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John Baily’s War, Exile, and the Music of Afghanistan: The Ethnographer’s Tale provides a personalized account of his encounters with Afghan music and musicians over forty years. Baily has been at the forefront of cataloguing Afghan music and musicians in recent decades. In the book, Baily presents his ethnographer’s tale in eight chapters, which include an introductory summary of the historical and political context of Afghanistan before the coups of 1978, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the global circulation of Afghanistan’s music. An essential element of Baily’s research is that he is himself an interpreter of Afghan music.

Baily explains in his introduction that during his forty-year period of research, he realized that the best way to learn about the music of Afghanistan was to become involved with it. To do this, Baily decided to learn an Afghan instrument. During the 1970’s, Baily began taking lessons with a famous master of the rubâb lute, Ustâd Mohammad Omar (20). Through his musical studies, he became friends with many Afghan musicians who appear later in the book. Baily’s interactions with specific individuals such as Omar punctuate and enrich the story considerably. Overall, Baily did an excellent job mobilising his experiences with Afghan culture to write his book. I like the text, because Baily provides a personal account, and this made his writing more credible.

The book’s first chapter has two parts. The first is a concise yet detailed history of the development of Afghan court music, following the patronage of a series of Afghan kings and rulers from the 1870s onwards. This section also introduces instruments,
places, and concepts still particular to Afghan music to this day. In doing so, Baily effectively ensures that readers unfamiliar with the political history of the country become acquainted with it. By incorporating the history into the beginning of this chapter, Baily corrects any misconceptions that western scholars may have about Afghan music. These efforts resonate with Ahmad Armast’s criticism that “misconceptions about Afghanistan have led to a total neglect of and ignorance of aspects on music in Afghanistan by musicologists.” Indeed, when compared to other ethnographical literature, Baily’s book is one of the very few to effectively make a connection between the history of war and the impact it had on the musical culture in Afghanistan. In the book, political shifts between modernity and social conservatism are analyzed mainly for their significant effect on Afghan music, rather than according to the conventional patterns of state formation and fission that have sparked the interests of political scientists. Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, an ethnomusicologist, is an example of another ethnographer who spent over forty years studying music in Afghanistan. The difference, however, is that Baily makes a connection to the impact of war on music. Sakata’s goal with her research was to see how music in Afghanistan impacted culture. Unlike Baily, most ethnomusicologists who study music in Afghanistan focus on how music impacts other subjects, instead of how other subjects impact music. This is why Baily’s work is so interesting.

The chapter’s second focus explores the propagation of Afghan musical values through radio broadcasting. Radio Kabul, the public radio station of Afghanistan, served a crucial role as the center of music creativity, because Afghanistan had few conservatories, music programs, and national sound archives (35). From the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, Radio Kabul rose to its most influential position. The ghazal (a poem set to music) became the principal art music genre of Kabuli, performed by musicians such as Omar through Radio Kabul. This genre was a powerful force in unifying the multi-identity country towards a pan-ethnic society; however, the 1978 coup d’état and another war was soon to follow.

The second chapter then outlines the unstable political landscape of Afghanistan from the aftermath of the coup’s establishment of the new Communist regime until its

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fall from 1978 to 1992. This period was known as the jihad (Holy War Era). The era of jihad marks the beginning of a long war which, among its unfortunate consequences, led to the exile of part of the population (30). During this chapter, Baily begins to clearly identify the major influences that politics have on music. Because Baily’s research consists of shadowing, filming, and learning instruments from Afghan musicians, Baily followed the exiled musicians Amir Jan Herat and Shah Wali to Peshawar, Pakistan. Baily’s goal in this chapter is to display the impact of war on music by talking about censorship. By including an excerpt from a recording of a conversation during a wedding in Akundaband, Afghanistan, Baily strengthens his argument of the negative impact wartime and post-wartime censorship has had on music in Afghanistan. For example, Baily captured the following exchange between a Mullah, a Muslim law enforcer, and Wali:

**Mullah:** Don’t play that thing because God and the Prophet will be offended. You do not play these things on occasions like weddings. It’s not right to play here. Turn it down! I can tell you this thing is forbidden because it is sorud [music]. Now you’ve come here, all of you together, you must cut the loudspeaker altogether. And then God will ask you on Judgement Day why were you playing that game, and so putting the whole community to such inconvenience?

**Shah Wali:** Okay.

**Mullah:** Any wedding that has got you in it is not going to be a good wedding because the angels are not going to come and visit. Cut the speakers! (30)

Baily argues convincingly that this incident illustrates several themes concerning the censorship of music in Afghanistan. It shows the direct interference by mullahs in music performance—the implicit idea that music is inappropriate, and the fear that listening to music will cause people to neglect their prayers (210). This kind of exchange, frequently recounted throughout Baily’s book, shows the impact of music censorship in Afghanistan and how conditions changed with war. It serves as solid proof for Baily’s argument. However, not all sources support Baily’s opinion. Abubakar Siddique, criticises Baily’s claim that the Taliban “censored” music in Afghanistan. Siddique states in a critique, “If you listen to the so-called Taliban chants, the Taliban taranas, they are in fact extremely musical. So, we could look at this in another way. This isn’t just the banning of music, but it is a competition between different kinds of music.”

The subsequent three chapters examine a turning point in the history of Afghanistan and its music: the overthrow of the communist regime in 1992. Baily details how the Mujahideen parties declared war against one another and drove the country to unprecedented chaos. This gave rise to the formation of the new Islamic State

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of Afghanistan, led by President Rabbani, who banned music from the media entirely. Shortly after, in 1996, the Taliban embarked on a conquest of the country and gained control of Kabul to establish the Islamic Emirate. They imposed their ideology on society with an extreme form of censorship, orchestrating the public destruction of instruments and cassettes, preventing guests from attending weddings where music was played, and banning all those who are guilty of “the sin of music.” During these wars, Baily was still in Afghanistan, researching and looking for musicians in exile. In 2000, Baily revisited Herat, where he first learned to play the rubāb lute in the 1970s. Baily provides a moving description of this experience in chapter 5:

Visiting the ruins of this once celebrated hub of musical activity was an emotional experience and brought back so many memories about the place where I first learned to play the rubāb. The teaching room, off the courtyard, was small but comfortable, with thin mattresses and lots of cushions. I remember there were two very large rababs, which I came to recognize as excellent instruments...

Baily’s description of the ruins gives readers the ability to understand the impact the war had on music. What hinders the reader’s understanding of this section is Baily’s lack of opinion. Baily provides great content with very little analysis, leaving it up to the reader to interpret the significance of the provided material, such as that found in the previous quotation. I expected Baily to express how the ruins of one of the first places he began his research made him feel, but he left the reader without his emotions.

And yet, upon the discovery of the unfortunate state of music in Herat, Baily resolved to become the catalyst for the re-emergence of music in Afghanistan. To accomplish this, Baily founded the New Afghan Music Unit at Goldsmiths University in London. AMU stimulated the re-emergence of Afghanistan music after the fall of the Taliban. This organization founded projects such as online tutoring for rubāb performance, invested in the creating and redistribution of new recordings of Afghanistan music, and put on a concert series. Baily then left his position as a consultant to the foundation in 2005 to focus on his chair at Goldsmiths University in London.

Baily’s sixth chapter is titled, “The Global Circulation of Afghanistan’s Music.” Since 1985, the author has followed the path of Afghan musicians in exile around the world, without any underlying project. The effects of forced migration on music are therefore essential, because they provide a new angle via which to approach the study of this musical phenomenon. Here, Baily recounts two other experiences, in London and then in Australia, and presents some of the conclusions that he draws concerning music’s important role in the constitution of an identity in exile and its fundamentally therapeutic role: a reflection drawing upon his past 20 years of research.

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1 “Ethnomusicologist,” 230.

2 Ibid.

*Critical Voices: The University of Guelph Book Review Project* is part of the curriculum at the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.
The final chapter of Baily’s ethnographical text summarizes his work in Afghanistan. Baily introduces this chapter with two questions: What lessons have we learned about the music of Afghanistan in relation to its wider social and cultural contexts; and What outcomes can we predict for its future? Baily explains that his studies with the musicians of Afghanistan not only taught him lessons about the country’s music, but also about the culture as a whole. Despite successive wars, the citizens of Afghanistan maintained a sense of national identity while faced with adversity. Baily states in the final page:

Despite the political uncertainties...practitioners of these traditions had come out of hiding, and we saw the reappearance of the wonderful regional music traditions of Afghanistan...the regional musicians in different parts of the country are feeling confident to come out from under the shadow of ultra-orthodox disapproval and repression, to make their contribution to the gradually strengthening life of music in Afghanistan...we see the emergence of an indigenous Afghan musicology, with local experts studying and writing about their local traditions. One could connect all this with a renewed sense of national identity.¹

Baily also discusses what he sees as the future prospects of this music; although the revival of Afghan musical life is progressing, going hand in hand with the growth of communications, it is often in favor of *pop*, at the expense of classical Afghan traditions bruised by war.²

This book is invaluable to anyone interested in the music of Afghanistan in terms of its contemporary history, or conversely to Afghanistan’s history from the perspective of its music, as Baily’s work is comprehensive in both respects. Baily structured this book in a way that would be accessible to individuals unfamiliar with Afghanistan history. By providing a concise historical summary at the beginning of each chapter, Baily was able to write a book heavy on history, but not to the extent that it lost the attention of the reader. This plays an important role, because it was of the utmost importance that Afghanistan’s history be understood in each chapter so as to comprehend Baily’s research.

Another element that contributes to this book’s success was Baily’s ability to establish himself as a credible source. By learning the *rubāb*, Baily was able to engage with the culture. This gave him the ability and competence to create connections with musicians and exiles, which likewise provided him access to personal accounts and profiles to consider when discussing each war. To improve the strength of his 210-page ethnographic timeline, Baily could have introduced what it was he was trying to gain from this experience from the very beginning of the book, instead of at the end. But it is not until the last chapter that the reader understands which questions Baily is trying to

¹ Ibid., 240.
² Ibid., 200.
answer. Overall, *War, Exile, and the Music of Afghanistan* successfully captures the depth and essence of the Afghan musician and serves as one of the first in-depth studies of Afghan music.

**For Further Reading:**


