the final day of conference presentations, but many refused the belated invitation. "It is understood that the majority of them [the uninvited musicians] possibly refused this final invitation because of their lack of invitation to attend the previous councils."⁴³ Although reparations were attempted, many oppugned the conference organizers for excluding many worthy musicians and scholars.

Minority groups were not the only oversight at the Cairo conference. Congress organizers also overlooked the inclusion of rural musicians and ensembles. Bartok strongly advocated for the Recording Committee to focus its efforts on the "more authentic" rural music, as he claimed it had greater animation and originality compared to city music.⁴⁴ Other members must have agreed with his views, and thus "special emphasis was placed on folk music."⁴⁵ The committee stated that "it is necessary to avoid everything that contains the superficial imitation of Western music which has no roots and no special character in its melodic composition."⁴⁶ This statement exemplifies the historically generalized view of the country as natural, peaceful, innocent, and embodying simple virtue, while the city was viewed as an "achieved center of learning, communication, light."⁴⁷

43. مؤتمر الموسيقى العربية الأول: القاهرة، ١٩٣٢. د. فكتور سخّاب [Sahhāb, D. Fiktūr] [Mu'tamar al-Mūsīqā al-'Arabīyah al-Awwal: al-Qāhirah, 1932] Beirut, 1997.

43 المفهوم ان الكثير منهم ربما رفضوا هذه الدعوة الختامية لعدم دعوتهم إلى حضور الجلسات.

44 Stephen Blum, "Prologue," in *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History*, 9.

45 Racy, "Historical Worldviews of Early Ethnomusicologists," 73.

46 *Kitab mutamar al-Musigá al-Arabīyah: al-mashmul bi-riyat hadrat sahib al-jakdah al-Malik Fuad al-Awwal: al-munaqid bi-madinat al-Qahirah fi sanat 1350 H.: sanat 1932 m* (Cairo: al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyah, 1933), 101.

يجب أن يهجر كل ما يحمل طابع التقليد السطحي للموسيقى الأجنبية وليس له أصل ولا طابع خاص في الأثناء التلحيني

47 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1. Williams continues his argument, stating that "powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness,

Some of the Arab participants of the committees devoted to rhythm and scales had invited the esteemed Western scholars to learn more about European compositional practices. Instead, the non-Arab attendees demanded that the Arabs relinquish their interest in European music and completely devote themselves to the preservation of their own folk music. Lachmann related this sentiment best, writing:

no – we certainly do not bring Eastern *music* any nearer to our understanding by tampering with it. Nor does it benefit from it any other way; instead of the real thing, we obtain a hybrid production, typical neither of East nor West, and shallow like ditchwater.⁴⁸

The myopic focus on "rural" music from specific Arab nations, therefore, provided only a small sampling of Arab folk music at the neglect of many other musical styles and traditions of the Near East.

The concept of the evolution of music was another cause for deliberation during the Cairo conference. This belief, prevalent in Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was also rife in the Near East. The Western conference representatives believed in the importance of preserving Arab folk music before it succumbed to European musical traits. This also influenced the committee on education, which was "alarmed by figures showing that more Egyptians studied Western music than Arab music."⁴⁹ The education committee decided to formulate strict guidelines for music education throughout the Arab world, including the interdiction of the piano in schools. Acceptance of this view was sporadic, as many were rapacious in their desire for a more Western-influenced Arab style. Others disagreed, embracing the evolutionist mentality, and saw the conference as a rebirth for "true" Arab music. During the first session of the conference, Muhammad 'Abdel Wahhāb exclaimed, "Blessed be the Arab nation in this country of Egypt! It is the junction point between the flourishing past and the marvelous present. Honor to you,

ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times" (1).

⁴⁸ Robert Lachmann, "'Oriental Music': A Series of Twelve Talks on the Palestine Broadcasting Station (1936-1937)," in *The Inrhmann Problem: An Unsung Chapter in Comparative Musicology*, 333.

⁴⁹ Lachmann, "Oriental Music," 75.

Egypt, fertile for her Arab renaissance!"⁵⁰ The Congress proved to be an instrument for the resurgence of Arab music. Philip Bohlman writes that the conference was also a distinct moment where "Arab music history re-entered world music history," allowing the widespread circulation of Arab music recordings and publication.⁵¹ While Western music continued to permeate Arab composition, the Near East retained its own style and believed in its resiliency and merit, particularly in the changing consciousness of ethnomusicology in the twentieth century.

Bartók's interest in the Arab world required great endurance and persistence. Language barriers, harsh climate, peculiar foods and customs, hostile attitudes, and physical ailments plagued Bartók's time in North Africa as he attempted to research and preserve indigenous folk music. In his essay "Why and How do We Collect Folk Music?" Bartók asserted that the "ideal folklorist possesses an erudition that is virtually encyclopedic."⁵² He must have a knowledge of linguistics and phonetics and must also be adept at choreography in order to understand the interconnections of music and dance. The folklorist must also be well prepared sociologically to understand music and customs and have a sound knowledge of history in order to compare folk-music material from various regions with that of his own country. It is also indispensable that he be an observant musician with a good ear. Bartók ended his description for the ideal folklorist, stating that "to my knowledge there has never been and perhaps never will be a collector embodying all those qualities, understandings, and experiences."⁵³

The Cairo conference of 1932 was a landmark event where Bartók encountered the early twentieth-century disparities between "East" and "West," "Orient" and "Occident," and the preservation of Arab folk

⁵⁰ Recueil des Travaux *du Congrès*, 54. "Que la nation arabe soit bénie dans ce pays d'Egypte! Elle fut le point de junction entre le passé florissant et le merveilleux present. Hommage à toi Egypte, féconde par sa renaissance arabe!"

⁵¹ Bohlman, *World Music*, 50.

⁵² Bartók, "Why and How Do We Collect Folk Music?" in *Bela Bartok Essays*, selected and ed. by Benjamin Suchoff (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 10.

⁵³ Bartók, "Why and How Do We Collect Folk Music?" 10.

music versus the progression of Near Eastern music. A veteran traveler and fieldworker, Bartok not only gained musical knowledge but also acquired the skill of diplomacy as he investigated indigenous folk music.

Through the multifarious successes and impediments experienced by Bartók in North Africa, his findings display the talents of a twentieth-century composer who exhibited a desire to understand cultural difference in music.