

A Historical Glimpse of Music in Yemen in the 1930s: A First Approach to the Cylinders Recorded by Hans Helfritz

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Abstract The 102 cylinders recorded by Hans Helfritz in Yemen in 1930–31 and held by the Berlin Phonogramm-Archive represent a precious asset for the study of music of this country. They are the first large number of recordings of Yemenite music carried out in the field, just before the beginning of the first commercial recordings in Aden a few years later. Unlike the Aden recordings, Helfritz's represent mainly popular musical genres from the different tribes from the Highlands and Hadramawt, soldiers' songs, work songs, women's songs, and Jewish songs. As a first approach to this collection, I re-documented an anthology of a dozen of these recordings. I brought together as much information as possible from different sources in order to contextualize this music and its collection: Helfritz's biography, his books, his two main travels to Yemen and how he recorded music, and some considerations about Helfritz's contribution to the knowledge of Yemenite music. I consider the ambiguities of his orientalist vision and approach as an explorer more than as a musicologist, which contributed to the form and content of the collection itself. Finally, I bring up a few ethical considerations about these "captured sounds" and the future of this collection.

The one hundred and two cylinders recorded by Hans Helfritz in Yemen in 1930–31 represent a precious asset for the study of music in this country.¹ They are the first extensive recordings of Yemenite music carried out in the field,² which were followed a few years later by the first commercial recordings in Aden from 1935 (Lambert and Akouri 2020). Both collections are complementary; they are not from the same region, nor about the same musical genre. While the commercial recordings were concerned mainly with urban music, Helfritz was more interested in rural and popular music. As a first approach to this collection, I will try to bring together as much information as I can from different sources in order to contextualize this music and its col-

lection: Helfritz's biography, his books, his two main travels to Yemen and how he recorded its music, a description of some of his recordings to which I had access, some considerations about Helfritz's contribution to the knowledge of Yemenite music, and finally some ethical considerations about the future of this collection.

Hans Helfritz's career and his books on Yemen



Figure 1. Hans Helfritz (1902–1995), young with pith helmet.

Hans Helfritz (1902–1995) (fig. 1), originally a composer, was passionate about Erich M. von Hornbostel and Robert Lachmann's teaching (Helfritz 1961:116). He decided to travel to the Middle East in the late 1920s to collect folk music and practice "musical ethnology," as it was called at that time. He learned Arabic and travelled to Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq (on which he wrote his first book). He made two main journeys through Yemen in 1930–31 and 1931–32. He made recordings during the first journey and published his first book on Yemen in 1932 and the second in 1934. Helfritz moved to Chile after 1936 to escape the Nazi regime.³ He subsequently journeyed

through Asia and Latin America as a photographer and published several travel guides. He published no fewer than five or six books on Yemen with catchy titles [e.g., *The last Marvel of the Desert* (fig. 2) and *The Country without Shadow*].



Figure 2. The cover of Helfritz's book published in 1934. Collection Jean Lambert.

Some of them had several editions and were translated into French, English, and Arabic. Actually, most of these books are almost the same under a different title or presentation; the same events of his first two travels from 1930 and 1932 are narrated again in different ways, often mixing the chronology with narrative feedback, as well as historical digressions.⁴ In four main books (1934, 1935, 1944 and 1956), Helfritz gives an account of his first travel to Yemen in 1930 or 1931,⁵ mixed with episodes of his second travel (1931 or 1932). One understands from his own testimony that it was only during his first travel that he was equipped with a recorder and made his 102 recordings (Helfritz 1936a:177, 1961:116). Helfritz published quite a few other books on South America and Asia in the style of travel guides. His publications specifically on music are very scarce. However, he remained a reference for future travellers (fig. 3).

I base the present study mainly on *Land ohne Schatten* (Helfritz 1934) and its French translation (Helfritz 1936a), as well as *Arabien: Die letzten Wunder der Wüste* (Helfritz 1944), and the French translation of a fourth book published in 1956, *L'Arabie heureuse* (Helfritz 1961).⁶



Figure 3. Hans Helfritz later in life, with Paul Bowles.

Hans Helfritz's travels to Yemen and his recordings

It is interesting, but not easy, to retrace the different journeys Helfritz made in South Arabia,⁷ and especially the steps of his first journey in 1930–31, to identify the places where he recorded music and when. It is particularly important to make a reconstruction of these events to better understand the context and the significance of the recordings, because Helfritz's books are usually not clear about the chronology. On the first journey to Sanaa, in 1930 or 1931, he found that he could not freely travel inside Yemen. This is how he decided to make his second journey, which, according to his own indications (Helfritz 1934:16–17), occurred in 1931 or 1932. It is the best known and most spectacular journey, as he was arrested upon his arrival at the eastern border and suspected of being a British spy. He stood under arrest for several weeks. Actually, it was not during this second journey that he made recordings, but only during his first one in 1930–31. He was equipped with a recording device (thanks to Erich Moritz von Hornbostel) and able to record the 102 cylinders which are now in the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin (Helfritz 1936a:177, 1961:116). Since he did not make any recordings during his second journey in 1931–32 or during his third one in Shabwa (1935), thus, I will only concentrate on "the first one" (fig. 4), although the second journey indirectly rubs off on the recordings, as we shall see later. As this first journey included several local trips, I will keep the expression "first journey" for 1930–31, and the word "trips" for the detailed parts.

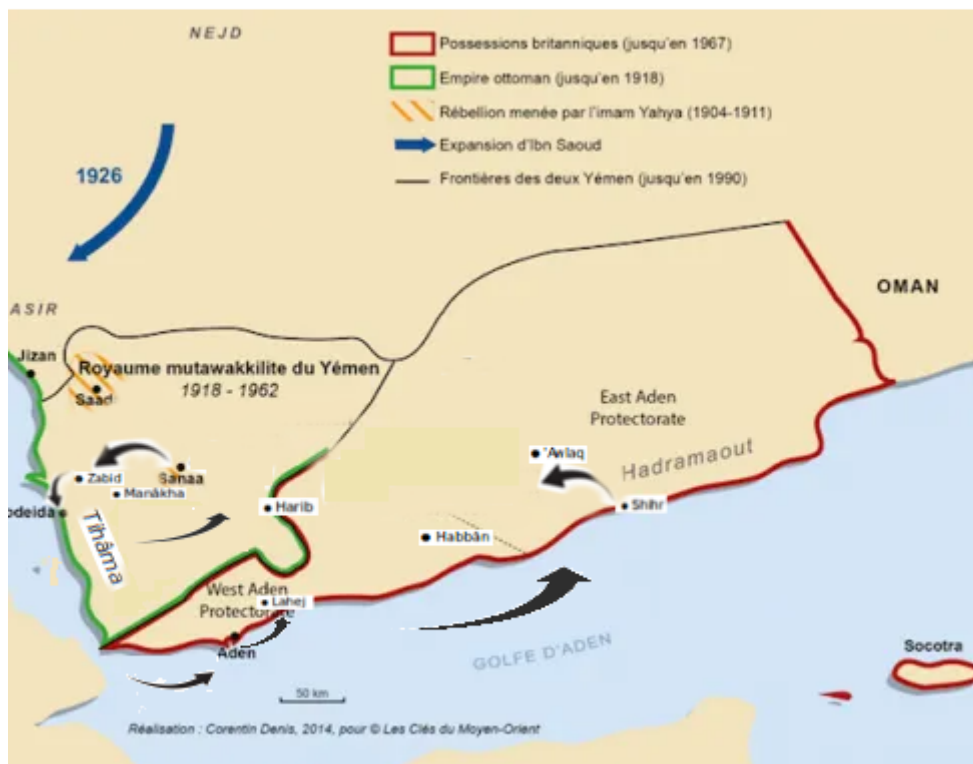


Figure 4. Hans Helfritz's first travel in Yemen (1930–31): 1. Aden and Lahej; 2. Shihr and 'Awlaq; 3. Hodeida, Sanaa, Manakha, Hodeida. Copyright by the author.

Helfritz began this first journey via Aden, the capital of the British colony, perhaps in February 1930 (or in 1931, according to the different sources).⁸ Based on his different accounts, I understand that he initially made a short trip to Lahej, where he may have done some recordings (he describes some songs: Helfritz 1961:36). He then travelled by boat from Aden to Mukallah, Hadramawt (then under British rule, like Aden), where he was welcomed by the sultan Omar al-Qu'aytī (who he had met in Berlin in July 1931) (Helfritz 1936a:11–12). Afterwards, he was welcomed by the sultan Abū Bakr Sheykh al-Kaff in Seyyun (inner Hadramawt) (ibid.:51–52), where he listened to a lot of singing and music. He presents a short chapter with a musical title (chapter VI: Music and Dance in South Arabia) only in his first main book, *Land ohne Schatten* (Helfritz 1934). He reports that he attended a dān session in Tarīm (ibid.:51–52). I do not know if he recorded it. It was probably at that time that he collected most of the Hadrami music, which is in the collection, especially from the 'Awlaq tribe, near Tarim, where he recorded more than 20 cylinders (111 Helfritz Südarabien in: Ziegler 2006, see "Inventory," 48–56 and 69–80).

It is only after this preparatory trip to Hadramawt that he went by boat to Hodayda's port, to begin his main trip inside Yemen.⁹ From Hodayda, he went to Sanaa, where he met the Imam Yahya, who welcomed him but did not allow him to travel in the country. The book depicts some interesting scenes related to music in Sanaa, for example, that he had the Crown Prince Moḥammed, son of the Imam Yaḥya, listen to his first recordings. The prince, who was a liberal, authorized him to make further recordings (Helfritz 1934:175–6), and sent him some of his soldiers who were known for their beautiful voices and songs (Inventory: 1–2, 16–17, 20, among which one was transcribed: Helfritz 1944:146a). Around this time Helfritz recorded several people in Sanaa (27), among which were a number of Jewish people, although they are indicated as coming from Dhamār and Ibb (84–86 and 91–92) (cities to which he did not go).

Helfritz was allowed to make a short trip to Manakha, in the jebel Harāz (Helfritz 1934 [1936a]: 222), where he was able to record local music (8–14 of the Inventory, at least).¹⁰ After returning to Sanaa, he had to leave for good, toward Hodeyda. On his way, he may have again made some recordings in the surroundings of Manakha (among which one was transcribed: Helfritz 1944:146b, "Jebel Harāz, Beni Ismail"). In Hodayda, he was lucky enough to attend an official ceremony with Crown Prince Mohammed (Helfritz 1944:231),¹¹ with Omani sailors performing music from their country (Inventory: 35), as well as Zarānig tribesmen performing sung dances (ibid. 58–65). He then left Hodayda by boat.

In brief, Helfritz made recordings only during his first travel, in a relatively short period, despite circumstances which he did not consider the best possible. But because he travelled in Yemen while the country was almost inaccessible, we are fortunate to have, for this remote period, a fair quantity of recordings of popular music from many regions and cities: Sanaa, Manakha, Hodeidah, the Zaranig tribe and Tihama, in North Yemen, as well as from Lahej, Habban, Hadramawt, and the 'Awlaqī tribe during his trip in the South. The sociological variety indicated by the inventory is very impressive; there are songs of shepherds, muleteers and cameleers, of soldiers of the Imam, of Hadrami beduins and tribesmen of the High Lands, war songs, *razfa* (military procession song) and *zāmil* (Beni Matar, al-Hayma), women's songs and children's songs. There are also many Jewish songs in Arabic and Hebrew. These recordings are mostly a cappella songs. There are also a few

with double clarinet, mizmar, and flute, gasba. I cannot but dream of listening to all these forms and genres, although they still exist in Yemen nowadays. At the same time, I note the absence of the lute, qanbūs, although it was present at that time in Sanaa, but played clandestinely, since it was forbidden by the theocratic and rigorist power of the Imam (Lambert 1997:149). But Helfritz could have recorded lute music in Aden, Lahej, and Mukalla, because he stayed in these cities for some time; remarkably, he did not, obviously because he was not interested in town music. To a certain extent, this was a bias which was encouraged by the comparative musicologists who considered urban music as acculturated and non-authentic, or nonspecific, because it was "not different from the Arabian music in the other Oriental cities" (Helfritz 1936a:178).

Corpus and methodology

Relying on the Museum's inventory ("111 Helfritz Südarabien," obviously inspired by Helfritz's notes), we have quite a lot of information about each recording (some of the lyrics, the name and activity of the singer, the place). There is valuable information about the song's incipit, the vernacular musical terminology, the social context, often in dialectal Arabic and in Hebrew, and partially translated into German. This material was not exploited because Hans Helfritz left Germany in 1936, except for a few transcriptions realized by Robert Lachmann (see below).

My approach will be focused on a sample of 15 sound items the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv was able to put at my disposal. The quality of the cylinders is generally rather good, although it is not always easy to recognize the words of the lyrics. I shall attempt to document the songs and music, relying mainly on the lyrics, to characterize, as much as possible, the musical forms and ethnographic context. In studying these recordings, I will consider three different levels of information:

a) the inventory of the Museum of Ethnology containing the hundred and two pieces. For each item studied, I will quote the first line of the original inventory in German and Arabic, and give a brief English translation (between quotation marks);

b) the 15 recordings to which I had a direct access, thanks to the Museum (20, 22, 25, 26, 27, 30, 84 –92);

c) some of these recordings were subject to deeper study based on my knowledge of Yemenite music and poetry. I thank Rafik al-Akouri¹² for helping me decipher some of the lyrics, as well as Mark Wagner and Tom Fogel for the Hebrew material.

A general remark on musical analysis: the main modal system in Yemen is the zalzalian scale system, also predominant elsewhere.¹³ I will use the usual terminology for modal structures: Rāst, Bayātī and Sīkah. This way of proceeding does not fully comply with maqām theory, since the latter was not used in Yemen until recently; another reason is that the melodies' ambitus often does not reach an octave and is mostly limited to a fifth of a sixth (pentachord or hexachord). Our transcriptions will be set on a conventional pitch, not to the absolute one. Thus, this approximate way of describing the material will be used with all necessary caution, awaiting further analysis. Later on, I will mention a number of pentatonic and hexatonic forms which are less common.

Three popular songs from Sanaa

27. a) Lahedschi, Araber aus Sanaa (Lahjī, an Arab from Sanaa)

b) Sanani

Bil el asib. Beduine (A beduin with a dagger sheeth).

The recording includes three consecutive songs by the same singer, or more precisely, three fragments of songs:

(1) The first one, Kullan maḥbūbeh 'induh, starts at 0'00":



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

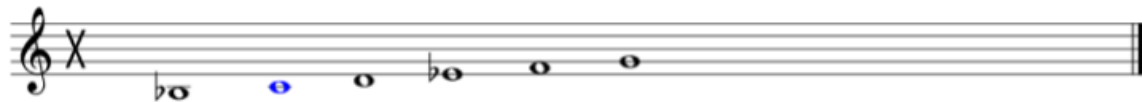
Audio 1. Three popular songs from Sanaa. #1: Kullan maḥbūbeh 'induh (starting at 0'00"); #2: Mā nazlatek Bīr al-'Azab (starting at 0'45"); #3: Mā bāk (starting at 1'20").

Link to [audio file](#)

Kullan maḥbūbeh 'induh

Kullan maḥbūbeh 'induh	Wa-nā maḥbūbī rāh
Yā muḥammilīn al-'inab	Fawq al-'inab fawq fāḥ
Everybody has his lover	Except me, my lover left
O you who carry the grapes	Above the grapes the fragrance

This song has a courtly poetry with an erotic symbolism conferred to the grapes. The scalar form is a Rāst hexachord on C, with an ambitus from Bb to G:¹⁴



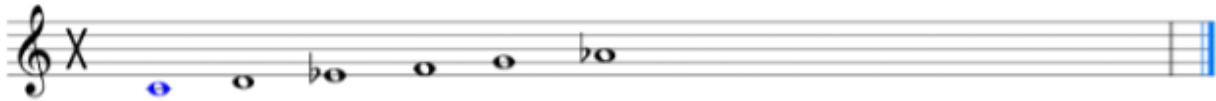
The style of the poetry, as well as the style of the melody seem to indicate that this song is from Sanaa, and not from Lahej, as indicated in the inventory.

(2) Starting at 00'45", Mā nazlatek Bīr al-'Azab:

Mā nazlatek Bīr al-'Azab¹⁵

Mā nazlatek Bīr al-'Azab	Bayn al-shumūs al-ḥāmiyya
Aw shī ma'ak maqdā gharad	Aw baytinā fī al-Bawniyya
Dān dān danī Dānī danī	Dānī danī dān Dāna dān
How was your stay in Bīr al-'Azab?	Among the warm (little) suns
Or do you have a case going on	Or our house ¹⁶ is in al-Bawniyye

This text evidently contains some gallant allusions (gharad, an affair; shumūs, plural of shams, for beautiful girls, with a diminutive nuance; “our house”), with a general meaning: there is a secret reason behind your coming to Bīr Al-'Azab and al-Bawniyya, which is that you are in love. This song is well-known and very much appreciated in Sanaa today, especially among the older generation. It mentions two familiar neighborhoods, Bīr al-'Azab and al-Bawniyeh, where aristocratic palaces were built in the middle of large gardens (Serjeant and Lewcock 1983), and where a relatively liberal life took place, even during the rigorist period between the 1930s and 1960s. Some variants of this song are still practiced in Sanaa.¹⁷ The melody is sung on the same pitch as the previous one, but with a slightly different ambitus:

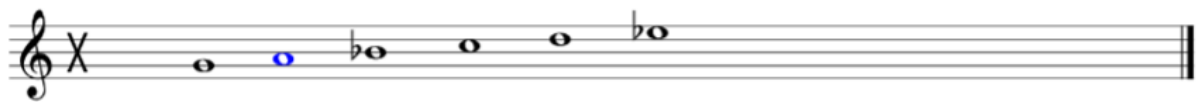


As one can see, the scalar structure is also a Rāst hexachord on C, with a different ambitus from C to Ab as well as an alteration on A, which is not so common in Rāst, but rather common in Yemen.

(3) Mā bāk, a popular song from Lahej, starts at 01'20":

Mā bāk anā mā bāk	Yā llī teqūl mā tubālī	Allah Allah
Bā-shūfa bi-l-'ayn	Mā bāshill shī fī gubālī	Allah Allah
I don't want you	You who say you don't care	
I see with my own eyes	And I can't get anything from you	

As indicated by Helfritz's documentation, this song is indeed lahjī,¹⁸ but sung by the same singer who sings the previous ones from Sanaa. This mere fact shows that in this urban context, the same person was able to sing songs from different regional traditions.¹⁹ The melody has a scalar structure which can be classified as a Bayātī heptachord on A, within an ambitus from G to E flat:



One must note that the pitch is not the same as in the two previous songs. I have found many contemporary versions of this song.²⁰ The comparison is interesting, because it shows that the Helfritz recording is built on a polyrhythmic form (ambiguity between binary and ternary), even if it is not very perceptible on the cylinder.

A female funeral song

91. Jūdin aus Dhamar. "Abda bak adeik ja mereni"

Totenlied. Hage mut (A Jewish woman from Dhamar, funeral song)



Full audio file also is available as part of
the web version of this publication

Audio 2. Jewish woman from Dhamar, "Abda bak adeik ja mereni"; funeral song.

Link to [audio file](#)

Alā wa-abda' bek yā jīd	Yā mughnī wa-yā midbir
Alā yā 'ālim al-sirr	Bi-l-bāten wa-bi-z-zāher
Alā māshi 'alā-l-mawt	Dhī hawle r-rikab 'āser
(...)	
Alā ḥin yiqber al-nās	Lam yirḥam 'alā l-gāser
Alā yā sīdī murtāḥ	Min al-dunyā wa-hū qāher
Alā yij'al miḥāsīn	Wa-sār al-ākḥira yi'mir
Alā law ta'lam yā khabīr	Mā min ḥad sālī
I begin (my poem) in your name	O Enricher, o Almighty,
You who know the secrets	The most intimate and the best-known
We're all going to death	All those with crooked knees
(...)	
When He buries people	He is not lenient with the sinners
O Sir, you are well doing	In this World although It is unjust
(Or) he who does good	He will build for the Other World
Ah if you knew, my friend	There's no way to avoid trouble (in this World)

The inventory says the singer is Jewish, which is most probable, but this is not reflected in the text, which is fully in dialectal Arabic. The lyrics contain a few tropes which seem typically Islamic, such as al-Ākhira (the Afterlife) and bātin wa-zāhir (the Hidden and the Apparent). This is not astonishing, since the Jews used to share a lot of popular songs with the other Yemenites and they may have easily borrowed this kind of religious discourse, especially among women (see below).

The modal structure can be defined as a Rāst pentachord (C – D – Ehf – F – G), with joint notes.

Such funeral songs, which are only feminine, were rarely recorded in Yemen. It was a taboo for decades among Muslim Yemenites, because it was often accompanied by feminine laments and emotional manifestations of grief.²¹

A praise song for the Imam

20. Soldatenlieder

a) magred el Imām

b) Chair, Asker aus Sanaa.

(Soldier song: (a/ *Maghred* of the Imam, b/ A poet, soldier from Sanaa)

There are actually two different songs:

(1) Maghrad al-Imām:²²



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 3. Maghrad al-Imām.

Link to [audio file](#)

This piece is an interesting one for several reasons. The maghrad²³ is a very peculiar genre in Yemen even now, and still exists in the context of agriculture, especially plowing (Lambert and Yammine 2012). In the recording, we can hear the vocal style stretching the syllables in long melismatic sections, and distorting the words, a reason why it is not easy to decipher the lyrics from this cylinder. Helfritz makes an interesting description in one of his books of some vocal techniques used by the soldiers at that time:

One hand is pressed on the adam's apple, and with the other the tip of the nose and the upper lip is pulled upward, producing a nasal sound. The vocals range from the highest pitched headsounds to the deepest notes from the bottom of the chest (Helfritz 1934 [1936a]:244).

What this text is trying to describe is a laryngeal tremulation, as well as other rare vocal techniques. Helfritz expresses his amazement about the contrast between the high pitch and chest sounds. Here, the scalar structure is hexatonic, reaching one octave: C – E – F – G – A – Bdb – C. The degree which is avoided here is D.

Hel Fritz provides a musical transcription of another maghrad he recorded and presents it in one of his books, with a transcription realized by Robert Lachmann²⁴ (Hel Fritz 1944:46, a):



Figure 5. Transcription by Robert Lachmann of a maghrad (wrongly identified as a Samel) collected by Hans Hel Fritz (Hel Fritz 1936a, 273).

In the reedition of his book (ibid. 1977: 261), one finds the same transcription with the mention of inventory number 68 (which seems to correspond with our Inventory). One must note that in the book, this song is wrongly defined as *zāmil* ("samel"): it is actually a maghrad. On the melodic level, the scalar structure is also a hexatonic one: *C – D – F – G – A* (– *C – D*) (the degree avoided here is *B*). So, these two melodies belong to a scalar hexatonic system. However, here, the structure gives a strong impression of pentatonicism, because the ascending melodic phrase also avoids the *F*, which is only expressed in the descending phrase, and in passing at the end. As we already have seen, pentatonicism in Yemen was interesting to both Hel Fritz and Lachmann. But pure pentatonicism is rather rare in Yemen. It is only available in certain examples of maghrad (Yamine 1995:275).²⁵

This maghrad melismatic form recorded by Hel Fritz has its own history in the 20th century; originally and until now, it has been a genre which is sung, solo, by farmers when they plow their field, maghrad al-ḥarth, with a bull or a donkey (Lambert and Yamine 2012:200).²⁶ However, at that time,

the Imam's soldiers, who were themselves tribesmen, qabāyil, and farmers, used its melodies and attached them to some lyrics for praising the Imam. According to Helfritz, they were mostly from the Harāz region (Helfritz 1944:46), as well as Beni Matar and al-Hayma tribes, who live in fertile regions where this song is very common. Since the Republican revolution in 1962, this maghrad is no longer sung by soldiers, but still by farmers, with their traditional lyrics, which are mostly sapiential.

(2) Starting at 1'40", another song from the maghrad genre. The lyrics are difficult to identify.

Zāmil, a tribal and military song (according to Helfritz's inventory; recording not available)

2. Soldatenlieder, Hajaile:

Wuchena aletaa uda'at robbane we Imām 'ene li judrub el asi jimen Kul-lechei

(A soldier's song, hujayla:²⁷

Wajhenā al-'atā wu-du'āt rabbanā Wa-Imāmanā -llī yidrub al-'āsī yu'min kulla shī)

Our pride is to serve and plea our God

And our Imam is beating the rebels and securing everything

Although this type of song is not yet available online, I chose to expose some information about it, since Helfritz often evokes the zāmil in his books, and it is well represented in the Inventory (31, 68). We see a photo in *L'Arabie heureuse*, which shows a group of soldiers of the Imam, characteristically formed in a square and singing a zāmil (ibid. 1961:140, figs. 42–43).



Figure 6. Some of the Imam's soldiers singing a *zāmil* (1930 or 1931), photographed by Hans Helfritz (Helfritz 1961:140).

This kind of song continues to be very much in use among Yemenites.²⁸ The *zāmil* (pl.: *zawāmil*) is a collective antiphonic song performed by the tribe during wartime, tribal encounters or official ceremonies (Yamine 1995:ch. II). According to local traditions, this song is supposed to frighten the enemies (Helfritz 1961:115; Baraddūnī 1982). The poetry usually extols the tribe's pride and praises the tribal sheykh or a political leader (Caton 1990). The poet composes the words on the spot, in order to express the specific situation of an event, eventually writing it on a piece of paper, and then dictating the words to the two choirs. *Zāmil* are mainly sung on melodies entering the *zalzalian* scale system, as mentioned previously. Their ambitus is usually a fifth, a sixth or an octave, with joint notes and they are sung in a syllabic manner and on a binary rhythm similar to a march (Yamine 1995:311).²⁹

Jewish songs

The songs by Yemenite Jews which were recorded by Helfritz can mainly be divided into two parts: the ones sung by females in colloquial Arabic (84, 85, 86, 91 [already studied above], 92), and those sung by men in Hebrew (87 to 90).

(1) Songs in Arabic:

84) Jüdin. "Ja sen, ja sen," Lied aus Dhamar, Jemen

(A Jewish woman, Yā zayn yā zayn (O beauty, o beauty), song from Dhamar)



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 4. Jewish woman, Yā zayn yā zayn, song from Dhamar.

Link to [audio file](#)

A – Bhf – C – D – E – F (hexachord, joint notes)

The content of this song does not match with the incipit. The words are difficult to identify.

85) Jüdin, "Ja naad, ja hannan" aus Dhamar Jemen (A Jewish woman, Alā yā ra'd ya ḥannān, (O rumble of thunder), Dhamar)



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 5. Jewish woman, Alā yā ra'd ya ḥannān, Dhamar.

Link to [audio file](#)

Starting at 1'30":

Alā nazalt li-l-wādī	Wa-lā a'raf nuzūleh
Alā wa-n-nī bi-walad	Akhdar munaqqash ju'ūdeh
Alā wa-gult: Yumma	Gad gulaybī yiḥobbeh
Alā gālat: Yā bentī	Bilādeh ba'īdeh
Alā gult: Yummah	Bilād al-ḥobb mā hī ba'īdeh

I went down the valley, without knowing how
And I met a brown boy, with curly hair
So I told: "O Mother, my little heart loves him"
She said: "O my Daughter, his country is far away"
I said: "O Mother, the country of love is never far away"

G – A – Bdb – C (tetrachord)

According to Rafik al-Akuri, this song may be a work song for grounding the wheat. It is known nowadays among Yemenite singers in Israel.³⁰

86) Hage Suweik.³¹ Jüdin, Dhamar. "Nasalt aseila bacher al Rawani" (For the bride procession. A Jewish woman, Dhamār)



Full audio file also is available as part of
the web version of this publication

Audio 6. Jewish Woman, Nazalt as-sāyla, Dhamar.

Link to [audio file](#)

Nazalt as-sāyla	La-baḥr al-ghawānī (bis)
Yā ḥāmil al-ja'dī	Wa-muballal al-sha'ri
I went down the wadi	An ocean of beauties
Those who have dread locks	And humid hair

C – D – Ehf – F – G (pentachord)

91) Jüdin aus Dhamar "Abda bak adeik ja mereni"
(see above)

92) Jüdin aus Dhamar. Rama Hage Hadjir Sunweik³² (mit Triller). (Jewish woman from Dhamar. Song accompanying the bride's procession, with ululations)



Full audio file also is available as part of
the web version of this publication

Audio 7. Jewish woman, Alā bi-llah amāna, Dhamar.

Link to [audio file](#)

Alā bi-llah amāna	Wa-gul-lī weshe matlūbek?
Alā tākul wa-tashrab	Wa-ḥassek 'inde mahbūbek
(Trills)	
Alā yā jānī al-ward	Gul lī min kam al-wardah
Alā nashtī mashāger	Li-khallī nesmir al-layla
(Trills)	
Oh, by God, trust me	And tell me what is your demand?
You're eating and drinking	But all your senses are with your loved one
Oh you who harvest roses	Tell me how much is one rose
We want a bunch of basil	To spend the night with my love

The scalar structure is a pentachord (C – D – Ehf – F – G), with joint degrees. This melody (92) is exactly the same as the melody of 91; the performer may be the same, and so is the tonal pitch. 91 is a funeral song while 92 is a wedding song. This shows that, at least in this tradition, the same melody may have very different social functions, the difference being eventually expressed by nuances in the performance and rhythm.³³ Here, there is no difference in rhythm or tempo.

(2) Songs in Hebrew (men from Ibb):

87) "Amel lel schir." Hebräisch. Mann aus Ibb, Jemen.

Wird gesungen bei "Arus," am Sonnabend, wenn sie alle versammelt sind, essen und trinken. (Amalel shir ve-tushbahot le-eli ("I sing a song and praises to my God"). A man from Ibb. Sung during the bridegroom party, in the afternoon, when they are together, eating and drinking).³⁴



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 8. Song in Hebrew, man from Ibb.

Link to [audio file](#)

This melody has an ambitus of a seventh from G to F, with two different melodic phrases, one ascending and one descending.

88) "Af' teha schir beel schedei, schehu hei menussi", derselbe aus Ibb (Hage suweik)

(Aftehah shir be-el-shaddai (I begin my poem by (the name of) God), the same one from Ibb (for accompanying the bridegroom procession?).³⁵



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 9. Song in Hebrew, "Af' teha schir beel schedei, schehu hei menussi", man from Ibb.

Link to [audio file](#)

89) Hage suweik "Jimsa Israel"

Sänger aus Ibb. min schan schabbat; am Sabbat (Yom Ze Le-Yisrael, "This day is for Isrā'il." "A singer from Ibb. For Shabat"). This melody is probably from Indian or Iraqi origin.³⁶



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 10. Song in Hebrew, man from Ibb.

Link to [audio file](#)

90) Hage Rakes. "Scheboi el hai" derselbe ["For the dance, same performer, Shevach El Hai ("God be praised")].



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 11. Song in Hebrew, man from Ibb.

Link to [audio file](#)

Scale: G - Ehf - **C** - D - E - F

This scale may be a hexatonic one (but without octavation).

One notes that the rhythm is ternary, although it is internal. This may explain why it is indicated as a "dance". This melody is part of the Diwān repertoire (defined as the urban learned paraliturgical singing).³⁷

In spite of the limited quantity of this material, I suggest that most of the women's songs in the Jewish tradition used to be performed in Arabic, while men's songs used to be performed in Hebrew. This confirms previous observations about the difference between male and female repertoires, between liturgic and para liturgic on the one hand, and secular on the other hand (Yaakov and Flam 2000, 1/6:29).³⁸ On the melodic level, most of the women's melodies belong to the Yemenite zalzalian system (i.e., 91 and 92 may be categorized as Rāst), with mainly joint degrees, while men's melodies seem more influenced by external elements or specific aspects of Jewish culture. Another observation is that most of these recordings do not belong to the urban and aristocratic Diwān (see the CDs of Avner Bahat 1990, 2006), but are more to be popular and ritual songs (except 90). In any case, further study of these Yemenite Jewish songs will need some collaborations with specialists of this tradition.

(3) A modern Jewish song with old Yemenite lyrics

30. Jehude, derselbe wie 25, 26. Hebräisch "Sepperi" Photo 19. 1,2 Leica.³⁹ Historie, wie die Juden von Jerusalem nach Jemen kamen (Jewish (boy)).⁴⁰ A Jew, the same as 25, 26. Hebrew: Sapperi tema tamīma, "Tell, pure and innocent". The tale of how the Jews came to Yemen from Jerusalem).



Full audio file also is available as part of
the web version of this publication

Audio 12. Song in Hebrew, Jewish man.

Link to [audio file](#)

As Ephraim Ya'akov and Gila Flam indicate in their first publication of this song ([Discographic References] 2000 *Music! The Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv* (1900–2000), CD 1/6:29–31), the melody is the same as the modern Zionist hymn *Hā-tiqva*, which is originally a Romanian tune, but whose original poetry was composed by Sa'ādiya ben Amram, a Yemenite poet from the 17th century. It has a very symbolic content, and some new verses have been added lately (Bahat 2006, CD 2, 9–10:61). The Inventory's comment says that the poem evokes the coming of Jews to Yemen from Jerusalem, but this interpretation is not clear. However, this may be supported by the following verse: "Won't you tell, and we'll rejoice in Yemen" (Sappari nagil b-Teima, second verse). This requires further research.

A double-reed clarinet mizmar tune

22. Mizmar, Sanaa



Full audio file also is available as part of
the web version of this publication

Audio 13. Mizmar tune, Sanaa.

Link to [audio file](#)

The mizmar is a double reed clarinet, pierced with six holes, which is played all over Yemen (Elsner 1999). It is played with circular breathing. In the Inventory, Helfritz mentions that the performer was a young boy who was 15, which is still very common in Yemen today. The style of this piece is from Sanaa. One must remark that usually, in Sanaa region, the mizmar is played to accompany singing and percussion, but here it is only instrumental and

solo. It is possible that this format was preferred by Helfritz, given the difficulty of recording several musicians and instruments on a cylinder, especially percussion instruments. But the Inventory also contains two pieces with mizmar and percussion (items 82 and 83, not included in the present study); it would be interesting to hear how the percussion was recorded on the cylinder. Here, at some point, the musician plays in a melodic tetrachordal structure which can be qualified as "Bayātī" on D, highlighting the fourth D-G.

Helfritz's contribution to the musicology of Yemen

If this collection, recorded in 1930 or 1931, was the first one in the history to represent Yemenite music, I would like to stress that it is complementary with the first commercial recordings on 78 rpm records which were done by private companies in Aden from 1935. While both sets are almost contemporary, Helfritz's recordings include almost exclusively countryside and popular music, while the Aden records represent almost entirely urban "classical" music (Lambert and Akouri 2020). Helfritz was clearly a fairly good Arabist, which reflects in the quality of the linguistic information included in the Berlin Inventory. On the musicological level, an evaluation must be more nuanced. His books are disappointing because they include few observations about music. Only one short chapter in one book has a title about music (Helfritz 1936a:ch VI). In the last reedition of his books (Helfritz 1977), there is an appendix ("Documentationen", 4 pages) which quotes a part of an article by von Hornbostel and Lachmann (1933) about Helfritz's recordings. In this article, the authors develop their theory about the similarity between South Arabian and Berber music (see below). Here we find the two transcriptions already mentioned, but for each one, a number corresponding to our Inventory: "Bani Ismail," number 7; "war song, Sanaa," number 68, as well as two others: "Beni Matar," 17 and "Awlaq," 58. These transcriptions will be precious for the future documentation of these items. Otherwise, Helfritz's musical observations are scattered throughout his travel narrative. These shortcomings may be explained by at least two reasons:

- from 1936 onwards, Helfritz was physically separated from his recordings because of his exile from Germany;

- after the war, Helfritz was occupied with other activities – he was a composer, a writer of travel books and a photographer.

Helfritz's musicological perspective was influenced by Erich Moritz von Hornbostel and Robert Lachmann. He was interested in pentatonic music and by the wide range ambitus of the soldiers' songs (Helfritz 1934 [1936a]:244; 1952 [1961]:116), which he probably came across in song 20 (see above). But the two transcriptions included in *Arabien. Die letzten Wunder...* (Helfritz 1944) were not his own. He was searching for archaisms and common musical features which, in a diffusionist perspective, would link different populations of the world. Within this framework, he was trying to identify a historical link between Yemen and North African Berbers via pentatonism and other formal features,⁴¹ in parallel with mud architecture and other common characteristics (Helfritz 1952 [1961]: 116–117; 1977: 256–259 and comparative transcriptions). Today, this kind of theory and method is outdated. Notwithstanding, the collection itself raises many interesting musicological questions: how did Helfritz record collective songs such as *zāmil* and *razfa*? Do these provide us with social history information? Did he record *shabwānī* (fig. 7) and *dān* in Hadramawt (which are mentioned in the books but not in the Inventory)? Did he record in Lahej? How did he record the percussion instruments? These few questions and many others will find some answers by documenting the whole collection. The few transcriptions made by Lachmann will also be interesting documents to compare with the recordings.

The "captured" sounds and other biases

As we can see from this brief panorama, the Hans Helfritz collection in the Museum of Ethnology is a rich source of popular music in Yemen in the 1930s, and the present article is only an introduction to it. The large amount of documentation work to be done on the collection is still ahead, and it may be fueled by Helfritz's personal archives,⁴² as well as Lachmann's archives.⁴³ Collaboration will be necessary from both Yemenite scholars to help decipher all the lyrics of the songs and Jewish studies specialists to understand this particular aspect of the collection better. While Hans Helfritz's recordings are undeniably valuable, his personal approach presented several ambiguities that need to be clarified for a better evaluation of the collection. On the one hand, his recordings were conducted by an orientalist vision and

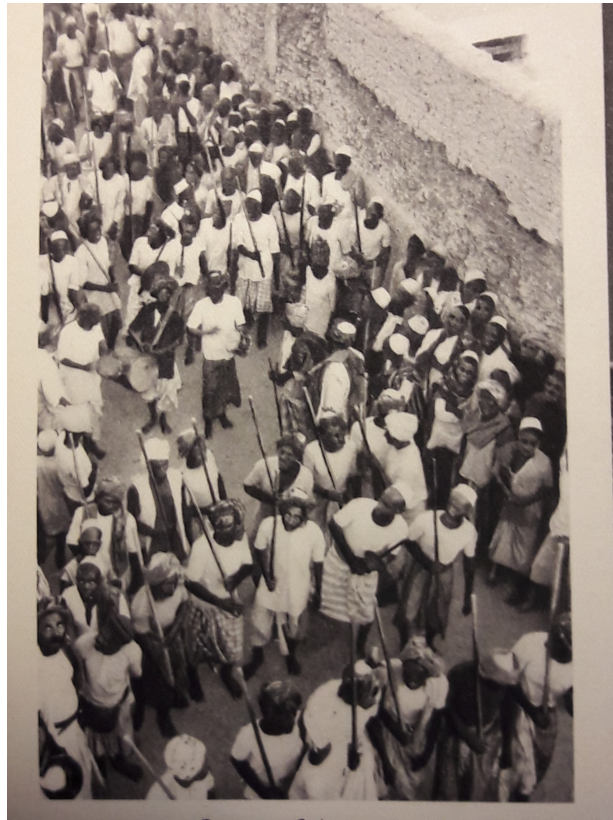


Figure 7. A shabwānī procession in Tarim (1930 or 1931), photographed by Hans Helfritz (1934).

a certain exotism which was representative of the colonial period, even if North Yemen had not been colonized. This approach was indirectly encouraged by the concept of comparative musicology, which favored those forms of music that were, at the time, considered the most authentic and the most 'preserved' from Eurogenic civilization and modernism. This implicit theoretical choice gave this collection its particular character, with a predominance of popular and tribal songs. On the other hand, the sensationalist and commercial content of Helfritz's books seems to show in him an absence of a profound vocation as a musicologist, unless we take into consideration that his vocation was affected by the political upheavals of the time. His reputation of an explorer more than a researcher has doubtlessly worked against Hans Helfritz with a view to the public opinion in Yemen, and so have the charges of espionage during his second journey. Later, the translation of his book into Arabic fostered this suspicion, if only because of the title of the Arabic edition of his book: *Yemen through the Back Door* (Helfritz 1985 [1961]). For Yemeni intellectuals, in recent decades, the idea that Hans Hel-

fritz was a spy continues to be common, even if it is, in all likelihood, unfounded.

How will the Yemeni public perceive these recordings? During the 20th century, the Yemeni perspective on sound recording, as well as photography, represented a major challenge for researchers seeking to document various aspects of Yemeni society and culture (Lambert 1997:146). Even listening to recorded music was forbidden (Helfritz 1934 [1936a]:209–210). These reservations, motivated by social and religious representations, were closely linked to the international political position of Imam Yahya (1918–1948), who wanted to prevent upheaval (ibid.:209). After the fall of the Imamate, during recent decades, this reluctance has abated with the increasing use of media and techniques of image and sound reproduction. However, the images and sounds that were collected in Yemen by foreigners in the past may now be considered by some as the result of an abduction. The reason for this is a tendency toward identitary positioning, linked, among other things, to the country's delay in economical development, and now to the current conflict in the region. All this potentially makes Hans Helfritz's collection of Yemenite recordings a collection of "sensitive" objects: these recorded voices from 90 years ago may even be considered as "captured" (Lange 2019) or even robbed. Another sensitive aspect concerns the Jewish recordings. This is the first (and possibly the last) time that Yemenite Muslims and Jews were recorded in the same corpus, same time, and at the same places, which is in itself very valuable. But the fact that most of the Jews have since left Yemen, as well as the identitary movement which has since grown on both sides, make any documentation of both commonalities and differences difficult. Helfritz's collection allows an important glimpse on this sensitive matter.

The only viable solution for the valorization of this precious collection will, therefore, be to establish cooperation with one or more official Yemenite institutions. However, despite the possibilities of digital technology, the current situation in the country makes such a cooperation difficult for the moment. In any case, it will be necessary to document the collection in the spirit of international exchange and global sharing. This is the only way to prevent the adventurous story of Hans Helfritz's travels on Yemen to continue in equally problematic ways.

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Notes

1. I thank Susanne Ziegler for introducing me to this collection in the Phonogramm-Archiv in 2000.
2. The first Yemeni recordings ever were made by Idelsohn in 1912–13, among Yemeni Jews in Palestine (Idelsohn [1914–32] 1973). These recordings are kept by the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften).
3. Helfritz fled because of his sexual orientation. For more on Helfritz's exile, see his biography: https://www.lexm.uni-hamburg.de/object/lexm_lexmperson_00002003. Accessed 19 November 2023.
4. Helfritz reports in his preface to the French edition, *Au royaume de Saba* (1961) that this volume gathers three previous works: *Chicago der Wüste*, *Das Land ohne Schatten* and *Geheimnis um Schóbua* (1935).
5. Owing to discrepant information in the books themselves, these dates are not entirely certain.
6. The cover of the 1936 French translation of *Land ohne Schatten* says "4th edition". This shows that the book was met with popular success well beyond Germany.
7. At the end of his book *Im Lande der Königin von Saba* (1952), there is a short biography which states that "he visited Hadramawt in 1931" and that "in 1933, he was the first to be able to cross the South West of Arabia from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea" (1952:167). It adds that "he visited Shabwa [...] two years later." According to this version, Helfritz would have made three main travels, one in 1931, one in 1933 and one in 1935.
8. According to another account, at the beginning of his first book, he says that he met the Sultan of Mukallah, Omar al-Keiti (al-Qu'aytī) in July 1931 in Berlin. Since al-Qu'aytī was the first important figure to welcome him in Yemen, according to his own account, he could not have made his first journey before 1931.
9. At that time, only the Mutawakkilite Kingdom around Sanaa was considered as "Yemen," and Hadramawt was regarded as separate. The reader can see on the map his first trip from Hodeyda to Sanaa and back (fig. 4).
10. He visited the Isma'ili community there, but I do not know if he was able to record them.

11. Later on, Crown Prince Moḥammed died accidentally. This may explain why Helfritz was not able to come back to Yemen in a regular way, because he had lost this main official support.
12. Archivist and director of the Yemenite Center for Musical Heritage (Sanaa).
13. The Zalzalian scale has been defined by modern Arabian musicology as scales having median seconds which are situated between the major and minor second, and are produced by half flat (hf) degrees, mainly E and B (Abou Mrad 2005), i.e., maqām Rāst has the following degrees:
C – D – Ehf – F – G – A – Bhf
Maqām Bayātī:
D – Ehf – F – G – A – Bhf – C
Maqām Sīkah:
Ehf – F – G – A – Bhf – C – D
These half flat degrees may bear several microtonal variations.
14. For this first approach, it will suffice to indicate the scale, leaving a transcription of the songs for further publications.
15. The poetical meter is a rajaz majzū', and it reflects in the way of singing, as well as in the pronunciation of the nonsense syllables.
16. The poet probably implies "your house" or "your girlfriend's house".
17. Fuād al-Kibī (ūd): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydC71mx7vRY>. Accessed 19 November 2023. On the melodic level, the modal structure is different from the Berlin version.
18. From Lahej region, a town close to Aden. Lahjī is a very specific regional style which was emulating the San'ānī culture at that time (Lambert 1993).
19. In the first commercial recordings made in Aden from 1935, especially by the Anglo-German Odeon company, the main songs published were from Sanaa and Lahej (Lambert and Akouri 2020), which shows that they were very popular in the whole Yemen, North and South. It was usual to first sing and play Sanaa songs and then Lahej in wedding parties until recently (Lambert 1997:67).
20. Hishām al-Yāfi'ī (around 2018): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDT283YjHi4>. Accessed 19 November 2023. It is interesting to note that it is still exactly the same modal structure, the same melody, but quicker.
21. This was recently unveiled by a Yemenite publication about women's culture in Sanaa (Baydani forthcoming).
22. At that time, the imam Yahya was the sovereign of north Yemen. His army was mainly composed of tribesmen from the Highlands.
23. The word maghrad means "song," but this root, GH R D, is specially used for bird songs.
24. There are two transcriptions in this book, both by Robert Lachmann. This shows that after Helfritz's main recording campaign, Lachmann was able to listen to his records, and that he had time to make these transcriptions, probably before he left Berlin in April 1935 (Davis 2013:XVIII).
25. See next footnote.
26. See https://archives.crem-cnrs.fr/archives/items/CNRSMH_I_2003_010_014_04/. Accessed 19 November 2023 (recording: J. Lambert). Although this recording was made indoors and at low volume, one can easily hear both the falsetto and the bass waves produced by the singer, probably some of the features which had fascinated Helfritz. One can recognize an almost perfectly pentatonic scale: G – A – C – D – F – G – A – (B).
27. The word hujayla is related to hajla, which is the word for a "work song" in Yemen today. This may denote the proximity between hajla and zāmil in certain regional dialects.
28. See https://archives.crem-cnrs.fr/archives/items/CNRSMH_I_1996_013_001_13/. Accessed 19 November 2023 (recording: Habib Yammīne).
29. Contrary to what Helfritz indicates, and as already mentioned, the song transcribed in *Arabien. Die letzten*

Wunder, (1944:146a) is not a *zāmil*.

30. Naomi Melihi: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCpLN0zbS0Q>. Accessed 19 November 2023.

This one has almost the same melody, but with a wider ambitus: G – A – Bhf – C – D (pentachord).

31. It seems that the word transliterated *suweik* by Helfritz is actually *suwayq*, which would mean: "driving, conducting." In this case, it could be a synonym of *zaffa*, the bride procession. This deduction may be made from the context of items 86, 87, 88 and 92. Moshe Piamenta does not mention this word, but he mentions *suwāqa* for "conducting a herd" (Piamenta 1990, vol. 1). The fact that the word *suweik* is also mentioned for a *Shabāt* song (89) might contradict this hypothesis; however, it could also be an error from Helfritz.

32. Read: *Suweik*.

33. I made the same observation on some other material in contemporary Yemen, especially in Sanaa.

34. I thank Mark Wagner very much for his help transcribing and translating the incipit of items 87, 88, and 89.

35. See previous footnote.

36. I am very thankful to Tom Fogel for helping me document the two items, 89 and 90.

37. See footnote 35.

38. Yemeni Jews used to teach formal religion and Hebrew literature only to men (Sharvit 1980:44; Goitein 1996), while women used to sing popular tunes in Arabic.

39. This is an indication that there is a picture of this singer somewhere in Helfritz's archives.

40. The two songs, 25 and 26, are performed by the same boy. I do not have enough information to document them.

41. He explicitly refers to Robert Lachmann's recordings of Kabyle music in Algeria (Helfritz 1952 (1961):116, 1977:256–259).

42. At the archive of the Academy of the Arts in Berlin.

43. For Lachmann, see Ruth Davis' paper in this issue.

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Jean Lambert is a French anthropologist and ethnomusicologist specializing in the music of Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the history of Arab music. He has published several books, among others, *Qanbûs, tarab. Le luth monoxyle et la musique du Yémen* (2013). He also published a number of live and archive recordings including *The Cairo Congress of Arab Music 1932* (a box set of 18 CDs, 2015). He is an assistant professor in the Musée de l'Homme (Paris).