

# LOCAL SOURCES AND THE LIMITS OF MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP: THE CASE OF SYRIAC CHANT

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## Abstract

Through a critical reading of two twentieth-century sources on a living musical tradition which has Early Christian origins, this article offers a reading of how local musicology fashions an extra-musical framing of ethnic religiosity by the very means of musical-theoretical detail. Drawing on subtly concealed senses of nationhood, the article shows how this fashioning was achieved in the case of Syriac music. It does so by engaging with the complexities that defeat such labels as local/European and sacred/secular, and that ultimately upset the basis of the distinction us/them with respect to the creation of knowledge and sources. The article also underlined ways in which inconsistencies within scholarship may – and do – form the means by which a scholarship, when deeply engaged with local matters, pushes the limits of its own premises, and redefines its categories and the conceptual bases upon which it should be understood.

**Keywords:** Nation, Ethnicity, Religion, Middle East, Syria.

## Resumo

Através de uma leitura crítica de duas fontes do século XX sobre uma tradição musical viva que tem origens cristãs antigas, este artigo oferece uma leitura de como a musicologia local modela um enquadramento extra-musical da religiosidade étnica por meio de detalhes teórico-musicais. Com base em sentimentos sutilmente ocultos de nacionalidade, o artigo mostra como essa modelagem foi alcançada no caso da música siríaca. Ela o faz envolvendo-se com as complexidades que derrubam rótulos como local/europeu e sagrado/secular, e que, em última instância, perturbaram a base da distinção nós/eles em relação à criação de conhecimento e fontes. O

artigo também sublinha as formas pelas quais as inconsistências dentro do conhecimento acadêmico podem – e fazem – constituir o meio pelo qual esse conhecimento, quando profundamente comprometido com assuntos locais, força os limites de suas próprias premissas, e redefine suas categorias e as bases conceituais sobre as quais deveria ser entendido.

**Palavras-chave:** Nação, Etnia, Religião, Oriente Médio, Síria.

## Background and Introduction

Local musical traditions in the Eastern Mediterranean are characterised typically by a subset of distinguishing features within regional groupings. This is the case for the musics of the region's diverse ethno-religious communities, such as the Armenian and Kurdish communities, who consider their respective dance music and song traditions as markers of distinction from neighbouring groups and a feature of internal cohesion. An exception to this rule are members of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, whose distinctive musical tradition, until the second half of the twentieth century, was that of their ecclesiastical chant. In Syria, they are known as Suryanis, the attributive reference to the church's liturgical language, Syriac, which is the literary dialect of Aramaic and the language of Early Christian literature. As the Suryani conception of identity puts strong emphasis on matters of faith (Jarjour 2016), members of this increasingly diasporic Levantine church identify a moment in the second half of the twentieth century at which they purposefully invented a popular song tradition in a bid to emphasise an ethnic identity that is not exclusively bounded by their long standing ecclesiastical heritage. The deliberate forging of a popular/folk genre in the local dialects of Aramaic common among Suryanis in south-eastern Turkey and north-eastern Syria would become independent from the ancient (classical) Syriac liturgical repertoire and would grow

exponentially to dominate secular festivities and dance parties around the globe. The invention of this repertoire was contemporaneous with an increase in professionalism and higher education among young members of a community that was recovering from the aftermath of early-twentieth-century massacres (in what is widely known as the Armenian genocide). It also came following the independence of Syria from France,<sup>1</sup> and a rising sense of nationalistic sentiments and competing leftist ideologies, all of which marked a general weakening of religious identification among the educated youth in favour of a sense of nationhood that was largely non-confessional.

While analytical categories, especially dichotomous categories such as sacred-secular and ancient-modern, are no more easily defined in the Suryani context than they might be in any other, the Syrian Orthodox musical practices have maintained, nevertheless, clear distinction between ecclesiastical singing and the new song genre. Be that as it may, the invented tradition continued to bear loose connections to its ecclesial counterpart, as a close reading of subsequent local writings about Syriac music would suggest. That local scholarship on Syriac music has maintained a connection between two kinds of music which are separate in practice, reflects revealing dynamics between a living musical tradition and the sources which scholars create and consult about them. This article is concerned with such dynamics.

The current article takes a close look at 'local' written sources on the subject of Syriac music in the second half of the twentieth century. The scare-quotes (which will be implied in much of this article) indicate that 'local' is more a description than a category. It serves to indicate that the sources in question were written by Suryanis – to be

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1 Syria's independence from French control was a process which included the gradual withdrawal of military presence between 1944-1946. The Day of Independence, April 17<sup>th</sup>, marks the departure of the last French soldier in 1946.

distinguished from those which European musicologists produced on the subject.

Focusing on works authored by two celebrated musicians in the Suryani community, the article proposes a critical contextual reading of two important sources from the twentieth century, and examines them in relation to relevant regional and European influences. It does so by shedding a spotlight on the claims and methods of Syriac musicological scholarship, which it views against a backdrop of converging and conflicting regional and European influences. Ultimately, the article suggests that a 'cultural' framing of religiosity manifests itself in this music minority tradition through a combination of local ethnic nationalistic tendencies and European musicological paradigms.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this extra-musical framing of Syriac musicality was fashioned with the help of hands-on musical-theoretical analytical tools. By deploying purposefully vague attributions such as 'historical' and 'civilisational' in meticulous music analyses, Suryani musicologists have aimed to redraw – or at least to disrupt – entrenched lines of inclusion and exclusion between local-European, sacred-secular and ultimately dominant 'us'-'them' binary bases at work in the twentieth century. The article also suggests that in doing so, Syriac musicologists have reassigned meaning to fraught terms in a context where religion, ethnicity and nation are essential yet separate elements of in-group identification and the labelling of others.

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2 In this article I will not problematise the term 'cultural', and will use it rather in its most comprehensive sense – which include contested dimensions. The purpose behind this uncritical employment is to approximate a use of the term which was common in Syria, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, where the notion of culture was coterminous with literacy, high art, and a deliberate distancing from the confines of the religious establishment and the its behavioral and intellectual codes.

On the question of sources, the main claim of this article is the following: It is only by understanding the limits of the scholarship within which (in this case Syriac) musicology operates that local sources may be appropriately read and understood.<sup>3</sup> In other words, in addressing the limits of the music scholarship within which any source material are conceived, and by testing it against practice, new possibilities for a more dynamic ethnomusicological understanding of living musical traditions may emerge. While this article addresses a musical tradition that is thought to have remained in continuous practice at least since its earliest extant medieval sources, the main claim of the article may find application in the study of musical traditions which we access today primarily through written sources.

## Local Trends and European Scholarship

Subsequent to a number of modern encounters with European musicological scholarship,<sup>4</sup> emergent literature on Syriac chant within local circles in the later decades of the twentieth century followed two tendencies: ethnic nationalistic and European musicological. Those tendencies emerged as a result of a combination of factors, such as, *inter alia*: migration, contact with European musicological literature and scholars, maintained contact with the homeland, a rise in ethnic and nationalistic awareness, a surge in European musicological interest in Levantine Christian musics, the increasing rise in education in the Levant following the end of Ottoman rule, and the establishment of European and Arab music schools in the area.<sup>5</sup> I will

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3 This article neither deals with European sources on Syriac chant nor offers a comparative framework for the literature at hand. I have addressed one early European source elsewhere (Jarjour 2015b), though the majority of 20<sup>th</sup> century sources remain pending close analytical reading.

4 For an example, see Jarjour (2015b).

5 Owing to these direct European influences, the question of church modality elicited systematisations akin to those adopted by other modal systems in the

explain the two tendencies in what follows by featuring the writings of two of the most prominent proponents of Syriac music, Gabriel As'ad and Nouri Iskandar, focusing on the intellectual surroundings or environments in which their respective works came to be.

While addressing the backgrounds of these tendencies merits in-depth attention for which the scope of the current article does not allow, it is worth noting briefly that, historically speaking, the two tendencies were not independent from more general movements in the region, which were based in nationalistic ideologies and lasted well throughout the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> From a methodological point of view, the fact that these tendencies followed existing paradigms is in part owing to the general dire state of education in the region, which had just emerged from four centuries of an unfavourable Ottoman rule that consolidated illiteracy.<sup>7</sup> The emergent educated elite, thus, had great dependency on European modernism in creating its own, and was searching for ways to find local application for nineteenth-century (perhaps even earlier) European ideas in the forging of their new nations.<sup>8</sup> In terms of creating a scholarly musical knowledge, local musicologists aspired to European paradigms and strove to a systematic type of musicology that subscribed primarily to positivism; in other words, they aspired to producing measurable and quantifiable, empirical knowledge. They did so as they strove to situate their local forms of knowledge among existing – European –

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region, such as Turkish and Arab modal systems. The question of the mode remained, in any case, a focal concept.

- 6 For more on pan-Arabist nationalism and the ways in which it was manifested in music and art song in the Arab world see, among others: Danielson 1997, Davis 2004, Lohman 2009, and Stokes 1992; 2009. On Arab thought and modernity see Hourani 1983, and Hanssen and Weiss 2016. While it might be argued that Arab and Suryani nationalisms should not be confused, the musicologists with whose work I am engaging in this paper lived and worked in the post-colonial Arab world, and their projects were conceived in its intellectual milieu.
- 7 For more on nationalism in the region, and the particular circumstances that have contributed to its popularity, see, among others, Gelvin 1994, Schumann 2001, Tauber 1990, and Sheehi 2000.

works on their music. Towards that end, a sense of ‘Westernisation’ as a means of legitimisation grew to influence local musical knowledge.<sup>9</sup> One result was the uncritical adoption of analytical emphasis on the modal nature of ecclesiastical music,<sup>10</sup> which placed much of the attention in local musicology on the presumed modal nature of church music (a notion that has gone largely uncontested until recently, Jarjour 2018 forthcoming).

Beyond the question of modality, the ethnic nationalistic trend in Syriac chant literature was retrogressive in that it looked back at history, yet progressive in that it adopted a contemporary ideology.<sup>11</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, Suryanis around the world voiced an invitation to retrace the historical roots of the Syriac tradition beyond early Christianity, to the ancient empires of Assyria, Babylon and Sumer. This trend was in line with the then contemporary stream of nationalistic ideas which were sweeping through Europe and were gradually gaining prevalence in the Levant. The Great Arab Revolt (1916-1918), which resulted in ridding the Levant of Ottoman dominance, is a case in point. Particularly relevant to this stream in Syriac circles was the emphasis it placed on ethnic and historical elements common to Suryanis across the region, which were intended

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- 8 Pointing out the philosophical reliance on European modernist thinking should not undermine local intellectual projects in the region, such as the Nahda, which were searching for their own philosophies. See Henssen and Weiss 2016.
  - 9 In a comparable case, the calls to standardise an Arab scale which local musicologists voiced in the Cairo Congress are another case of westernisation (for more see below). Much like Arab musicologists argued in Cairo, Suryani musicologists regarded modal systematisations as modernising and forward-looking.
  - 10 This adoption may well have been an unintended consequence of the desire to distinguish Syriac chant from non-Christian surroundings, which local musicologists would have inherited from European studies (for more, see Jarjour 2015b).
  - 11 There is a vast body of ethnomusicological literature on the subject of nationalism, as well as on intersections between nationalism and conceptions of ethnicity and identity. Perhaps the most widely regarded account of the issue and a number of its manifestations is found in Martin Stokes’s introduction to a volume on the subject and a number of articles therein (see Stokes 1997).

to unify the Suryani people in an attempt to rescue them from genocide (de Courtois 2004a, 218). Such emphasis bore, arguably but naturally, strong nationalistic overtones that became a widely declared political agenda by the 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

Syriac nationalism bestowed a new and important role on music. By the second quarter of the twentieth century (and beyond), Syriac music (i.e. chant) served as a unifying factor and was employed as proof of unprecedented historical claims of authenticity and national belonging to the land of Mesopotamia and its ancient civilisations (As'ad 1990 أسعد). Such a belonging afforded the practitioners of Syriac chant the prospect of laying claim to rights of legitimate existence: as an ethnic group in a self-ruling nation, as new states were being created on the Levantine map.<sup>13</sup> Emergent nationalistic claims extended to an 'authentic' music. Despite the small number of Syriac nationalistic writings in the Levant,<sup>14</sup> the archetypical example of local literature on music within this trend is the book of Gabriel As'ad on the history of Syrian Music, which I discuss below.

Alongside ethnic nationalism, the second tendency which emerged in modern Suryani musicological literature during the final decade of the twentieth century was more directly influenced by

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- 12 On the genocide of the Suryani people and the emergence of the Assyrian Liberation Party see Lahdo 2008 لحدو.
- 13 The peoples of the Levant hoped that the Great Arab Revolt would result in the creation of an Arab nation, a dream that was shattered by the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), the long-term result of which was the creation of the current Arab nations of the Levant (Petran 1972). Consequently, the nationalist Suryanis, who dreamt of a nation of their own, argued for the right of protection from genocide by European countries when the region underwent ethnic turmoil (Wigram 2002).
- 14 As they were subject to censorship (Lahdo 2008 لحدو).

European musicology. Studies by French and German musicologists in the first seven decades of the century attempted to tackle Syriac chant from a systematic point of view. Most comprised printed transcriptions of large sections from chant books or collections based on liturgical genres (Jeannin 1925; Husmann 1969-71). Similarly, local musicologists followed suit in favouring systems and employing western notation. In addition to influences from European musicology on Syriac chant, this tendency was equally influenced by similar inclinations in the wider Arab musicological scene. Arab musicologists, particularly around the time of the Cairo Congress (1932), were showing increasing interest in an effective systematisation of Arab music. Calls were raised for agreement on an Arab equally tempered quartertone-based scale, and for the employment of western notation for the sake of a systematic development for Arab music (Racy 1991). The works of Nouri Iskandar, a member of the Suryani community in Aleppo, are the foremost example of local literature influenced by this tendency.

## **Gabriel As'ad: Cultural Nationalism**

Gabriel As'ad (1907-1997) was a Suryani musician who became famous for composing secular songs in Syriac. A violinist and music educator, As'ad worked and lived in the north-east of Syria. He is considered a pioneer in being the first twentieth-century composer of the west Syrian church (2008 لحدو).<sup>15</sup> At a late age, As'ad wrote a

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15 An early divide split the Syriac-speaking church into east and west Syriac. This paper focuses on the west Syriac tradition, which is that of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch. The two musicologists in question, As'ad and Iskandar, are members of this church. While their musicological writings put no particular emphasis on the west/east Syriac split, it would be safe to assume that they were operating within the west Syriac sphere. At any rate, their musical activity – when it took place in ecclesiastical circles – was predominantly among members of the Syrian Orthodox community.

book entitled *al-Mūsīqā al-Sūriyyah 'abra al-tārikh*, Syrian Music Throughout History, which he published, most probably in Syria, in 1990.<sup>16</sup> Before discussing the book, some background information on the author and his contribution is necessary to contextualise this work.

As'ad was born in the south-east of Turkey, in Midyat, and spent his last years in Sweden. His family moved to Adana in 1914; then, fleeing persecution, to Tripoli in Lebanon and Homs in Syria before settling in Damascus in 1921. In 1923 As'ad started learning music, subsequently adopting the discipline as a profession. Although his musical career took various shapes in different places, his output consisted largely of secular nationalistic compositions. His activities ranged from playing entertainment music at a restaurant in Lebanon at the end of the 1920s, to heading the Cultural Centre in Malkieh (1958-1973) and teaching music at the Cultural Centre in Qamishli (1958-1967), both in the north-eastern region of Jazireh in Syria. As the Jazireh region falls across the border from Tur Abdin (also Turabdin) – one of the regions that were most badly affected by sectarian violence and scene of major massacres against Christian minorities, Jazireh received large numbers of Suryanis fleeing persecution at the turn of the century; it was not unusual for As'ad to settle there. His subsequent emigration to Sweden in 1979 was another step that many Suryanis made in their continued diaspora. In fact, Qamishli itself was largely built for and by fleeing Suryanis (and subsequently other persecuted minority groups), and became a

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16 The author's name appears on the book as Jibrān 'As'ad. Even though the book does not indicate a place of publication or a publisher, the assumption that it was printed in Syria can be made with a degree of certainty. Normally, either as a result of the lack of specialist publishing houses, or with first-time or unknown authors, or, indeed, because of the nature of the subject matter, authors often find themselves forced to publish their work at their own expense, in which case a publisher would not be stated. In some cases the name of the printing house may appear, although this is not the case with As'ad's book.

unique place in which their cultural – especially musical – heritage developed and flourished, despite (or perhaps thanks to) continued political disenfranchisement and economic marginality. Between his Damascus years and the return to live with his people in Jazireh, As'ad spent five years in Palestine (1931-1936), where he worked with famous musicians (e.g. Zaki Murad and Mary Jubran) and seems to have achieved a degree of success that allowed him to record his first LP (1933), which contained two Syriac nationalistic songs.

As'ad is known for using, as well as declaring, Syriac music as his primary source of inspiration, although he wrote in a largely western compositional style, according to the few commentaries I was able to find about him.<sup>17</sup> His contribution to the tradition was unprecedented in its frank nationalistic content and framework. His first composition was a song about the Assyrians (1926).<sup>18</sup> His first publication, a songbook titled *From Our Modern Music*, was a collection of twenty-three songs, thirteen of which were his own. The songbook was published in Aleppo (1953), to which he moved following Syria's independence in 1946. As a music teacher in Aleppo, As'ad reportedly taught his own songs, but by the time his book was to be published some texts had to be modified owing to censorship.<sup>19</sup>

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17 To date, information on contemporary Suryani figures can often be found only on Suryani websites and online forums. Biographical material in print is scarce and limited to book introductions. Therefore, most of the information here on As'ad comes from online articles, which I verified in more than one source in the hope that a wider dissemination of certain information may enhance credibility.

18 'Assyrian' is the traditionally preferred term which nationalistic Suryanis employ in their political and cultural discourse. It is used instead of, *inter alia*, Syriac, Aramaic, Aramean, all of which may have cultural, religious or linguistic associations rather than political overtones. The term 'Assyrian' is derived from the historical connection made to the Assyrian Empire, which reigned over the area of upper Mesopotamia at various points in history BC. The use of this term, therefore, carries territorial claims and connotes a right to independent rule as a nation state.

19 The first Suryani to introduce nationalistic song to Syriac was Na'üm Fā'eq, one of the foremost nationalists in the history of Suryani nationalism. He composed nationalistic poetry and set it to existing Turkish tunes. As'ad was the first composer of fully original Syriac nationalistic songs (Lahto 2008 (لحدو)). For more on As'ad, Fa'eq and their work, see <[www.gazire.com/forum/viewtopic.php?](http://www.gazire.com/forum/viewtopic.php?)

The years As'ad spent in Syria were fraught with political instability and sudden changes. Following independence, the young nation faced economic and political challenges the result of which was great instability in an environment of conflicting political ideologies.<sup>20</sup> Given the centrality of song in music making in the Arab world, the balance that a music educator had to achieve must have been delicate. This would have been particularly the case for As'ad, as he was in charge of music making in national cultural institutions in a region that is home to a mix of ethnic and religious minorities; and more so as he himself was of declared nationalistic sympathies. As an ethnic and religious minority in the social and political fabric of post-independence Syria, and possessing vivid memories of recent religious persecution, Suryanis were understandably less inclined to involvement in other than mainstream political activism. There were, nevertheless, a number of activists who established the Assyrian Democratic Organisation in 1957 (2008 لحدو), but they were not representative of the majority, which was represented instead by the church and has traditionally elected to declare allegiance to governments.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the great pride he took in drawing from the Syriac religious musical tradition, As'ad did not align himself with clerical musical activities in his writings, nor was he renowned for knowing many chants (which is otherwise a commendable trait that establishes clerics' authority as chant experts). On the other hand, and perhaps

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- 20 Following the Arab Revolt, the European Powers divided the region into nation states, among which was Syria, where French Mandate was declared (Petran 1972). Syria gained full independence from France and was declared a republic between 1944 and 1946. Political instability during the post-independence years was such that four military coups were staged between March 1949 and November 1951 (Tibawi 1969).
- 21 The information included here on the modern history of the Suryanis is collected from various encounters and conversations. The modern history of the Suryanis is particularly neglected in print.

somewhat paradoxically, he does not seem to have aligned himself with Suryani political activists either. It has proven difficult to obtain more personal information about his political alignments, so, before drawing conclusions, I will present the following account of an incident in which he was approached to compose Syriac songs within a predefined political aesthetic.

Abrohom Lahdo, a medical doctor residing currently in Germany, is a Suryani born in Qamishly (1949). He wrote a first-hand account of the appearance of what he calls 'Syriac contemporary popular song'.<sup>22</sup> Lahdo attributes the appearance of modern popular Syriac song to the increase in external influences affecting the Syriac tradition following expanded contact with western cultures as Suryanis went into diaspora early in the twentieth century. While non-Syriac influences were not new to Syriac music, the degree of influence at that stage was, in Lahdo's opinion, of a scale that necessitated calls for giving the music a 'national identity'. In 1957, the Assyrian Democratic Organisation (ADO), of which Lahdo was a founding member, was established in Syria and proved popular among young Suryanis. Lahdo attributes the rapid increase in ADO membership, particularly among the young and educated, to the great success of the emerging nationalistic songs composed by As'ad and others. Before this, secular Syriac song was of a formal nature, used set poetry in Classical Syriac (*kthobonoyo*) and treated exclusively serious, mostly nationalistic, subjects. In 1965, however, young members of the ADO started calling for Syriac songs to replace the Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish singing to which they had become accustomed but were growing to reject as foreign. Therefore, they called on composers to create a new form of Syriac singing that reflected their national awareness, a kind they could identify with and

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22 This appeared in an article titled *Tārīkh al-Mūsīqā al-Suryāniyah*, History of Syriac Music (Lahdo لحدو 2007 ب). A full account was subsequently published in a book, also by Lahdo (2012), including lyrics and a few musical transcriptions of modern Syriac songs.

use proudly in their own weddings. The new genre they proposed was to fulfil the following conditions: be in a colloquial version of Syriac (e.g. *turoyo*); treat subjects such as love, flirtation and courtship; the melodies to be new, catchy and simple; the tempo to be fast and appropriate for line-dancing. In 1968, as the enthusiastic ADO members were planning to produce a first record of this new genre of song, one of them, a poet by the name of Danho Daho, approached Gabriel As'ad, asking him to set some of his popular poems to music. According to As'ad's son, Sardanabal, the musician's response was 'I would prefer to continue composing in my known classical style' (2008 *لحدو*).<sup>23</sup>

As'ad thus had strong but undeveloped political sentiments towards what he perceived as a Suryani nation. He did not see great benefit in political activism, and was (perhaps characteristically) skeptical of the ways in which this activism proposed to interact with Syriac music to produce a new political music. Yet his sentiments achieved expression in the strong cultural-national views that he chose to declare through a form of musical expression he believed to be 'authentic'. In the following section, which discusses As'ad's book on Syriac music, I argue that his work was in effect a proposed, if undeclared, Syriac national music.

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23 Labels such as 'classical', 'folk' and 'popular' bear vague reference to the loosely conceived and rightly disputed terms in music studies. The purpose is to designate, respectively, what some Suryanis consider as a higher, more sophisticated form of music which relates to the church's ancient history, and the dance and song genres which occupy parties and celebrations outside church services. In As'ad's response, the term 'classical' also signifies association between the old ecclesiastical chants and what some might consider 'high' art; in this case art with a 'higher' purpose than entertainment, namely nationalistic music.

## ‘The History of Syrian Music’

As’ad’s book treats a wide variety of historical and musicological subjects and makes strong historical assertions by connecting the current Syriac – ecclesiastical – modes with ancient Mesopotamian modality. However, it stops short of substantiating these claims with convincing evidence. In what follows, I will attempt a summary of the book’s main propositions. One point worth noting here is that scale and mode are interchangeable concepts in this book.

Under the main heading, ‘discovering the musical scale from the modes of the Syrian Church of Antioch’,<sup>24</sup> As’ad makes the following declaration:

*The historical Syrian musical scale has been laid down on the basis of the eight ecclesiastical modes [‘alḥān] of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, from which emerged all the existing music/melodies [‘alḥān] in the world (19).<sup>25</sup>*

Then, he refers to al-Farabi, ‘the great musician’ who presumably talked about these ‘alḥān, and estimated them to number 3000.<sup>26</sup> As’ad then proceeds to state that the eight Syriac modes are built on the Harp of Sumer, which has ‘seven plus one’ strings. In the next sentence he quotes Barhebraeus (13<sup>th</sup> century) as saying that the modes originated as twelve ‘but were reduced to eight, which is the case in the Sumerian Harp as shown above’ (As’ad 1990, 19 أسعد). The author then proceeds to offering the various Arabic and Syriac names for the eight ecclesiastical modes, to which

24 *‘iktishāf al-sullam al-mūsīqī min ‘alḥān al-kanisah al-suryāniyah al-anṭākiyah.*

25 The Arabic word ‘alḥān (singular laḥn) is used to indicate melodies, modes, a musical corpus and in some cases music in general. This quote (my translation) shows some of its uses.

26 In Arabic: " لقد تم وضع السلم الموسيقي السوري التاريخي من الألحان الثمانية التي تستعمل في الكنيسة السريانية الأنطاكية، ومنها انتقلت جميع الألحان الموجودة في العالم، والتي تكلم عنها وقدرها الموسيقار العربي الكبير الفارابي بحوالي 3000 لحن (أسعد 1990, 19 أسعد)

he otherwise refers by their conventional numerical names throughout the book. In this combinatory presentation of music theory and etymology, As'ad links modal affect to the etymologies of the Arabic and Syriac names of each mode. He stresses, in the process, closer affinities between the Syriac name and the presumed affect of each mode.

In the subsequent section, he draws on examples from the book of prototype chants (known in Syriac as the *Beth Gazo* – 'treasury of chants') to demonstrate the association he proposes with the Sumerian Harp of Ur.<sup>27</sup> He stipulates that the notes for the harp's strings are *G A B c d e f (+g)*. He then transcribes eight paradigmatic chants, in modes 1 to 8, and transposes them so that the final note of each is the same as the corresponding string on which the chant's mode is presumably built. Accordingly, the first chant (and mode) ends on *G*, the second ends on *A*, and so on. As'ad then offers a different set of transcriptions for the same modes, this time keeping the chants (and hence the eight modes) in the conventional register in which they are sung in church.

The point behind this transcription, one might presume, is to demonstrate that the eight modes are built on the eight strings, but the author does not offer an explanation for this conclusion. In other words, the fact that the transcribed chants may be transposed onto a *G-g* scale does not prove that they originate from that scale, particularly if nine alterations were required in one key signature (in the case of the third mode). Nor does the whole process prove a connection to a stringed instrument that was discovered in Mesopotamia. In a similar manner, the book draws on historical and archaeological information on ancient music in Mesopotamia, Greece and Egypt, and on early Christian and biblical stories.

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27 The Harp was unearthed in 1929. For more on the musical instruments uncovered in Mesopotamia, see Galpin 1929.

The basic claim of As'ad's book is that the music of the contemporary Syriac church is a direct descendant of that of ancient Mesopotamia. The historical reference is the Sumerian Harp of Ur, which dates from 3500 BC, and is presumed to have had strings tuned to the notes *G A B c d e f*. In parallel to this claim, however, As'ad resorts to Arab modality to explicate the contemporary Syriac modes, attributing this modality, in turn, to Persian models. Whilst making this claim, As'ad proposes a certain 'Syrian Scale' which he contends is deducible from the Harp of Ur and forms the scalar basis of all the above systems. In an attempt to make a reasonable summary of As'ad's book, one might say that the author reduces several regional modal systems to one. He draws on contemporary modal systems (i.e. Arab, Persian, Syriac), as well as ancient systems (i.e. Akadian, Sumerian), and combines the whole into one scale. He names this scale the Historical Syrian Scale, which he then superimposes on the Sumerian Harp.

Although some of As'ad's historical and archaeological observations are worth further investigation, his method is reductive and teleological. From an historical point of view, there is a case to be made for a relationship between modern and ancient ritual musical practices in Mesopotamia, particularly the notion of an eight-fold modality, which the writings of Henry Farmer, Egon Wellesz and Eric Werner consider. However, above and beyond the limitations of the evolutionism and diffusionism of pre-1950s comparative musicology, this area remains understudied and requires expertise in archaeology, Assyriology and musicology.<sup>28</sup> I found no indication that As'ad and other Suryanis, who advocate the idea of Mesopotamia as the origin of all music (among them contemporary church cantors and secular singers), are aware of the work of scholars such as Wellesz and Werner.

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28 Publications by scholars working under the name ICONEA Near and Middle Eastern Archaeomusicology, have appeared in recent years in *Near Eastern Musicology Online* (NEMO-Online).

However, despite the significant lacunae in As'ad's historical argument, the evidently secular nature of his musical activities and the strong nationalistic overtones in his claims with regard to scalar and modal theory, bestow a particular significance on this book, especially in relation to nationhood and religiosity.

## **Ethnic Religiosity**

Methodical limitations notwithstanding, the secularist focus in As'ad's approach informs the contemporary study of Syriac chant in various ways. Interestingly, the book was published when As'ad was in old age, almost two decades after his immigration to Sweden. Even though it does not make frank Assyrian nationalistic claims, it does little to hide its nationalistic agenda. This partly explains the circumstances of publication, an endeavour that would not have been encouraged in the 1970s and 1980s in Syria, when ethnic minority cultural or linguistic activities were limited in the public sphere to mainstream pan-Arab ideology. Those limitations were significantly relaxed by the 1990s, especially in relation to the non-political Christian Syrian Aramaic heritage, a notion on which emphasis has by the early 2000s become an ordinary occurrence in the life of Suryani communities all over Syria. As'ad's work, therefore, albeit modest as an addition to the musical theoretical aspect of studying Syriac chant, contributes to understanding the variety of dimensions in which music is significant to the various communities of Suryanis whose multiple locations around the world dictated to a large extent the discourses in which they were inclined to engage.

The profoundly held belief in the tradition's deep roots in history and its origination in some of the oldest known musical cultures is only compounded by the close affinities made to early

Christianity. This combination produces allegiance to a form of authenticated culture that is marked not only by music but also by a sense of religiosity which is strongly present despite its apparent sidelining in the work of such a secular musician as As'ad. Such notions are not merely material for ideological groundings and nationalist political agendas, they are legitimating reasons for contemporary markers of being and belonging promulgated through music.<sup>29</sup> In the secular sense, establishing a connection to the living church serves the purpose of pointing to historical evidence of continued existence in the homeland.

So far as As'ad's theory is concerned, music serves as part of that continuous evidence. In being the connector of pre-Christian Assyria to the Syriac-speaking church and a secular modern-day musicality, music becomes one thing, a stable continuous singular thing which can be pinned down in scales and mapped onto the strings of unearthed artefacts. This form of evidence conception and construction represents an essential identity marker for a religiously framed type of ethnicity, or as I prefer to call it, an ethnic religiosity. Faith is irrelevant in this ethno-religious fashioning of collectivity, at least in so far as religious faith is concerned. While identification under the banner of religion without the necessity of faith is not unusual in the Middle East, it is a growing notion in the Suryani church albeit one that is rarely endorsed publicly by its clergy.<sup>30</sup> An example is the increasing number of Muslim people in Turkey who identify as Assyrian on the basis of their local Christian ancestry.

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29 This point is examined further elsewhere (Jarjour 2016), as it has significant bearing on the contemporary setting of chant and singing in modern-day Syria.

30 See for example Mahmood (2015) on secularism and religion in the Middle East.

## Nouri Iskandar: Syrian musicologist à l'Occidentale

Another example of modern Suryani musicological writing is closely connected to the Suryani neighbourhood (or *ḥayy al-Suryān*) in Aleppo, where its author, Nouri Iskandar, lived and worked. Iskandar was born in Deirezzor in 1938 to Urfalli parents who emigrated from the Turkish south-east in 1920. The family lived in various places in the region before settling in the Suryani neighbourhood when Nouri was about five years of age. He was a junior cantor deacon in his early years and played the trumpet with the Syrian Orthodox Scouts Marching Band of Aleppo. He became the first member of the community to study music academically when he obtained a Bachelor in Music Education from Cairo (1959-1964).<sup>31</sup> Iskandar subsequently taught music in schools and worked in music teacher-training in the city prior to his retirement in 1989. Between the years 1994 and 2003, he directed the Arab Conservatoire of Music in Aleppo: the junior music school in the city, which operates, along with its sister institution in Damascus, under the patronage of the Ministry of Culture.<sup>32</sup> Iskandar is today an esteemed musician and composer who enjoys a degree of fame on the Middle Eastern Arab music scene. His compositions range from Syriac love songs to works combining western orchestra, solo Middle Eastern or European instruments and

31 The year 1959 saw the birth of the United Arab Republic, a union between Syria and Egypt which was dissolved in 1961. The influence of this highly charged pan-Arab phase on Iskandar and his work is worth investigation.

32 Formal western music teaching was introduced officially to Syria by the Ministry of Culture in the early 1960s. The Arab Conservatoire of Music was established in Damascus in 1960, followed by a sister institution in Aleppo in the 1980s. Subsequently, the Ministry of Culture extended its patronage to establish the Higher Institute of Music in Damascus in 1992, as the first institution of higher education in music. The relationship between Arab and western music in all three institutions has been a complex and changing one. The institution which Iskandar ran was one that taught both Arab and western music, in the form of western music private tuition. The conservatoire followed curricular paradigms whereby the students underwent two jury examinations per year.

small or large vocal ensembles, in different configurations. He is known for combining western harmony with Middle Eastern modalities in his compositions, as well as employing Syriac and Islamic Sufi chant in vocal pieces. He continues to be commissioned and invited to present his work in Europe and Syria; he was honoured in 2008 by the Syrian president.

Iskandar is best known in his home community for his work with church choirs, which he undertook intermittently between the early 1960s and 2000. In collaboration with the church, he published transcriptions of the Beth Gazo in two volumes: the first was printed twice, in 1992 and 1996; the second was published in 2003 (both by Dār Mardīn in Aleppo). The two volumes included two different musical versions of the Beth Gazo. The first volume was made after a famous recording by Patriarch Jacob III, who 'is considered to be one of the masters (if not *the* master) of Syriac music in this century' (Ibrahim and Kiraz 1999).<sup>33</sup> The second version comprised the Beth Gazo in the Edessan school, which is the historical lineage from which the community of his adopted church, St George's church, in Aleppo's Suryani neighbourhood descends. This volume was based on a variety of recordings and sources. Unfortunately, Iskandar offers no details on his sources, but he told me in a conversation that he drew on the cantors in church as well as on various extant recordings by deceased clergy of St George's, which he amassed from families and private collections.

Both versions start with an extensive introduction, written jointly by the Syrian Orthodox bishop of Aleppo, Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, and Iskandar himself.<sup>34</sup> The bishop wrote most of this

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33 This famous recording of the BG in the school of Mardin was made during one of the Patriarch's visits to New Jersey in 1960; it is considered the oldest, most authoritative and most widely disseminated sound recording of the Beth Gazo.

34 The introduction was also printed separately in Arabic under the title *al-Mūsīqā al-Suryāniyah*, *Syriac Music* (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1996; 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition 2003). It was also given the Syriac title *Musiqi Dsuryoye*.

introductory material; Iskandar's contribution is a short but valuable essay on the music theory of Syriac chant titled *Madkhal 'ilā al-Mūsīqā al-Suryāniyyah*, 'Introduction to Syriac Music'. The bishop's approach to the subject is a combination of the traditional one in medieval Syriac literature (e.g. the 13<sup>th</sup> century writings of Gregory Barhebraeus) and an informative survey. Ibrahim offers an historical survey of singing in the Suryani church, and explains the role and purpose of chant. He also surveys the musicological studies of which he is aware, and presents a brief discussion of prayers in the canonical hours of the Divine Office. Finally, Ibrahim provides historical information on various chant types and a list of definitions for chant terminology.

On his part, Iskandar takes a strictly technical musicological approach in his introduction of the transcriptions. He introduces the eight modes in their scalar form, offers a brief summary of the characteristics of Syriac music and lists the poetical metres employed in the chants, emphasising the relationship between word and music. The two introductions were published independently as a slim but valuable book under the title *Syriac Music*.

The part of Iskandar's essay is his presentation of the eight ecclesiastical modes. Drawing partly on contemporary Arab maqam theory, Iskandar presents the church modes in terms of intervallic succession and borrows Arab modal theory for the purpose. In doing so, he relies heavily on urban Arab modal designations, maqamat, as they are used in northern Syria and Turkey. He uses the standard notation system recommended by the 1932 Cairo Congress of Arab Music, which proposed certain symbols for quartertone accidentals. Iskandar adds more details combining those symbols with Turkish notation accidentals to reflect the nine-comma division of the tone.<sup>35</sup>

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35 The smallest increment of the tone he uses is the comma, which is one-ninth of the tone; he measures the quartertones by the number of commas raised or lowered by each accidental. The accidental symbols he employs include numbers

He goes into such intervallic detail in the scalar representations of the modes that two modes include 1 and 2 comma-altering accidentals.<sup>36</sup>

It is evident that Iskandar adopts an empirical approach, derived from his studies of European musicology, in deducing findings from processing a very large musical sample. Be that as it may, he admits significant discrepancies within his modal categorisation, and notes that a large number of chants do not fall in the categories which his analysis prescribes. Iskandar's transcriptions of two versions of the Beth Gazo demonstrate his long experience as an exponent of the tradition, as well as his experience in local music. In my view, his work comes closest to conveying the microtonal character of Syriac modality. Yet his heavy reliance on Arab modes and Turkish microtonal theory results in two types of inconsistency: those of designation and interval. The former are due to the fact that not all chants in a given Syriac mode correspond to the parallel Arab mode, and the latter are due to regional differences in terms of tone subdivisions between different areas of the Arab (and the Syriac) world.<sup>37</sup>

Iskandar's wide sample is admirable, yet, having had the chance to converse with practising deacons, I noticed differences between the way the cantors perceived the modes and Iskandar's presentation. It soon became apparent that the system, impressive and coherent as it is on paper, does not account for a sizable part of the chant corpus, especially within the Edessan school practiced in the Suryani neighbourhood. The Paschal mode *ḥasho* (Jarjour 2015a), of which Iskandar makes no mention, is a case in point. Moreover,

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to reflect the tone division into nine commas. For more on the Cairo Congress and its debates see Racy 1991.

- 36 In the third and fourth modes, Iskandar uses the accidentals 2b and 1b, to indicate lowering the relevant notes by 2 and 1 commas, respectively (1996, 81).
- 37 Designation inconsistencies occur despite the fact that Iskandar worked within a limited geographic area (i.e. he did not account for differences with other Arab regions, such as Egypt or Tunisia).

even though Iskandar lived in the Suryani neighbourhood and was briefly a deacon early in his childhood, in his writings he frames his knowledge of the chant solely by his adopted musical-analytical theoretical perspective. It became clear through fieldwork in Aleppo that in order to be well versed in the ecclesiastical tradition and achieve a degree of agility in using the modes akin to that possessed by the senior deacons, one needs to have a long and practical knowledge of the repertoire. In other words, Iskandar's ecclesiastical vast sample, which comes from hours of recordings and meticulous transcriptions, affords his work significant accuracy, and remains by far the most comprehensive and locally informed musical-theoretical account of Syriac ecclesiastical modality we have to date. In terms of fulfilling the aim of providing a practicable and comprehensive systematic description of musical practice, this hybrid system achieved a closer representation than did its European predecessors. In terms of chant practice, however, the efficacy of this unprecedented publication remains to be proven, given the critique it receives from practising cantors as serviceless. Be that as it may, and for the purposes of the current article, there are more levels on which this work may be read.

Seen in light of his larger musical output, Iskandar's analysis bears more than a single reading as a detail-laden musical analytical set of transcriptions. Iskandar has been a vocal critic of the role the church has played in suppressing secular singing. Popular – or folk – music, in his opinion, is the real vehicle through which a people develop their musical tradition, and Suryanis are no exception. Iskandar believes that by forbidding song in the Syriac language, clergymen have caused the music of their people to disappear completely and that of their church to freeze in time, which accounts for why it has not developed since the dawn of the second millennium. He also concedes that the preservation this music

underwent in zealously protected liturgical chants allows us a glimpse into what the music of the people might have sounded like outside worship. Iskandar expressed this opinion to me in a conversation in Aleppo, and has articulated mere hints of it on various public appearances and media interviews. At any rate, this widely quoted musician believes in the formative role Syriac music has had on music in the region as a whole, which he attributes to its historical precedence over more recent musics in Syria today.

Iskandar publicises widely his belief in a 'Syrian Music' that is distinctive from other regional musics, and is manifested in Christian, Muslim and folk musical traditions in the Eastern Mediterranean. This music has an 'historical civilisational dimension', which allows it to encompass all the oral traditions of historic Syria – religious and otherwise.<sup>38</sup> While such views are reminiscent of As'ad's proposition, Iskandar does not go as far as condoning an ancient prototype scale, despite regarding Suryani church music as a progenitor of sorts to other musics. Iskandar's emphasis on intricate detail, which one must deduce has been maintained from pre-Christian eras through the church, is another parallel with As'ad's theory that is left unarticulated (therefore unpoliticised) in the expert's public discourse.

Iskandar's radical views on the role the church has played in forbidding its early music from developing yet subsequently preserving it almost untouched emphasises the idea of origins. In adopting this purist view, the musicologist's work puts forward a music lineage – an ethnic musicality – that is characterised by extant ecclesiastical intonation. His project presents the church's modal system as evidence of early popular/folk sounds. 'The Syriac melodies are 99% folk melodies,' he told the audience at a concert in Damascus before he lead a small choir in a collection of chant excerpts. 'Let us all

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38 Interview with Amjad Tomeh on Syrian TV, *Beyni Wbeynak*, Season 2, episode 12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC7OMF2GhqA> (video uploaded 22 March 2017; accessed 20 April 2017).

enjoy it as music, not as prayer,' was the invitation he issued to the audience from the stage.<sup>39</sup> This framing of liturgical music as that of the people bestows on popular Syriac music an equally elevated status as that of church music, and brings at the same time the sacred sounds into a secular – 'civilisational' – domain. This musical-analytical blurring of the otherwise clear practical separation between the sacred and the secular is the positivistic musicologist's contribution to a non-religious, yet religiously delimited, historical linearity; an endorsement of ethnic-nationalistic identification which mentions neither ethnicity nor nation. The paradoxes and the categories, in short, are one and the same.

## In Sum

The only way to group works by Suryani musicologists about Syriac music independently from those previously written by non-Suryani musicologists (all of whom happen to be European), is to consider them local. While the labels 'local' and 'European' carry profound distinctions, in reality each body of works is adopting the point of view of the other in some way. The local, as this paper has suggested, reflects the European, follows it, mirrors it and is somewhat disadvantaged by its analytical tools. Yet, the local also questions the legitimacy of the European, even if implicitly, by employing it to further a quintessentially ethnic-nationalistic project by means of meticulous musical analytical detail. But since the ideological motivation of a nationalistic musical project is yet another echoing of European ideas, attempting a distinction between the local and the European is thus equally complicated as attempting to distinguish the sacred from the secular. This is the case even in the Suryani context,

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39 Oriental Landscapes Festival. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of5so4vaR2A> (video uploaded 25 Dec 2012; accessed 20 April 2017)

where practice hardly permits confusion between liturgical chant and party songs. Therefore, a close look at As'ad's and Iskandar's works in their respective practical, ideological and intellectual contexts reveals an unfolding perception of religiosity that is framed in very general, selectively inclusive 'cultural' terms. This vaguely described framing renders a religiously-defined identity almost non-religious: an ethnically characterised label which, despite being Christian at its core, is at once pre-Christian and post-religious. In this sense, the musically constructed identity which local musicological works are fashioning is both secular and modern. While secular and modern would appear anything but appropriate for describing a religious and old tradition such as Syriac music, secularism and modernism were at the core of the intellectual and literary critical discourses within which As'ad and Iskandar operated in twentieth-century Syria. For that reason, secularity and modernism form the backdrop against which this ancient religious music was to be studied and framed by proponents of the tradition in the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup>

Through a brief analysis of two written sources on the history and theory of Syriac chant that are commonly discussed and read in local circles, this article has outlined two prominent tendencies in recent works. While neither source subscribes exclusively to one tendency, the two books may be seen to represent an ethnic nationalistic tendency in the case of Gabriel As'ad, and a European musicological tendency in the case of Nouri Iskandar. Identifying these tendencies has shown various elements in local musicology ranging from the evolutionist ethno-centric nationalist to the regional diffusionist empirical – all of which have genesis in European scholarship. This reading of sources revealed problematic aspects in the authors' respective methods but also highlighted dimensions of

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40 The wider impact of secularism and modernity on the study of Syriac chant is a worthwhile subject that is yet to be tackled.

these written sources that must be accounted for when approaching Syriac chant as an oral musical enterprise.

On the whole, this article has offered a reading of how local musicology fashions an extra-musical framing of ethnic religiosity by the very means of musical-theoretical detail. It has shown how this fashioning was achieved through engaging with the complexities in the sources, and by arguing that these complexities defeat such labels as local/European and sacred/secular, ultimately upsetting the basis of the distinction us/them. The article also underlined ways in which inconsistencies within scholarship may – and do – form the means by which a scholarship, when deeply engaged with local matters, pushes the limits of its own premises, and redefines its categories and the conceptual bases upon which it should be understood.

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