



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Edward Said on Popular Music

Capitain, W.

Published in:
Popular Music and the Postcolonial

DOI:
[10.1080/03007766.2016.1228097](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2016.1228097)

[Link to publication](#)

Creative Commons License (see <https://creativecommons.org/use-remix/cc-licenses/>):
CC BY-NC-ND

Citation for published version (APA):
Capitain, W. (2019). Edward Said on Popular Music. In O. Lovesey (Ed.), *Popular Music and the Postcolonial* (pp. 49-60). London : Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2016.1228097>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Edward Said on Popular Music

Wouter Capitain

ABSTRACT

Although Edward Said, generally known as one of the founders of postcolonial studies, has written extensively on music, he almost completely ignores popular music. However, the few moments in which he does reflect on popular music are highly revealing. In this article I provide a comprehensive overview and a critical analysis of Said's public statements on popular music, and argue that these strongly create dissonance with his interventions in postcolonial theory and politics. More specifically, I argue that in these reflections on popular music Said voices problematic elitist, orientalist, and universalist claims. Consequently, Said's notion of popular music constitutes perhaps the most antagonistic aspect of his oeuvre.

Introduction

On 3 March 2004, Najla Said gave a tribute to her father at the Edward Said Memorial, a conference hosted by Columbia University, where family, friends, and colleagues commemorated Edward Said's passing on 25 September 2003. About halfway through her talk, Najla reminded the audience that “even though daddy could have told you anything you wanted to know about a lot of things, he was entirely hopeless when it came to pop culture.”¹ She mentioned, for example, that he “wouldn't be able to distinguish Michael Jackson from a chair, and knew only one thing about Madonna, that ‘she's the one who always shows her belly button, right Naj?’” Najla revealed, however, that her father “knew, and liked, a total of four popular songs, none of which have any commonalities as far as I can tell. These were: ‘Sympathy for the Devil’ by the Rolling Stones; ‘What's Love Got to Do with It?’ by Tina Turner; ‘Iko Iko,’ but only the version from the movie *Rainman*; and ‘Axel F,’ the theme from *Beverly Hills Cop*.” Najla shook her head in bemusement, and the audience laughed at Edward Said's peculiar taste in popular music.

But Edward Said's notion of popular music is not a joke. On the contrary, I will argue that Said's disdain for popular music cannot be reduced to a personal peculiarity; instead, it strongly creates dissonance with his legacy in postcolonial theory and politics. Said is generally known as one of the founders of postcolonial studies² and as a public intellectual who frequently spoke for the Palestinian liberation struggle, but he also regularly lectured and published on music. Although in these publications Said concentrated almost exclusively on European classical music,³ he also occasionally reflected on popular forms of music, most notably in interviews. These remarks on popular music have received little critical attention

CONTACT Wouter Capitain  w.h.p.capitain@uva.nl

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

in contemporary debates. Several recent studies do discuss Said's orientalism in relation to Arab popular music (Abels; de Groot 208–13; Valassopoulos 194–98) or his elitism in relation to popular culture (Featherstone 380–81; Hart 30–39), but none of these offers an in-depth account of his notion of popular forms of music more generally. In this article, I provide a comprehensive overview and a critical analysis of Said's notion of popular music and its relation to his legacy in postcolonial theory and politics.

I will argue that Said's notion of popular music may constitute the most antagonistic aspect of his oeuvre, because in three ways it appears antagonistic to his interventions in postcolonial theory and politics. First, Said tends to reduce popular music to its commercialization, thereby undervaluing its politically subversive potential. Second, in his recollections of listening to Arab popular music during his childhood, he describes this music using overtly orientalist clichés. Third, although Said does recognize that definitions of musical styles are intrinsically relational—whether “Western” versus “non-Western” or “classical” versus “popular”—he nevertheless makes universalist claims as to what “music” constitutes, and propagates the traits and ideologies of European classical music as normative. These three concerns based in Said's remarks on popular music cannot be discarded as merely personal and perhaps slightly amusing peculiarities; instead, the elitism, orientalism, and universalism in Said's considerations of popular music require critical attention in order to demonstrate how they potentially silence considerations of alternatives to hegemonic cultural expressions.

“That Whole Mass Culture Phenomenon”: Said's Critique of Popular Culture

Said was certainly aware of the problematic nature of his elitist notion of popular music. For example, when, in an interview, Bill Ashcroft confronts him with “the fact that it's mostly Western classical music that you're interested in,” Said answers that this is indeed “a tremendous limitation on my part” (11). In the same conversation, Said admits that he is not interested “in the kind of music my children listen to at all; I'm not really that interested in jazz—very, very peculiar. I find that very troubling. I feel I should be interested” (12). Similarly, in an interview with Jennifer Wicke and Michael Sprinker, Said remarks that it is strange that the music of his own Arab and Islamic tradition means relatively little to him, and the “same is roughly true of popular music” (246). Said continues:

Popular culture means absolutely nothing to me except as it surrounds me. I obviously don't accept all the hideously limited and silly remarks made about it by Adorno, but I must say it doesn't speak to me in quite the same way that it would to you or to my children. I'm very conservative that way. (246)

It is notable that, besides relating his notion of popular music to his two children, Wadie (born 1972) and Najla (1974), Said also compares himself to Theodor Adorno. In relation to music, Adorno is one of Said's main sources of inspiration, and he has engaged with Adorno's work extensively, in particular in *Musical Elaborations* (1991) and *On Late Style* (2006). In Said's opinion, musicology largely neglects Adorno's writings because his work strikes most readers as “unfashionable, perhaps even embarrassing, like his opinions on jazz” (*On Late Style* 23). Moreover, on the rare occasions on which musicology does survey Adorno's writings, Said observes “a tendency for other musicologists [except Carl Dahlhaus] to pick at Adorno's weaknesses rather than to confront his postulations or emulate the theoretical breath and magisterial scope of his best work” (*Musical Elaborations* xvii). Concerning

popular music and jazz, however, even Said dissociates himself from Adorno's "hideously limited and silly remarks."

Yet Said's approach to popular music is actually remarkably similar to Adorno's. According to Adorno, the culture industry has commodified popular—as well as, to some degree, "serious"—music, and has consequently disrupted music's relative autonomy and its potential as social critique (Adorno 295–304). Like Adorno, although less frequently and in less detail, Said is inclined to emphasize its commodification when reflecting on popular music. For example, in *Musical Elaborations* Said maintains that "Critics who have taken an interest in pop music—Jon Weiner [*sic*] and Simon Frith, most notably—have studied the ways in which the mass culture has commercialized and appropriated rock and jazz, even their most socially intransigent and resistant aspects" (55–56).⁴ Said contrasts this commercial discourse of rock and jazz music with the "extremely specialized language" of "the elite musical culture" (56), which remains largely untouched by political and commercial appropriation, and instead is characterized by its "remarkably persistent, if uneven and as yet unmapped, effects in Western society" (56). Thus, according to Said, despite their socially intransigent and resistant aspects, rock and jazz music are appropriated and commercialized by "mass culture," whereas the specialized language of elite musical culture remains unaffected by such influences and has, from that particular autonomous position, the subversive potential to affect society. Adorno could not have made it any clearer.

One aspect of Said's notion of popular music that significantly diverges from Adorno's is that, for example in his reference to Wiener and Frith quoted above, Said sometimes does recognize the potentially intransigent and resistant aspects of popular music. In the aforementioned interview with Wicke and Sprinker, Said is asked to elaborate further on the political potential of popular music. In their conversation, Sprinker confronts Said's disregard for African popular music, which is "much more global" than European classical music but "falls on deaf ears here" (247), remarks with which Sprinker provocatively implies a Eurocentric attitude on Said's part (247). Sprinker continues, "You yourself don't listen to reggae and rock, but they are the great popular political music of our time" (247). Said answers he does not "know about deaf ears" and that he actually "read a great deal about [reggae and rock]," but maintains "it's not what I first want to listen to when I listen to music" (247). Moreover, Said affirms that Sprinker correctly notes the discrepancy between his political and his musical interests, and he self-critically acknowledges that "[n]obody would ever deny that rock culture has taken over and in a way is much more interesting intellectually to somebody of my own perspective" (247). Said adds that, nevertheless, he prefers to listen to and write about Glenn Gould and Toscanini.

Unfortunately, Said does not elaborate on how rock culture has "taken over" and is "much more interesting intellectually." However, some indications of what he might have had in mind can be found elsewhere in this interview with Wicke and Sprinker. In the context of this conversation, Said's reference to his "own perspective" seems to relate to his preoccupation with global cultural and political relations, on the one hand, and with the intellectual opportunities for resistance against techniques of domination, on the other. Earlier in this interview, Said advocates "the important theoretical and intellectual perspective...of a kind of globalism in the study of texts" (242), and argues that by authors on the political "Left" (such as Adorno) there is a fascination with techniques of domination, but that the potential for resistance is usually ignored (239–40). Alternatively, Said insists, there are "endless opportunities for intervention" (240) in the techniques of domination, and that he, for

example, appears on television to intervene in the American media's representation of global independence struggles, specifically concerning Palestine. It is from these perspectives, relating to globalism in the study of texts and to opportunities for intervention that, later in the interview, Said suggests rock culture "has taken over" and is "much more interesting intellectually." But, despite his recognition of this intellectual and political potential, he maintains, "it's not what I first want to listen to when I listen to music."

In a different interview, conducted about a year after his conversation with Wicke and Sprinker, Said again briefly reflects on the intellectual and political potential of writing about rock culture (Marranca, Robinson, and Chaudhuri 38–39). Early in this interview, Said reiterates his disdain for popular music, but instead of recognizing its potentially subversive qualities, he now dismisses it as a cultural phenomenon that is almost unworthy of intellectual inquiry. When asked by Bonnie Marranca to reflect on his writings on musical performance and how they are perceived by those in the literary world, Said answers that, to his regret, "the isolation of musical culture from what is called literary culture is almost total" (38). He remarks, however, that an exception can be made for popular music, which does attract some attention from literary critics:

I think there are a few desultory efforts to be interested in the rock culture and pop music, that whole mass culture phenomenon, on the part of literary intellectuals. But the world that I'm interested in, the music of classical performance and opera and the so-called high-culture dramas that have persisted largely from the nineteenth century, is almost totally mysterious to literary people. (38–39)

Despite claiming to have read a great deal about popular forms of music and despite occasionally recognizing the subversive potential of reggae, rock, and jazz, Said nevertheless disqualifies "that whole mass culture phenomenon" as a field unworthy of his critical attention, even though previously he acknowledged that, from his intellectual and political perspective, it is "much more interesting intellectually" than the field of European classical music. His disdain for popular music is thus not merely a "tremendous limitation," but manifests a sharp discrepancy between his intellectual and political concerns, on the one hand, and his interest in music, on the other. Although Said might describe his ambivalent notion of popular music in terms of a personal conflict with his two children, it seems particularly incompatible with his interventions in postcolonial theory and politics.

"Quintessentially Arab and Muslim": Orientalism in Said's Notion of Arab Popular Music

Whereas we may ascribe his acquaintance with rock, jazz, or more generally Anglo-American popular music to his two children, Said became familiar with Arab popular music during his childhood. Despite growing up in Palestine and Egypt, however, he mainly listened to European classical music, and played the classical piano from an early age. In his memoir *Out of Place* (1999), Said occasionally reminisces about these musical memories, and emphasizes their resonance in his later personal and intellectual developments. Although most of these memories relate to his formative experiences of listening to and playing European classical music, he also briefly mentions a concert by the popular Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum (1904–75), which he attended as a small boy in the mid-1940s at the Diana Cinema in Cairo.⁵ Yet in contrast to his fond memories of European classical music, Said remembers Kulthum's concert as a rather traumatic experience, and he specifically recalls his strong aversion to

several musical characteristics. For example, Said writes that he found Kulthum's style of singing "horrendously monotonous in its interminable unison melancholy and desperate mournfulness, like the unending moans and wailing of someone enduring an extremely long bout of colic" (99). Additionally, he "could not discern any shape or form in her outpourings, which with a large orchestra playing along with her in jangling monophony I thought was both painful and boring" (99). By using this imaginative vocabulary to capture these vivid memories, describing the music in terms of horrendous and formless monophony, Said not only offers a personal narrative of his early musical memories, but also employs a very stereotypical terminology to represent these Arab sounds and his affective response. Through his use of language, written about half a century after that "excruciating evening at the Diana Cinema" (99), Said indicates that these childhood memories of Kulthum's music are not merely personal recollections—they are also, paradoxically, quite orientalist.

On other occasions, Said also recalls this particular concert by Kulthum, often with a detailed account of the setting and music during that evening, thereby repeatedly emphasizing the monophony and the lack of musical form and development. One such instance in which Said classifies this music in particularly explicit orientalist terms is in the obituary article that he wrote about the Egyptian belly dancer Tahia Carioca (1919–99), first published in *Al-Ahram Weekly*. About halfway into this short article, Said briefly digresses from his homage to Carioca and compares her to that other great Egyptian "entertainer," Umm Kulthum:

[Kulthum's] Thursday evening broadcasts from a Cairo theater were transmitted everywhere between the Atlantic and the Indian oceans. Everyone who enjoys Indian, Caribbean, and "world" music knows and reverently appreciates Umm Kulthum. Having been fed a diet of her music at far too young an age, I found her forty-plus minute songs insufferable and never developed the taste for her that my children, who know her only through recordings, have for her. But for those who like and believe in such cultural typing she also stood for something quintessentially Arab and Muslim—the long, languorous, repetitious line, the slow tempi, the strangely dragging rhythms, the ponderous monophony, the eerily lachrymose or devotional lyrics, etc.—which I could sometimes find pleasure in but never quite came to terms with. Her secret power has eluded me, but among Arabs I seem to be quite alone in this feeling. ("Farewell to Tahia" 230)

Considered in light of Said's argument in *Orientalism*, this brief account of Kulthum manifests three orientalist features. First, Said refers to a rather essentialist cultural typing of her music as "quintessentially Arab and Muslim," and combines this portrayal with an odd generalization about "Indian, Caribbean and 'world' music." Second, in describing musical characteristics, Said uses a vocabulary that strongly relies on orientalist clichés, especially in its adjectives and adverbs—"languorous," "repetitious," "strangely dragging," "eerily," "devotional"—evoking a mysteriously static and exotic orient.⁶ Third, Said employs this musical essentialism and orientalism to distinguish himself from the "quintessentially Arab and Muslim." Although in this account Said primarily intends to compare Tahia Carioca to Kulthum, he effectively distinguishes himself from (other) Arabs.

Besides distinguishing himself from (other) Arabs in his recollections of Kulthum's music, Said also repeatedly constructs an arguably essentialist binary between the static qualities of Arab popular music and the developmental progression in European classical music. Said explicitly contrasts static Arab with developmental European music, for example, in a lengthy interview with Charles Glass in 2002, released on DVD posthumously as *Edward Said: The Last Interview* in 2004.⁷ Here, Said explains that Kulthum's music "just struck me

as horrible,” because “there was no form to the music that I could identify; there was just repetition, with tiny differences in each repetition.” To Said’s ears, these supposedly formless qualities “contrasted *terribly* with the Western music—you know Mozart and Beethoven and Mendelssohn—that I loved and played” (emphasis in original). Similarly, in *Musical Elaborations*, Said describes Kulthum’s music as “an aesthetic whose hallmark was exfoliating variation, in which repetition, a sort of meditative fixation on one or two small patterns, and an almost total absence of developmental (in the Beethovenian sense) tension were the key elements” (98). Said could not appreciate this absence of developmental tension in Arab music, he explains in a brief autobiographical reflection, because “in my preponderantly Western education (both musically and academic) I seemed to be dedicated to an ethic of productivity and overcoming obstacles” (98). By repeatedly contrasting the supposedly static and repetitive Arab music with the Western “ethic of productivity”—and, moreover, by implying that this difference exists in both the musical and the academic domains—Said’s narrative of his formative musical experiences results in an essentialist binary of the musical orient and occident, and thus actually relies on the orientalist rhetoric he challenged in *Orientalism*. Against the background of his academic and political affiliations with post-colonial criticism, Said’s attempt to distinguish himself musically from (other) Arabs and the binary he constructs between the musical orient and occident become perhaps the most antagonistic aspect of his oeuvre.

Said recognized this antagonism between his musical taste and his political and academic affiliations and he admitted that his disregard for Arab music made him feel “quite uncomfortable” (Ashcroft 12). Perhaps this personal discomfort could explain why Said in his writings and in interviews repeatedly—maybe almost obsessively—recalls that particular concert by Kulthum, which he attended as a small boy in Cairo. This discomfort could perhaps also explain why, later in his life, Said revisited his initial judgment of Kulthum and learned to appreciate her music. For example, in an interview with Tariq Ali, recorded in 1994 and first published in 2006, Said admits that “now I think, as I grow older, I’m beginning to discern some art to that [music by Kulthum]” (40). Similarly, in *Musical Elaborations* Said observes that, although at a young age “the kind of art practiced by Umm Kulthum receded in importance for me” (98), in recent years “I returned to an interest in Arabic culture, where I rediscovered her, and was able to associate what she did musically with some features of Western classical music” (98). Despite this tentative appreciation of Kulthum, Said maintains a Eurocentric frame of reference, judging Arab music by its similarity to features of Western classical music. Moreover, Said formulates his reappraisal of Kulthum in terms of personal preferences, but ignores the ideological implications of the orientalist terminology and rhetoric he has used to describe Arab music.

In an interview by Michaël Zeeman, conducted for Dutch television in 2000, Said again frames his appraisal of Kulthum in terms of a personal narrative, without acknowledging how his judgment strongly relies on orientalist clichés. When Zeeman asks Said what kind of music he listened to during his childhood, Said again recalls that particular concert by Kulthum, its monophonic music, and the intellectual passivity it produced in him while listening. Yet this time Said seeks to excuse his rather orientalist terminology. Thinking again of that evening in the Diana Cinema, Said tells Zeeman:

It was a dreadful experience for me.... And to me there wasn’t the kind of form or shape [in the music], it seemed to be all more or less the same. And the tone was mournful, melancholic. I didn’t understand the words. Above all, what I missed—I realize now—what I missed was

counterpoint. It's very monophonic music. And I think it is designed to send people, not exactly into a stupor, but it would induce a kind of melancholic haze, which people like, and I found very disturbing. I mean, mentally it made you inactive—I think, I mean this is entirely subjective.⁸

Said again emphasizes the music's lack of development, its static monophony, and the listener's intellectual passivity; however, now he excuses himself by noting that his memories and affective response to this music are "entirely subjective." Said thus explicitly frames his memories and appraisal of Kulthum as a subjective judgment, but reducing this narrative to a matter of individual taste cannot conceal the antagonism between his legacy in postcolonial criticism and the musical orientalism in his notion of Arab popular music.

"A Relatively Distinct Entity": Relationality and Universalism in Said's Notion of Music

As becomes clear from his memories of listening to Kulthum, Said recognized that the categorization of musical styles is always a relational process. He describes her music as monophonic in comparison to counterpoint in European classical music, just as it supposedly lacks development in comparison to the music of Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn. Similarly, Said regards popular forms of music as commercialized and appropriated by mass culture in comparison to the relative autonomy of classical music. Said's recognition of this relationality could perhaps have encouraged him to discuss European classical music in tandem with non-European and non-classical musics, since their mutual dependency would make any isolated discussion inadequate. However, with the exception of his revealing remarks on popular music, as discussed earlier, Said grants surprisingly little attention to any music beyond the European classical canon. Moreover, not only does Said almost completely ignore popular music, but he also often advocates the European classical canon as the universal standard of "music," thereby propagating its characteristics and ideologies as normative. Said actually does not compare the characteristics of Arab music, jazz, and rock to European classical music, but rather he largely dismisses non-European and non-classical styles because they do not adhere to the normative standards of counterpoint and development.

The paradox of Said's recognition of this relationality of musical styles and his neglect of popular music was identified in 1992 by Nicholas Cook. In his review of Said's *Musical Elaborations*, Cook critically observes, "At one point Said seems to say that classical music is defined by virtue of the distinction between it and non-classical music. But if that is the case, popular culture must play an essential role in any account of the social and ideological context of classical music" (619). From this perspective Said's choice not to elaborate on popular music shows his ignorance of popular culture, including its politically subversive potentials, while limiting the breadth of his discussion of European classical music, specifically concerning its social and political context. Said's neglect of popular music is particularly notable considering that, as Cook correctly observes, in *Musical Elaborations* Said insists that European classical music is defined by virtue of its distinction from non-classical and non-European musics. In the introduction to this book, where Said outlines his approach to music by comparing it with Adorno's, he writes:

But like Adorno—and perhaps with as little justification—I accept the existence of a relatively distinct entity called "Western classical music," although at a later occasion perhaps I'd like to

show that it is far from coherent or monolithic and that when it is talked about as if it meant only one thing it is being constructed with non-Western, nonclassical musics and cultures very much in mind. (xviii)

Unfortunately, this “later occasion”—which could perhaps have resulted in a musicological equivalent to *Orientalism* that deconstructs the perceived unity of musical entities and critically analyzes their intrinsic relationality—never occurred. Such a study would certainly have been a welcome contribution to musicological debates, in which musical traditions are usually examined in relative isolation.⁹ As Cook observes, it is precisely this isolation which is problematic in *Musical Elaborations*, where Said concentrates almost exclusively on a “relatively distinct entity” called “Western classical music,” despite his recognition of the relationality of musical categories.

Said returns to this question of relationality in the final pages of *Musical Elaborations* (97–105), here specifically with reference to his personal enjoyment of listening to music. In these pages, Said argues that any listening experience always relies on previous encounters, both musical and non-musical, and he recalls a particular concert by Alfred Brendel to illustrate this argument (79–91). Because listening to Brendel’s performance of piano variations by Brahms strongly stimulated his musical memories, Said explains that this experience was “threaded through with earlier as well as contemporary, with other Western as well as non-Western, musics—for example, the singing of Umm Kalthoum with which I grew up, rock and jazz, the hymns and folk-songs I also grew up with, and so forth” (97). According to Said, musical categories are constructed with other musics and cultures very much in mind, and previous encounters with other musical styles affect the personal experience of listening to European classical music. Yet Said ignores both the intrinsic relationality of musical styles and his personal development and enjoyment as a listener, and chooses to accept Western classical music as a relatively distinct entity.

Whereas in *Musical Elaborations* Said problematically treats European classical music in relative isolation, in other instances he also creates strong hierarchical distinctions between different musical styles. He does this by formulating European classical music as the universal standard for “music,” in contrast to local, “other,” sounds that do not adhere to this normativity. One instance in which these universalist claims become particularly explicit is a radio interview conducted by Scott Simon in 2002. When asked by Simon to reflect on what Beethoven means to him, Said answers that “Beethoven in the first place really transcends the time and place of which he was a part.”¹⁰ Said further specifies: “I mean, he’s an Austro-Germanic composer, who speaks to *anyone* who likes music, no matter whether that person is African, or Middle-Eastern, or American, or European” (emphasis in original). Said further underlines that Beethoven’s music is “expressing the highest human ideals,” and that these ideals are “universal experiences.” These universalist claims in relation to European classical music sharply contrast with Said’s notion of other forms of music, such as Arab popular music. For example, in the aforementioned interview with Ashcroft, Said recalls that particular concert by Kulthum (whose name is oddly misspelled in Ashcroft’s transcription), which he attended as a small boy in Cairo. Said remembers:

One of the defining experiences of my childhood was being taken to a concert of the greatest Arabic singer, El Fasoum [Umm Kulthum]. It turned me off Arabic music—what I considered to be “ethnic” music—forever. I don’t know why, it’s a very strange thing and I’m quite uncomfortable with it. But for me, music is the western classical tradition. The music of my

own [Arab] tradition? I listen to it, I know something about it, I can talk about it if I have to, but it doesn't touch me. (11)

Again, with reference to his childhood and to what “touches” him in music, Said characterizes Arab and European music in terms of personal development and predilections. However, by contrasting the “universal” European classical music with the “ethnic” Arab music—even asserting that, for him, “music” is the “western classical tradition”—Said not only provides a personal account of his musical preferences, but also makes a rather problematic assertion regarding musical normativity. Yet curiously, Said seems unaware of the political implications of his universalist claim on music.

Said's neglect of the potential implications of his universalism is particularly curious considering that, in other contexts, these matters are often his primary concern. To name just one example, when Said in *Musical Elaborations* briefly digresses from a consideration of music into a theoretical reflection on Foucault, he immediately elucidates the implied Eurocentrism and universalism of Foucault's theoretical claims. More specifically, Said observes how Foucault problematically “elevate[s] admittedly discernible patterns in Western society during the modern period to the level of the essential and the universal. To call the theories therefore Eurocentric or imperial is, I believe, not an exaggeration” (51). But as soon as Said returns to “music”—that is, to “Western classical music” during the modern period—he appears deaf to echoes of universalism and Eurocentrism. Yet such an essentialist distinction between the “universal” Western elite canon and the “ethnic” Arab culture is precisely the type of assertion which Said, in the domains of literature, history, or politics, emphatically denounced. Indeed, Said does acknowledge that he is “quite uncomfortable” at being unmoved by the “ethnic” music of his Arab tradition, but this personal discomfort cannot resolve the dissonance between his musical universalism and his legacy in postcolonial theory and politics.

Conclusion

In her analysis of Said's notion of popular culture, Anastasia Valassopoulos writes that “Said was nothing if not balanced in his treatment of his consumption of culture” (201). In his contribution to the same edited volume, Rokus de Groot states that the music of Kulthum “played an important role for Said as an *alternative*, as a contrapuntal voice to Western classical music” (216, emphasis in original). Both authors rightly observe that Said did indeed occasionally listen to, read about, and discuss popular music, and that these reflections on popular music can be interpreted as an alternative voice within his more elaborate writings on classical music. In Said's treatment of music, however, popular forms are markedly inferior to those of the hegemonic European classical canon. Moreover, in Said's work, not only is the voice of popular music in Said's work usually silent, but when it does become audible, it creates a powerful dissonance with other, particularly postcolonial themes in his writing.

As a public intellectual, Said not only spoke in an academic context, but also frequently wrote newspaper articles and appeared in television interviews. His voice thus had, and potentially still has, a significant resonance. It nevertheless appears that Said was rather hesitant to engage critically with the implications of his public statements on popular music; similarly, in the academic reception of his writings, these statements are usually neglected. However, from Said's own intellectual and political perspective, these statements need to be challenged wherever they reinforce stereotypical representations of other musical traditions,

construct essentialist cultural distinctions, and reaffirm the hegemony and normativity of elite European cultural expressions. Music is all too often listened to either as commercialized entertainment that can only monophonically speak the language of the culture industry or as a universal language of emotions that is unable to speak politically. From this perspective, Said's articulations about popular music are reduced to a personal matter of taste, supposedly unrelated to his intellectual and political interventions. Nevertheless, as much as these articulations continue to circulate publicly, their political implications require critical attention.

In his memoir *Out of Place*, Said discusses the tension between the different themes of his life, and concludes that “[w]ith so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place” (295). Similarly, Said seems to have been aware that his conservative notion of popular music was “out of place.” He admits that from his intellectual and political perspective, rock music is “much more interesting” than European classical music, and yet he was insufficiently interested to listen. Later in his life he could “discern some art” in Arab music, but in his repeated recollections of listening to Kulthum, he draws an arguably essentialist distinction between the developmental progression in European classical music and the monophonic, endlessly repetitive, and intellectually unproductive music of (other) Arabs. He does recognize how musical styles are intrinsically relational, but nevertheless concentrates almost exclusively on “a relatively distinct entity called ‘Western classical music.’” Although Said experienced much dissonance in his life, it is his notion of popular music which, probably more than any other theme, is “out of place” in his work, not only personally, but also culturally, intellectually, theoretically, and, perhaps most significantly, politically.

Notes

1. A video recording of Najla Said's speech can be viewed on the website of Columbia University. See http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/media/04/280_edwardSaid_memorial/ (relevant passage from 5.38 minutes; accessed 25 Feb. 2016). Her speech is also published as “Tribute to My Father.”
2. Even though Said, and in particular his *Orientalism*, is often considered as foundational to postcolonial studies, his relation to this field is highly ambivalent, and he has explicitly distanced himself from “postcolonial studies” (Said, “In Conversation” 82). For Said's stance on postcolonial studies, see Robert Young's essay “Edward Said: Opponent of Postcolonial Theory” and the edited volume *Edward Said and the Post-Colonial* (Ashcroft and Kadhim), in particular the contributions by Dirlik, Williams, and Ashcroft.
3. See Said's *Musical Elaborations; Parallels and Paradoxes* (with Daniel Barenboim); *On Late Style*; and *Music at the Limits*. For Said's writings on European classical music, see, in particular, Scott, de Groot, and Hutcheon.
4. Said might have had in mind, for example, Jon Wiener's articles “Rockin' with Ron” and “Beatles Buy-Out,” and some of Simon Frith's articles in *The Observer*, such as “Punk Is Dead” and “Instant Revolutions.”
5. In his recollections of this particular concert, Said sometimes states that he was 12 years old at that time (*Out of Place* 99), whereas in some interviews he asserts that he was 8 or 9 (e.g. Ali 40; Zeeman; Glass). In *Musical Elaborations* he writes, “The first musical performance I ever attended as a very small boy (in the mid-1940s) was a...concert by Umm Kalthoum” (98). Said mentions the Diana Cinema as the location of this concert in *Out of Place* (99).
6. For studies on common features of musical orientalism, see, for example, Head and Locke.

7. The entire interview with Glass is also available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NNuczNFyZM> (relevant passage from 23.38 minutes).
8. The entire interview with Zeeman is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=676fB7ExZys> (relevant passage from 8.45 minutes).
9. Several notable exceptions to this general tendency are Gelbart, Kalra, and Taylor.
10. This interview was broadcast on National Public Radio (NPR), and can be downloaded from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=892575> (relevant passage from 5.10 minutes). See Simon.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

Wouter Capitain is lecturer in popular music studies at the University of Amsterdam and Utrecht University and a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, with research on Edward Said's work on music.

Works Cited

- Abels, Birgit. "Musik, Macht und der Mythos Mehrstimmigkeit." *Norient: Network for Local and Global Sounds and Media Culture norient.com*. 21 May 2014. Web. 25 Feb. 2016. (<http://www.norient.com/stories/popular-orientalisms-3/>)
- Adorno, Theodor. "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening." *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002. 288-317. Print.
- Ali, Tariq. *Conversations with Edward Said*. London: Seagull Books, 2006. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill. "Conversation with Edward Said." *New Literatures Review* 32 (1996): 3-21. Print.
- , and Hussein Kadhim, eds. *Edward Said and the Post-Colonial*. Huntington, NY: Nova Science Publishing, 2001. Print.
- Barenboim, Daniel, and Edward Said. *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*. New York: Pantheon, 2002. Print.
- Cook, Nicholas. "Musical Elaborations by Edward W. Said." *Music and Letters* 73 (1992): 617-619. Print.
- Featherstone, Simon. "Postcolonialism and Popular Culture." *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Graham Huggan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013. 380-395. Print.
- Frith, Simon. "Instant Revolutions." *The Observer* 13 Dec. 1987: 21. Print.
- . "Punk Is Dead – Long Live Punk." *The Observer* 16 Mar. 1986: 27. Print.
- Gelbart, Matthew. *The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music": Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wager*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. Print.
- Glass, Charles. "Edward Said: The Last Interview, 2003." *YouTube*. 15 Dec. 2014. Web. 25 Feb. 2016.
- Groot, Rokus de. "Edward Said and Polyphony." *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*. Ed. Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom. Berkeley: U of California P, 2010. 204-226. Print.
- Hart, William. *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- Head, Matthew. "Musicology on Safari: Orientalism and the Spectre of Postcolonial Theory." *Music Analysis* 22.i-ii (2003): 211-230. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Edward Said on Music: Always Comparative, Always Contrapuntal." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 83.1 (2014): 21-27. Print.
- Kalra, Virinder. *Sacred and Secular Musics: A Postcolonial Approach*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Print.

- Locke, Ralph. "Cutthroats and Casbah Dancers, Muezzins and Timeless Sands: Musical Images of the Middle East." *19th-Century Music* 22.1 (1998): 20-53. Print.
- Marranca, Bonnie, Marc Robinson, and Una Chaudhuri. "Criticism, Culture, and Performance: An Interview with Edward Said." *Interculturalism and Performance: Writings from PAJ*. Ed. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta. New York: PAJ Publications, 1991. 38-59. Print.
- Said, Edward. "Farewell to Tahia." *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts of the Middle East*. Ed. Sherifa Zuhur. Cairo: The American U in Cairo P, 2001. 228-232. Print.
- . "In Conversation with Neeladri Bhattacharya, Suvir Kaul and Ania Loomba, New Delhi, 16 Dec. 1997." *Interventions* 1.1 (1998): 81-96. Print.
- . *Music at the Limits*. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. Print.
- . *Musical Elaborations*. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. Print.
- . *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*. New York: Pantheon, 2006. Print.
- . *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978. Print.
- . *Out of Place: A Memoir*. London: Granta Books, 1999. Print.
- . "Tribute to My Father." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 25 (2005): 21-25. Print.
- Scott, Derek. "Edward Said and the Interplay of Music, History and Ideology." *Edward Said and the Literary, Social, and Political World*. Ed. Ranjan Ghosh. New York: Routledge, 2009. 104-123. Print.
- Simon, Scott. "Barenboim and Said: 'Parallels and Paradoxes': A Unique Intellectual Collaboration Between Scholar, Musician." *National Public Radio*. 28 Dec. 2002. Web. 25 Feb. 2016.
- Taylor, Timothy. *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. Print.
- Valassopoulos, Anastasia. "'Long, Languorous, Repetitious Line': Edward Said's Critique of Arab Popular Culture." *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*. Ed. Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom. Berkeley: U of California P, 2010. 191-203. Print.
- Wicke, Jennifer, and Michael Sprinker. "Interview with Edward Said." *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Michael Sprinker. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992. 221-264. Print.
- Wiener, Jon. "Beatles Buy-Out." *New Republic* 11 May 1987: 13-14. Print.
- . "Rockin' with Ron." *The Nation* 6 Oct. 1984: 309. Print.
- Young, Robert. "Edward Said: Opponent of Postcolonial Theory." *Edward Said's Translocations: Essays in Secular Criticism*. Ed. Tobias Döring and Mark Stein. New York: Routledge, 2012. 23-43. Print.
- Zeeman, Michaël. "Interview with Edward Said." *YouTube*. 28 Nov. 2012. Web. 25 Feb. 2016.