

MAQAM AND LITURGY: RITUAL, MUSIC, AND AESTHETICS OF SYRIAN JEWS IN BROOKLYN. By Mark L. Kligman. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009. 267 pp. Hardbound, \$34.95.

There is a growing body of literature concerning Jews from the non-Western world, but few works deal with communities who immigrated and settled in the Americas. Even fewer are devoted to specific cultural expressions. *Maqam and Liturgy: Ritual, Music, and Aesthetics of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn* provides a strong and important contribution to this relatively meager corpus of literature by focusing on practices of liturgical music. Serving as a second volume to Kay Shelemay's highly acclaimed *Let Jasmine Rain Down* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Kligman's interpretive study shifts the focus of inquiry away from the para-liturgical, marginally secular practice of *pizmonim* (tributary song poems) to the predominantly male, liturgical world of musical performance in the Syrian synagogue. Building upon the ethnographic research begun during his tenure working with and assisting Shelemay, Kligman utilizes his connections with informants and his ability to penetrate the religious world of the Syrian Jews to shine an important light on the liturgical music outside the purview of *Let Jasmine Rain Down*. In doing so, Kligman addresses multiple audiences—ethnomusicologists, historians, and scholars of cultural studies

and migration. Fully capitalizing on oral history methodology, Kligman goes beyond interviews with informants by documenting important historical information embedded in oral musical expressions as well as pertinent information from earlier forms of documented Jewish oral history—the Talmud, rabbinic responsa, and published commentaries on Jewish law.

Kligman divides *Maqam and Liturgy* into three parts: Background, Sabbath Morning Service, and A Judeo-Arab Synthesis. He devotes the first part to background information on the Syrian Jewish community—the history of Arab and Jewish cohabitation in Syria, the waves of immigration and settlement in Brooklyn during the twentieth century, and peculiarities of Syrian Jewish liturgical texts. The second part uses the Sabbath morning religious ritual as a frame to explore liturgical music and specifically the oral performance of *maqamat*-based music without any accompaniment from musical instruments. *Maqamat* (pl.), crudely defined, are melodic modes or scales that follow specific rules for melodic invention. After a theoretical explanation of *maqamat*, showing synonymy between Jewish and Arab approaches in the Levant, Kligman includes informants' explanations about aesthetic qualities of different *maqamat* (beauty, sadness, and happiness), choices for melodic repertoire, performance transcriptions, and discussions of how nonmusical factors affect performance to compile ample oral evidence to support his thesis. In the third part, he uses this evidence to support his thesis, that a Judeo-Arab synthesis between Hebrew text and *maqam*-based musical practices governs the performance aesthetics central to defining a uniquely Brooklyn approach to Syrian Jewish identity. He suggests that the “adaptation of Arab musical aesthetic desires within a Jewish religious context” (207) not only reproduces the historic cultural contact between Arabs and Jews in Syria but also encourages the codification of a “Brooklyn system” (202) of liturgical musical practice.

The notion of a synthesis posited by the dichotomous appellation “Judeo-Arab” suggests that these communities operate distinct from one another, synthesizing new expressions only through contact in certain arenas of cultural expression. In discussing what Kligman refers to as “reassociating meaning through *maqamat*” (214), he relies upon an explanation of *saltana*, or modal ecstasy, as described by Ali Jihad Racy in reference to Arab music from the Levant rather than delivering more of Cantor David Tawil's own reflections on the ability of *maqamat* to induce ecstasy in Jewish prayer. While this correlation is important, the suggestion that Jewish conceptions about *maqamat* are simply incorporated through contact or reassociation with a majority Arab culture encourages a perception that such clear communal boundaries exist and that a synthesis is bringing together two distinct cultures along these lines. Focusing instead on liturgical performance as a means for Jews to distinguish themselves from a

common culture would perhaps be more intriguing and historically accurate. Instead of the use of *maqamat* being indicative of a Judeo-Arab synthesis, I would suggest that the religious context for the performance of *maqamat* and the strict nature of oral performance without instrumental accompaniment are indicative of a Jewish approach to what is, from its starting point, a commonality of Levantine cultures.

Such an approach would make Kligman's latter point and prescient observation even stronger: that a uniquely Brooklyn system for performing Syrian liturgy exists. Regardless of efforts to circumscribe Jewish traditions, oral processes are integral to liturgical practice, allowing for some level of invention. This research is timely since Syrian Jewish liturgical practices in Brooklyn, now institutionalized but codified only during the mid-twentieth century, owe much of their definition to the processes undertaken during this period. Two cantors informing Kligman, Isaac Cabasso and David Tawil, are central figures involved in this process. Affected by geographic concentration and regulated ritual, the oral process of transmitting musical culture is akin to the reminiscing of individuals about other aspects of communal history. Moreover, the reliance upon idiosyncratic liturgy for performance and the transmission of customs and laws particular to the community via rabbinic, poetic, and song texts (increasingly disseminated on the Internet) serve as documented oral history.

This book provides an important example of how applying oral history methodology, including interviews and analyses of certain texts and musical practices, can construct a stronger history of a community. The threading together of *maqamat* and Jewish liturgy throughout weaves a portrait of how the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn defines itself through this dynamic and exciting oral performance. *Maqam and Liturgy* clearly makes an important contribution to literature about non-Western Jewish communities in history, ethnomusicology, and Jewish studies. As the literature expands, this interpretive study of the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn will be valuable for interested parties for years to come.

Samuel R. Thomas
City University of New York

doi: 10.1093/ohr/ohq088

Advance Access publication 5 August 2010