

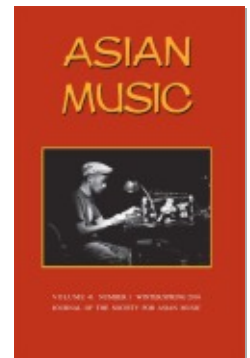


PROJECT MUSE®

Women of Egypt 1924–1931: Pioneers of Stardom and Fame
(review)

Virginia Danielson

Asian Music, Volume 41, Number 1, Winter/Spring 2010, pp. 179–181 (Review)



Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/amu.0.0052>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/369333>

Women of Egypt 1924–1931: Pioneers of Stardom and Fame. Compilation and text by Amira Mitchell. British Library Topic World Series TSCD931, 2006. One compact disc. Includes 19 pages of liner notes, photos, and other illustrations.

By now we have come to understand that commercial recording, launched in the Middle East in the first decade of the 20th century, provided female performers there (and elsewhere) with opportunities to expand their presence in the public domain from the relatively specific venues of the 19th century. Along with the public concert, commercial recordings also brought performers new audiences, especially since record players tended to appear in shared spaces such as coffeehouses, and they substantially augmented performers' incomes.

This new recording—drawn from the remarkable treasures of the British Library Sound Archive under the superb leadership of Dr. Janet Topp-Fargion—now brings us ready access to a very good sampling of the women's voices audiences heard both in Cairo where the recordings were made and most of the women lived, and in provincial and rural Cairo where the recordings were brought and played in homes and coffee shops. The accompanying notes are accurate as far as I can tell, and draw from primary, contemporary sources in a useful way. Their author, Amira Mitchell, should be commended for providing significant and helpful information in severely limited space and for her selection of wonderful illustrations. Having tracked many of these stars myself and sought their voices, I must say I love this CD and recommend it. In a few paragraphs, I will attempt to point out some of its merits in terms that I hope will augment Mitchell's already impressive work.

The recording presents the most well-known singers of the 1910s and 1920s, whose art and reputation remain in the heritage of Arab music today: Munirah al-Mahdiyyah, Fathiyya Ahmad, Umm Kulthum, Badi'ah Masabni, and Fatmah Sirri. (The notes do not quite do justice to Sirri, who was really very popular and much in demand.) From this standpoint, it is a good sampler for the time.

Additionally, we find an extremely rare exemplar of Wadudah al-Manyalawiyyah, whose recordings are very hard to find today, but who was known in her day and for generations later for her musico-poetic understanding and artistry. Here, she sings with accompaniment by the well-known violin virtuoso Sami al-Shawwa (more of whose magnificent work can be heard on Les Artistes Arabes Associés CD AAA 107, *Sami al-Shawwa* [1999]). In a similar vein, the example of Sekinah Hassan offers the rare experience of another artist valued for aesthetic depth, musical competence, and artistic understanding. From my own perspective, these two examples alone render the recording valuable. (Devoted listeners may find recordings of Sekinah, Wadudah, and other artists of this generation in Ali Jihad Racy's collection of copies of early recordings deposited at the University of Illinois Archive of Ethnomusicology,

Collection 101. The Loeb Music Library at Harvard University recently acquired a substantial number of 78-rpm recordings that also include similarly rare recordings. This collection is as yet catalogued.)

Fathiyyah Ahmad's lesser known and accomplished sisters, Mufidah and Ratibah, appear on the recording, in one instance joined by composer Zakariyyah [sic] Ahmad (who is no relation), providing a wonderful sample of Zakariyya's entertaining and highly local Cairene voice. Never viewed as a good singer, Zakariyya was nonetheless valued as a tremendously entertaining artist with his expressive, gravelly, "local guy" voice. (More performances many be heard on Sidi Record's *Dor Daya'at Mostagbal Hayati*.) He and Ratibah were good friends; their duet is a rare and valuable example of not-so-virtuosic but very much appreciated public culture. All three were welcome and entertaining presences in their heydays in Cairo's theater district.

The remaining tracks broaden our grasp of musical life and women's roles in it with capable performances in a variety of styles that help capture the diverse and cosmopolitan tastes which characterize Cairo historically. We find another recording of the well-known poem "Kam Ba'athna," here rendered by Sourayyah Qaddourah, also recorded in the same era by Umm Kulthum, Fathiyyah Ahmad, and Abu al-'Ila Muhammad. Of particular note is the piano and violin duo of Rose Zahran and, once again, Sami al-Shawwa that concludes the recording. Piano playing skill at once marked young women (and their families) as suitable participants in the international life of Egypt's mercantile and political elites, and also piqued the interest of composers and performers who were more or less constantly interested in new timbres and combinations of sounds (also notable in item 2 on this CD), adjusting tunings as well to satisfy local aesthetics. Al-Shawwa offers a breathtaking *taqsim* (improvisation) introducing the piano-violin rendition of the pre-composed *bashraf*.

More generally, this group of recordings presents good examples of performance practice of the era. *Dulabs*, or short-teaching pieces, introduce a number of the performances (see items 3, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 13). Item 12 includes magnificent heterophony in the instrumental interludes. Many examples feature male or female vocal responses to the solo singer (items 2, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 15).

The producers of *Women of Egypt* made the rather appalling decision to offer only the first side of each recording represented in an effort to include as many different performances as possible. The result is absolutely jarring in the instance of Aqilah Ratib's breathtaking performance of "Har al-gawa," which is suddenly interrupted mid-course. Overall, though, the effects of this decision are more positive than not for the breadth of work included. Mitchell makes the best use of the unusual opportunity to produce a recording of this nature. It is worth remembering, too, that these short recordings served audiences

then as they do here as aide-memoire of the wonderful, longer, musically and poetically expansive, live performances that still exist in Middle Eastern musical culture.

As Mitchell points out, *Les Artistes Arabes Associés' Cafés Chantants du Caire, Volume 2 Les Almées*, offers a good companion recording as does *Women of Istanbul* (Traditional Crossroads 1998, CD 4280). The latter presents recordings of Turkish female stars across a relatively broad spectrum of musical entertainment; and we must bear in mind that women of Cairo and Istanbul traveled to one another's cities (and regions) with some frequency to perform. At the risk of self promotion, I would like to mention that an old article of my own broadens the context of this recording (Danielson 1991).

Virginia Danielson

Harvard University

References

Danielson, Virginia

- 1991 "Artists and Entrepreneurs: Female Singers in Cairo during the 1920s." In *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron. New Haven: Yale University Press.

al-Shawwa, Sami

- 1999 *Sami al-Shawwa*. Paris: Les Artistes Arabes Associés (AAA 107).

Traditional Crossroads

- 1998 *Women of Istanbul*. New York: Traditional Crossroads (CD 4280).

Zakaria Ahmed

- n.d. *Dor Daya'at Mostagbal Hayati*. Jeddah: Sidi [unnumbered].

Lalgudi G. Jayaraman: *Singing Violins*. One CD, with a 12-page booklet of liner notes, by Vamanan, and one photograph. Turin, Italy: Felmay Fy 8094, 2005.

U. Srinivas: *Mandolin Melodies*. One CD, with an 8-page booklet of liner notes, by Vamanan, and one photograph. Turin, Italy: Felmay Fy 8091, 2005.

Felmay (www.felmay.it) is an Italian world music record company that produces jazz, klezmer, "global fusion," Asian and African music, and other CDs, as well as DVDs and CD-ROMs. Its roster includes famous Indian classical musicians such as Hariprasad Chaurasia, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Dr. N. Ramani, and Balamuralikrishna. The first of the CDs considered here is the second recording in Felmay's catalogue by the legendary violinist Lalgudi Jayaraman. (The catalogue also contains another CD featuring Jayaraman's two children, but not