

We, the strangers

Music in the refugee experience: The story of Ismail

By Ioannis Christidis

*The wind whistles in sorrow behind doors,
no whisper wakes the yearning.
We set out, young, to write on walls,
all life promised us is gone.
(A song of the Syrian revolution)*

In March 2011, in the city of Dara'a in Southern Syria, a group of pupils, inspired by the political slogans of the so-called “Arab Spring,” in other countries, painted graffiti on the wall of their school, targeting Syria's president. These schoolboys were taken into detention by the regime's officials; they were tortured into confessing. The incident became the spark that ignited mass protests in Dara'a. The response of the government was fierce. Protesters were killed by live ammunition and snipers. Those detained were tortured, even murdered, causing more rage among the Syrian people, who started organizing anti-regime demonstrations all across Syria, in what is widely referred to as the “Syrian Revolution.” The violence escalated, and the whole situation became one of the deadliest and most complex conflicts of the last decade, causing the forced migration of about six million Syrians.

Ismail and his companions were singing the song about the children of Dara'a in a bus that drove them from the refugee camp “Oreokastro” to the center of Thessaloniki, where a huge protest demanding freedom of movement was about to start. This city of Northern Greece, during the summer and autumn of 2016, became the site of a large mobilization and of a unique coming together of international and local activists and refugees. A couple of months earlier, with the EU-Turkish Refugee Agreement of March 2016, that resulted in the closure of the Balkan refugee route, about 15,000 people were blocked at the Greek border with North Macedonia, close to the village of Idomeni. After

several protests and attempts to cross the borders, these people were finally forcibly moved by the Greek authorities into twelve wretched refugee camps, in abandoned warehouses and military facilities, in the suburbs of Thessaloniki. With the support of a wide grassroots solidarity movement, these people started to protest against their forced immobility and spatial and sociopolitical segregation, claiming freedom of movement and better living conditions.

I was involved in these events as an activist, but I also experiencing them as a musician. I first met Ismail on that bus and even though I could not then understand the lyrics of his song, I was moved by his voice. I had the chance to listen to him on several other occasions, in protests, or in the tent he was sharing with his companions in the refugee camp. Ismail was always singing. What was so intriguing was that he was not the only one to do so.

Music seemed to play an integral role in all of these protest events. Their main protagonists were young men of Syrian-Arab backgrounds who would employ their talents or their music-lists in their smartphones to empower their resistance strategies. This mostly included live singing of popular Arabic songs about the Syrian uprising or their current refugee experiences and the broadcast through speakers of a type of folkdance music, known as *dabke*, that triggered lively circle dance performances. Literally there was no protest without music, singing or dancing. For these young refugees, besides a medium for the negotiation of their traumas, music also became a manifestation of their determination for freedom and dignity.

Inspired by the power and uniqueness of these musical performances I decided to start to document them and to use my training in ethnomusicology to try to understand and make understandable to others their meaning and message, believing that through this understanding we could become more politically effective. To do so, I set up a PhD research project, currently conducted in cooperation with and with the support of the Music and Minorities Research Center. To approach this music through the perspectives of its actors, I contacted Ismail, with whom I maintained links, and he agreed to share his life story and thoughts.

Ismail grew up in Raqqa, a city built on the northeast bank of the Euphrates, in Syria. His father also used to sing, his brothers wrote poems - and he himself started singing very young. At ten years old he first performed in front of his classmates and his teacher was impressed, and encouraged him, although he had never attended any formal music classes. Ismail loved listening mainly to *tarab* music, that is music related to more classical forms of Arabic music, and he specifically preferred Iraqi singers and big stars of Arabic music, such as the Lebanese male singer and composer Wadih El-Safi and the

Egyptian female singer Umm Kulthum. At fifteen, he started to sing in gatherings and parties in the gardens next to the Euphrates where relatives and friends invited him because of his beautiful voice. Sometimes he also performed in restaurants and during weddings. Nevertheless, Ismail did not consider himself a professional singer. Singing was a hobby and he was earning his living mainly from other activities.

In 2013, Raqqa became the first city to be controlled by groups of the Syrian rebel opposition. The regime responded by bombing the city. In one of these attacks a young male nurse was killed. People reacted by organizing an anti-government protest in front of his house. It was the first time that Ismail sang during a protest, in front of the victim's mother. He sang the song about the children of Dara'a, the one I listened to him singing three years later in Thessaloniki. The lyrics were written by his brother and the melody composed by himself. They constituted an assemblage of stories of violence and trauma into a single narrative that, besides being an expression of grief, sought to motivate collective resistance.

Protests were forbidden in Syria for about 40 years. With the uprising of 2011 they suddenly became extremely important and transformative, as social events. Ismail thinks that people of Mesopotamia, the wider region of Raqqa, had an inherent love of music. Any social event would have music. So did the protests: "Without music, protests were perceived as "soulless" or "cold," and thus less people would attend."

In November 2013, Raqqa fell into the hands of another militant group that started to play a determinative role in the Syrian conflict: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Ismail, previously persecuted by the forces of Assad, now was threatened again by ISIS. He considered both repressive forces against the democratic revolutionary project. In 2015 he escaped to Turkey and from there, in 2016, he sailed on a boat to Greece. Sadly, he was one of the unlucky ones who did not manage to cross by the Balkan route in time.

In the refugee camp in Thessaloniki, Ismail became famous for his voice. He was frequently invited to sing, to break the camp's monotony. Besides songs with political connotations, for his closest friends or during the protests, he also sang love and sad songs, those he knew from the past and those people would enjoy. For Ismail, music becomes effective only when the singer feels and expresses the essence of the lyrics: "The listeners can understand if music comes from the throat or from the heart. If you feel it deeply then you can make deeper influence on the people." *Tarab*, is an Arabic term that refers to a kind of emotional connection attained through music between singer and audience. When this

connection functions well, both enter into a state of ecstasy that can lead to psychological relief and joy. Ismail, being accustomed to *tarab* music since his childhood, would employ specific repertoires, improvisation and voice techniques, to create this connection.

On one of the coldest days of winter 2017, I decided, with Erin Cook, a music historian from the US also interested in ethnomusicology and a good friend of mine, to visit Ismail at the refugee camp. However, we found that he had left a few days ago. His friends invited us for tea in their tent, where they were trying to warm themselves up with a small air heater. The temperature crept up from -15 °C to -10°C. They set up a laptop on a table and connected with Ismail via messenger. Ismail shared his songs with us for about an hour, through an on-line performance. In the tent, one of his friends started to play the *darbuka*, the goblet drum. The small delay of sound caused by the bad connection did nothing to spoil atmosphere, heated up by emotions and the warm feeling of coming together under the songs of Ismail.

After some weeks, Ismail was relocated to another country. However, his asylum application was rejected and he was returned to Greece, to Athens. There we had the chance to meet each other once again. He arrived with some friends in Omonia Square carrying a suitcase with an oud inside. Ismail was trying to learn the oud even when he was in Thessaloniki. Sadly, the instrument was broken. I took it with me and I promised to fix and return it to him when he finally managed to reach the Netherlands, where he wanted to re-build his life. After one and half years, and severe difficulties, Ismail finally made it to Amsterdam. I wanted to send the oud back to him but he rejected my offer. He said it was a symbolic present for his time in Greece and for the warm feelings he had when getting out of the refugee camp and meeting with local people. Since then, I continued watching Ismail's singing performances via Facebook, but slowly they have started to get less frequent.

In Amsterdam, Ismail wished to improve his singing and music skills on a more professional level. Although he got involved to some extent in music festivals, several restrictions stemming from the institutional reality of refugees have not let him fulfill his dream yet. For reasons related to the EU Dublin III Regulation, Ismail's asylum application in the Netherlands is still not accepted. This fact has had a very negative impact on his daily life. He describes himself as being on a lower level than that of the refugees. He feels like an “outlaw” and this discourages him from continuing with his music: “Here, if you sing a bit too loud the neighbors will bring the police, and, being an undocumented refugee, trouble with police is the last thing I need in my life.”

In the events where Ismail is invited to sing he introduces himself as a refugee. This label, even though

not technically correct, provides him some release, some freedom to sing and feel that he is doing something. Going back to Syria is beyond imagining. However, he also feels tired. From 2011 until today his life has been in a constant precarious state. To become an officially recognized refugee and to be granted asylum in the Netherlands has become his priority: He wants documents and to settle down in a fixed place! Alongside the songs of the revolution, the love songs and sad songs he sang in the refugee camps, Ismail today performs another song:

*Who cares about us,
us, the strangers.
Who is worried about us,
us, the exiles.
And who asks about us,
when we are absent,
when our absence lasts for years.
Us, the ones who have no one,
who came from nowhere.
Our ID cards stamped: the strangers.
Our lives wasted in stations, in trains, in airports.
Our homes lost.
Oh, kind people, this is us, the strangers!*

“We, the strangers.” (Original song by the Iraqi singer Karim Mansour)

- This article would not have been possible without the help of Salah Ammo, Mohammed Khattab and Julie Northey, who offered their skills to translate and interpret Ismail's songs and words.

For more information visit the website of Music and Minorities Research Center:

<https://www.musicandminorities.or>

<https://www.musicandminorities.org/research/projects/music-in-the-experience-of-forced-migration/>