Desert Polyphony. Musical identities in the Sultanate of Oman

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Oman’s current leader, Sultan Qaboos strongly promotes and encourages cultural – and particularly musical – development. Oman has a splendid opera house, numerous military bands, traditional music ensembles and a symphonic orchestra. Music education is offered in schools and since 2008 also at university level. However, these efforts and developments are constrained, since in Oman, where the traditional Islamic (religious, cultural and social) values, policies and practices are deeply rooted in all domains of public as well as private life, music and musical activities – or being a musician – are often problematic, stemming from the long-standing controversy that surrounds music in the Islamic society.

This study delineates the factors that might be influential in the development, construction and maintenance of musical identities, focusing on the question: How do musicians experience their musicianship in the traditional Islamic context of the Sultanate of Oman?

The study was designed as a qualitative investigation using semi-structured interviews. A purposive sample of four Omani musicians was interviewed: a traditional musician, a Western classical musician, a rapper, and a DJ. The transcribed interviews were analysed by means of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009).
This study introduces four different personalities, each with varying attachments, attitudes, understandings and definitions regarding music and musicianship. Looking at the participants’ accounts, portraits of four distinctive, sometimes even conflicting definitions of musical identity emerge, characterised by the varying ways in which aspects of the participants’ ideas, understandings and meanings with the expectations of the traditional Islamic cultural and social realm overlap and/or clash. Findings show that participants with “identities in music” (IIM; Hargreaves et al., 2002) received formal music education, reported conflicting feelings about being ‘special’ and emphasised the absence of a musically inclined home environment in their childhood. In contrast, participants with “music in identities” (MII) learned music in informally, did not express any conflicting feelings regarding their musicianship and remarked that music and musical activities were always present in their family and closer social environment. However, even for these participants family support was not demonstrated by active and direct encouragement or any kind of material assistance, only by ‘no objection’.

Resulting from recent worldwide political developments, more and more music teachers are facing the challenge to accommodate Muslim students’ and their parents’ differing views concerning music into the school curriculum. Providing them with information about Islamic interpretations and opinions might help to avoid misunderstandings, thereby contributing to mutual cultural, societal and interpersonal understandings.