



**John Baily, *Songs from Kabul: The Spiritual Music of Ustad Amir Mohammad***

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THE MUSIC OF Afghanistan has received relatively little scholarly attention, and although being in the media spotlight for the past decade has stimulated the general public's interest in the cultural and musical traditions, Afghan music has still not received sufficient attention in academic scholarship. John Baily has worked for decades to try and fill this void, and *Songs from Kabul* continues to bridge the gaps existing in academic literature about the musical traditions of Afghanistan. Finally, we have a book that focuses on the principal vocal genre of Kabuli art music, the *ghazal*.

*Songs from Kabul* presents an in-depth look at the *ghazals* that were sung by Ustad Amir Mohammad and recorded by Baily during his fieldwork in Afghanistan in the mid-1970s. The accompanying compact disc is requisite listening, as the book is essentially a reader for the accompanying recordings. Of the five chapters of this short book, the first and last present a general discussion of the history of music in Afghanistan, and a reappraisal of the *ghazal* form in Kabuli art music, while the other three chapters focus on Amir Mohammad, the *ghazal* song texts, and Baily's field notes describing how and where the recordings were made, how the song texts came to be transcribed, and so on.

The history of Kabuli art song, and the music of Afghanistan in general, is not by any means complete. While extant musical treatises from fifteenth century Herat are plentiful, the history of the music of Afghanistan during the post-Timurid eras is not well documented and very understudied. Recent studies by Ahmad Sarmast and the present work by Baily help to elucidate musical life in Afghanistan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Baily's discussion of the history of Kabuli art songs makes many interesting points regarding the royal patrons of music in Afghanistan during this period and also points to possible outside musical influences that may have helped to shape the performance aesthetics of art music in Kabul.

The close ties between the music of Afghanistan and that of North India is generally agreed upon, but the exact points of intersection of these traditions has not been pinpointed. Baily's argument that the vocal performance of art songs may have arrived in Afghanistan from Kasur and Patiala in Pakistan is a hypothesis that is both attractive and probable, and the possible introduction in Afghanistan of the Patiala-style *khayāl* singing by Ustad Piyara Saheb Khan of Lahore also makes for an interesting point worthy of further research, as does the possible influence of Kashmiri *ṣūfiāna kalām* music performance. Baily has also compiled an interesting historiography that traces the mention of music in historical sources since the

founding of Afghanistan in 1747, throughout the reign of several music-loving rulers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Sher Ali Khan, Amir Abdulrahman Khan, Amir Habibullah Khan, and King Amanullah Khan. Baily's descriptions of Kucheh Kharabat, the musicians' quarter in Kabul, capture the vibrant musical atmosphere that prevailed prior to the decades-long war that began at the end of the 1970s, continuing to the present day. In the first chapter, Baily concludes by providing a concise summary of the *ghazal* poetic form and its characteristics as a vocal music form in Afghanistan.

The main body of the book focuses on Amir Mohammad, his musical background and biography, and his music. Much of the content of these chapters draws upon the original ethnographic and field research notes written by Baily during his sojourn in Herat in 1974–1975, and outlines the social circumstances of his meetings with Amir Mohammad and the musical gatherings where the recordings were made. These experiences are further contextualized through Baily's inclusion of extensive direct quotations taken from the fieldnotes that he made at the time, including sketches of the seating arrangements and time logs for the various musical occurrences of the gatherings.

Chapter 3 is entirely devoted to the song texts of the *ghazal* performances of Amir Mohammad found on the accompanying compact disc, alongside information on how the texts came to be transcribed and translated, as well as excerpts from the original translation manuscript of Baily's "anonymous scribe" and notes elucidating some of the literary devices and symbols found throughout the song texts. Baily stops short of offering his own interpretation of the meaning of the texts, but does provide insights from his colleagues and other literary specialists, and includes information about the poets and poetic terminology used in his discussion of the song texts.

The song texts are also integrated into chapter 4, which deals with how *ghazal* poems are set to music in the Kabuli tradition. This chapter integrates a more musicological approach and is helpful in introducing the reader to the details of the musical form of *ghazal* singing and the song structure used by Amir Mohammad. The song-forms are mapped out for the reader, and, alongside the sound recordings, provide a thorough depiction of the overall structure of *ghazal* song form in Afghanistan. In this way, we can see how the lines of each *ghazal* poem are sung according to the *astāī*, *antara*, and *fard* melodic sections and where they fit in among instrumental sections such as *dunī*, *alāp*, *zōnga*, and so on. The ties between various other poetic forms such as *mosammat*, *mukhammas*, and *ruba'ī*, and their integration in *ghazal* performance, are also mentioned briefly. The rhythmic component and rhythmic meters (*tals*) are described. The complex relationship existing between poetic meter (*'aruz*) and rhythmic meters is conspicuously absent from Baily's study, and although such a topic might draw away from the focus on Amir Mohammad and his music, it would have been nice to see at least a brief discussion of the role of poetic meters being sung and how they are commonly placed alongside the rhythmic meters in performance.

In concluding this study, Baily makes several salient points regarding the development of the *ghazal* as a musical form in Kabul from 1880–1930, and again

reiterates the close ties that music has traditionally had with Sufi spirituality in Afghanistan. Baily does a good job of emphasizing the unique attributes of *ghazal* performance in Afghanistan that distinguish it from other *ghazal* singing traditions found throughout greater Central Asia and the Middle East. For all of its musicological value, one of the greatest contributions of Baily's work is that it brings Ustad Amir Mohammad into the spotlight, making his life and music known to the rest of the world. As a researcher, enthusiast, and performer of the musical traditions of Afghanistan, I was very pleased to find this informative introduction to the music of Amir Mohammad, and the art of vocal *ghazal* singing in Afghanistan.

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