Singing and dancing for freedom of movement[1]

Enacting citizenship and resisting forced confinement in "hotspot" refugee camps in Thessaloniki, Greece 2016

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Introduction

When the Balkan migration route was blocked in March 2016, many of the people trying to cross the Greek–North Macedonian border were trapped in the border area close to the Greek village of Idomeni. Despite the mass struggle for freedom of movement that followed, the border remained closed. In May 2016, the Greek police forcibly transferred 15,000 people from Idomeni into twelve run-down refugee camps, consisting of abandoned military facilities and industrial warehouses in the suburbs of Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest city, some 70 km from the border. The refugees' attempts to move forward had been thwarted and, furthermore, the living conditions in these state- and EU-run camps were unimaginably grim. Soon, these so-called "hotspot" camps became places of resistance. Backed by an extensive solidarity movement, residents of the camps started to organise protests both inside the camps themselves and in the centre of the city.

In much of the trans-disciplinary literature on refugee camps, individuals labelled "refugees" are often seen as people "out of place,"[2] as depoliticised "bared lives"[3] who "on the way to the camps […] are stripped of every single element of their identities, except one: that of stateless, placeless and functionless refugees."[4] Such approaches overlook the fact that refugees still have their own agency, but they

1 This article forms part of the author's Ph.D. project in ethnomusicology, entitled "Music in the Experience of Forced Migration from Syria to European Borderland." Since 2020, this project has been conducted within the Music and Minorities Research Center of the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): Z 352-G26.

2 Cathrine Brun, "Reterritorializing the Relationship between People and Place in Refugee Studies," Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography 83 (2001) 1: 15–25.

3 Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

4 Zygmunt Bauman, Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts (Oxford: Malden, 2004), 76.

do shed some light on the impact of certain policies on refugees' lives. Particularly in Greece, the refugee experience is usually associated with forced immobility in camps, imposed by EU and Greek migration-control policies, and by grinding asylum procedures.[5] Forced migrants are forced into a state of limbo where the absence of basic human, civil and political rights renders them completely subject to state power and often turns them into victims of unaccountable institutional violence.[6] Still, however appalling, this victimisation and dehumanisation constitutes only one side of the complex experience of forced migration and immobilisation of refugees in camps.[7]

This article examines the role of music in the everyday lives of Syrian refugees in the hotspot camps of the EU. It demonstrates music's capacity to evoke collective empathy, mobilise participation and foster acts of citizenship, shifting the imaginaries surrounding refugees from victimisation to agency and strength. Empirical research conducted in Thessaloniki, Greece, in 2016 included audiovisual and digital documentation of music and dance performances in refugee camps and during protests in the city centre as well as exploratory interviews with the main protagonists, who were mainly young men of Syrian origin.[8] This was then supplemented with online research.

The opening section of the article provides a general description of the sociopolitical and historical context of the music. The next section presents an overview of the musical expressions documented in Thessaloniki; the actors and functions; musical genres and prominent songs and dances; the musical instruments; and the means of amplifying, circulating and reproducing music. The third section offers a theoretical approach to music in the context of forced migration via a framework that considers the various stages of the refugee experience – from pre-departure contexts to those relating to the refugee journey and finally confinement in refugee camps – as crucial factors in the transforming and transformative meaning of refugees' music. The fourth section presents direct accounts from the field, particularly those of two protest singers of Syrian origin. Finally, the last section theorises

5 Nadina Leivaditi et al., Refugee Protection: Greece – Country Report (Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond Project #770564, Horizon, Report Series, 2020).

6 Jihane Ben Farhat et al., "Syrian Refugees in Greece: Experience with Violence, Mental Health Status, and Access to Information during the Journey and while in Greece," BMC Medicine 16 (2018): 40.

7 Jonathan Darling, "Becoming Bare Life: Asylum, Hospitality, and the Politics of Encampment," Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 27 (August 2009) 4: 649–665; Adam Ramadan, "Spatialising the Refugee Camp," Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 38 (2013) 1: 65–77; Simon Turner, "What Is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29 (2016): 139–148.

8 To avoid potentially harmful consequences, all of the interviewees are unnamed.

the musical expressions of young Syrian men in Thessaloniki as *musical acts of citizenship*, acts that "claim rights and impose obligations in emotionally charged tones."[9] The main conclusion is that Syrian refugees' music-making in Thessaloniki in 2016 was a means by which they recreated a community of struggle with reference to past experiences in Syria but also articulated new objectives connected to the context of their confinement in hotspot camps. Music and dance then became key elements in their goals of escaping from the camps; connecting with the social life of the city and "acting as being citizens" and, finally, advancing their struggle for greater freedom of movement.

The socio-political and historical context of the hotspot camps

The years 2015 and 2016 were marked by an unprecedented increase in the number of people who reached European countries and sought protection under the international framework for refugees. These people travelled by any possible and often risky means. In 2015 alone, of those who tried to cross from Turkey to Europe on boats, 806 people were reported as dead or missing.[10] This mass migration was triggered by a series of conflicts in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, the most prominent of which was the civil war in Syria[11] which erupted in 2011 after the regime's deadly repression of a mass popular protest movement that many Syrians termed the "Syrian Revolution."[12]

The ongoing conflict in Syria had disastrous effects on human lives (about 600,000 deaths since 2011).[13] In addition, according to the UNHCR, it forced more than the half of the population to abandon their homes.[14] In 2018, the population of dispersed Syrians outside Syria was estimated at 5,629,700, primarily shared among Turkey (63.8%), Lebanon (16.9%), Jordan (11.9%) and Iraq (4.4%).[15] In addition, it is thought that about one million Syrians (18%) have migrated to Europe

9 Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, Acts of Citizenship (London: Zed Books, 2008), 10.

10 Duvell H. Crawley et al., Unpacking a Rapidly Changing Scenario: Migration Flows, Routes and Trajectories across the Mediterranean: Unravelling the Mediterranean Migration Crisis (MEDMIG Research Brief No. 1, 2016), 5.

11 UNHCR, Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014 (Geneva: UNHCR, 2015).

12 Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

13 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Total Death Toll," June 1, 2021 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/217360/> (13 June 2021).

14 The estimated population of Syria was 21.1 million before the war. According to the UNCHR, today there are 6.7 million internally displaced persons in Syria and 6.6 million Syrian refugees. See UNHCR, "Syria Emergency" <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> (13 June 2021).

15 UNHCR, "Refugees Operational Portal (2018)" <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria> (13 June 2021).

since 2011, including Palestinian and Iraqi refugees who were living in Syria before the war and Kurdish Syrians who have long been a discriminated group in their home country. Forced migrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Cameroon and other countries have also made their way to Europe over the last decade, albeit in smaller numbers than the Syrians.[16] For instance, in 2015 alone, a total of about 850,000 migrants crossed the border from Turkey to Greece, then made their way to Central Europe along the so-called "Balkan route."[17]

The scale of this movement of people made it an important topic in the media and in EU political discourse. Usually termed the "refugee crisis," it mostly constituted a crisis of the Common European Asylum System, as developed within several EU directives and the Dublin III Regulation of 2013.[18] These migration and asylum control mechanisms are manifestations of the EU's trend towards the securitisation of migration, which seeks to develop a "strong security system to compensate for the 'security lost' by the free movement of persons."[19] In practice, this implies stricter control of the EU's external borders as well as specific measures that will render migrants immobile in entry countries or even non-EU neighbouring states. Dublin III, in particular, allocated the tasks of receiving and processing applications for international protection to specific member states, including all of those with external EU borders.[20]

Greece faced problems implementing Dublin III from the very beginning, so it was little surprise that the system collapsed completely under the increased pressure of the mass migration movement. This triggered controversial reactions within individual EU states. On the one hand, Germany's temporary suspension of the Dublin regulations was welcomed by many actors, including refugees, as a progressive humanitarian response. On the other hand, the European Commission's announcement of a new "Agenda on Migration," published in May 2015, which contained guidelines on how the crisis should be managed, not only aligned with the existing trend of securitisation but aimed to make it even stringent. Specifically, the Agenda advocated early identification of those migrants with a right to asylum and their separation from those with no such right. The former – after long bureaucratic procedures – would then be permitted to proceed to other EU countries,

16 Leivaditi et al., "Refugee Protection: Greece," 13.

17 Ibid., 5.

18 Arne Niemann and Natascha Zaun, "EU Refugee Policies and Politics in Times of Crisis: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives," Journal of Common Market Studies 56 (2017): 1, 3–22.

19 Philippe Bourbeau, The Securitization of Migration: A Study of Movement and Order (London: Routledge, 2011), 27.

20 See in EUR-Lex, "Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013," Article 13 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02013R0604-20130629> (13 June 2021).

whereas the latter would be returned to their countries of origin.[21] This strategy was subsequently implemented through the so-called "hotspot" approach. To reinforce the border regime and ensure that all migrants who entered Europe irregularly would be registered, identified and processed for either relocation or return, the EU designated hotspot areas in all "frontline" countries where entries were increasing and launched "fast-track" legal and political measures. As part of this "hotspot" mechanism, a number of "Reception and Identification Camps" (commonly known as "hotspot camps") were established in Greek border zones, such as the islands of the northwestern Aegean. These were managed by a variety of different agencies, including the Greek police and army, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), Interpol, the UNHCR, the Red Cross and other humanitarian organisations.

In March 2016, with the closure of the Balkan route and the signing of an agreement between the EU and Turkey that facilitated returns, Greece was transformed from a transit stop into a host country with a growing population of asylum-seekers. Ever more poorly equipped and badly maintained hotspot camps were erected to accommodate refugees arriving from the Greek islands and others who were forcibly relocated from the border zones. For instance, between February and June 2016, twelve hotspot camps were established in the greater urban area of Thessaloniki alone.[22] The Greek government simply rented abandoned warehouses, old military facilities and factories, usually in the city's highly polluted western industrial zone and close to the neglected rubbish dumps, then installed tents and containers provided by the UNHCR.

The four largest camps were located on the old Diavata military base, in the abandoned Softex factory and in warehouses in Oreokastro and Vassilika – each provided basic accommodation for between 1,000 and 2,000 people. Some of the camps were ethnically orientated (e.g. for Kurdish Syrians), although the majority were not. There was a constant influx of new residents, so it may be assumed that the ethnic composition of the mixed camps approximated the proportions of migrants who were arriving in Greece at the time. According to UNHCR data, 48 per cent of new arrivals in the camps between January and June 2016 were Syrians, 25 per cent were

21 See European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A European Agenda on Migration," May 2015 <https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf> (13 June 2021).

22 During that period, the "Moving Europe" political initiative created a very well-informed interactive map that shows the exact locations of the refugee camps in northern Greece <http://moving-europe.org/mapping-of-refugee-camps-in-northern-greece/> (13 June 2021).

Afghans and 15 per cent were Iraqis, of whom 41 per cent were adult men, 21 per cent were adult women and 37 per cent were children.[23]

At first, all of the camps looked more like public spaces of imposed socialisation rather than havens of safety and privacy, but this started to change when some of them started to replace the tents with container houses. Besides the forced migrants themselves, Greek police, military and other security personnel, employees of asylum services, Greek and foreign NGOs, UNHCR staff and volunteers and caterers were all on site on a daily basis.

The Greek state probably envisioned that it would be able to maintain firm control over access to and exit from these camps, but the wire fences and checkpoints it erected proved totally inadequate.[24] Residents could enter and exit freely – sometimes through holes made in the fence -, although there was nothing for them to do in the desolate surrounding areas. Inside, the living conditions were equally harsh and inhumane. Due to a lack of space under roofed facilities, tents were erected outdoors, where the temperature could reach 40°C in the summer months. Insects and rodents caused skin infections, especially among the children, and there were fires and accidents on a regular basis. Rain resulted in extensive flooding and the destruction of tents and the residents' possessions. Although NGOs offered some activities for the children, the adults were left with nothing to do during the day other than wait for the results of their relocation applications, which always took months. To highlight the appalling conditions inside the Oreokastro camp, some of the residents painted the word "Tomb" on their tents.[25] Nevertheless, some of the residents managed to keep themselves busy by engaging in financial activities, selling freshly cooked food or cigarettes, providing barbering services, or helping with the children's activities.

Although the international media reported on conditions in the camps, the voices and opinions of the residents were seldom heard in the local media. The refugees' segregation became newsworthy only when fights broke out between residents or accidents occurred. The imposed uncertainty and the migrants' loss of control over their own movement soon triggered protests and several acts of resistance. From the very beginning, local activists organised visits to the camps

23 UNHCR, "Greece Factsheet," 1–30 June 2016 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/49749> (13 June 2021).

24 In 2021, the Greek government started to build concrete walls around migrant camps in mainland Greece. See Marion MacGregor, "Greece: Migrant Camps Surrounded by Concrete Walls," INFOMIGRANTS, 9 June 2021 <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/32834/greece-migrant-camps-surrounded-by-concrete-walls> (13 June 2021).

25 Aryn Baker, "Syrian Refugees in Greece Are Moving out of Camps, and into a New Kind of Limbo," *Time*, 6 February 2017 <https://time.com/4659464/greeces-refugee-hotels-limbo-finding-home/> (13 June 2021).

with the aim of breaking their isolation and supporting the refugees' demands for better living conditions and more freedom of movement.[26]

During the first such visit, in June 2016, after the activists had installed a sound system for announcements, a group of young residents with their mobile phones in their hands asked if they could connect them to the speakers and play some music. The planned announcements were postponed and a kind of mini-festival began, with ever more people gathering around the speakers and some starting to dance in a huge circle. Many of those present soon became very emotional. Thereafter, this type of musical protest became a common feature of daily life in the camps and during demonstrations in the city centre, with some events uploaded onto the internet or even live-streamed on activists' websites.

I held a threefold position in these events as an active citizen of Thessaloniki involved in solidarity initiatives, a student of musicology and a player of the Middle Eastern oud. The performances were so unique that I was motivated first to start documenting them and later to try to understand what they meant for their actors. Bridging potential gaps in understanding between refugees and local communities, due to language barriers, certain expectations and a variety of class, gender, cultural and other factors, became one of my research goals. Ethnomusicological scholarship on music and forced migration, as well as on music and minorities, provided the theory and method I needed to examine more closely the role of music in these particular experiences of the Syrian refugees I encountered in Thessaloniki.

An overview of documented musical expressions

Before long, every protest featured music, singing or dancing. The main protagonists in these musical protests were young Syrian-Arab men who mainly sang modern Arabic pop songs, with topics relating to the Syrian uprising and their ongoing experiences as refugees, and danced to a popular Syrian genre known as *dabke*. The singing and dancing usually preceded the protests. Two young men would often approach a microphone connected to the speakers and simply start to sing, without any background music to accompany them. Their singing was inspirational, and sometimes punctuated by slogans, but the main reaction was often bewilderment among the mixed audiences of refugees and local activists who could not understand Arabic.

26 An example of this mobilisation was the organisation of an international "No Border Camp" in Thessaloniki in July 2016. The initiative running this project published a multilingual newspaper to facilitate communication between the refugees and local society <https://noborder2016.espivblogs.net/noborder-newspaper/> (13 June 2021).

If the singing was mainly directed towards other members of the Syrian-Arab camp community, the *dabke* dance routines soon became popular with other nationalities in addition to the Syrians. *Dabke* is best described as a genre stemming from folk Middle Eastern dance music, which developed during the 1990s into a modern genre of popular music, namely *musiqa shaʿbiyya*.[27] It features lively electronic beats combined with emulations of traditional instruments like the mijwiz generated by synthesisers and vocals with lyrics in colloquial Arabic. *Dabke* is commonly broadcast – or played live – in Syria and danced during weddings and other festivals.

In Thessaloniki, the participants in dabke– most of whom were young men – generally assembled in a circular or linear formation with their hands clasped together, then performed a variety of steps, although most of the dances were characterised by repetitive stamping of the left foot. The lead performer, whose dance moves tended to be more elaborate and sophisticated, would decide when it was time to move from one routine to the next and then signal this to the other participants. Children would often join the end of the line and attempt to emulate the more basic moves. In one party at the campus of Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, camp residents, students and activists danced in huge concentric circles and spirals.

Speakers, mobile phones, digital networks and the internet all played key roles in these musical expressions. First, most of the tracks were downloaded from YouTube or other online platforms. Second, refugees and activists would often record and/or live-stream performances on Facebook pages they had created to raise awareness of living conditions within the camps, to organise acts of resistance and to establish lines of communication between the residents and potential supporters. Third, the refugees used mobile devices to maintain an emotional connection with their former lives in Syria, whether by listening to and singing their favourite songs or by practising religious rituals. Fourth, participatory aspects of networks such as Facebook helped to provide some relief from the monotonous daily routine of life in the camps. With that in mind, the activist group Refugee TV organised a talent show – *Refugees Got Talent* – in the Oreokastro camp.[28] Contestants performed a wide variety of musical genres on a range of instruments. For

27 Shayna Silverstein, "The Stars of Musiqa Sha'biyya," 6 August 2020 <https://norient.com/academic/new-wave-dabke> (13 June 2021).

28 An interview with members of the Refugee TV team can be found in Charalampos Tsavdaroglou, "'Refugee TV' and 'Refugees Got Talent' Projects Affective and Decolonial Geographies of Invisible Common Spaces," in Contested Borderscapes: Transnational Geographies vis-à-vis Fortress Europe, edited by Dionysios Gouvia et al. (Thessaloniki and Mytilene: Invisible Cities Research Group, 2019), 177–194. <https://aoratespoleis.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/contested-borderscapes-4.pdf> (13.06.2021).

instance, an oud player and his son sang "Safarna Al Euroba"[29] ("On Our Journey to Europe"); a young man from Raqqa sang in a style that was popular in his home city; and two young girls sang a rap song. Votes were cast online, and the organisers reported that the camp residents' enthusiasm for the event exceeded their expectations.[30]

Besides the protests, there was more casual, less organised music-making in private tents – which, given the lack of space and the close proximity to neighbouring tents, often became more or less public events too – and in cafés and private apartments in the centre of Thessaloniki. In these contexts, the preference was usually for old popular Arabic songs that the singers identified as "*tarab*." This music had the power to drive some singers and/or audiences to something approaching individual or collective ecstasy – the literal definition of the word "*tarab*." Meanwhile, international and Arabic pop music, hip hop and even heavy metal were played at children's parties and group activities in the camps and the city centre. In at least two of the camps, larger tents were converted into makeshift mosques from which the daily call to prayer – the *adhan* – was broadcast through loudspeakers.[31] And, finally, some residents played their own musical instruments, including ouds, guitars, darbukes (a type of drum) and sazes.

Music and forced migration

There is a saying among those who study music in the context of migration: music goes where people go. Nevertheless, ethnomusicology's main premise is that music becomes meaningful within specific social and cultural contexts. If these con-

29 Original title in Arabic: اوربا ع سافرنا . Written by the Syrian pop singer Nidal Karam (now resident in the Netherlands) to describe his own refugee experience, "Safarna Al Euroba" was widely circulated among Syrian refugees on the internet in 2015 and 2016.

30 There is a documentary about this contest, "Refugees Got Talent," directed by Theopi Skarlatos for Al-Jazeera, which provides valuable information about the situation in Thessaloniki's camps and the roles of music and mobile technologies in the refugees' daily routine and resistance, specifically in the camp of Oreokastro. It is available online at <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2017/03/refugees-talent-170323115635234.html> (13 June 2021).

31 According to Michael Frishkopf, although melodic recitation is an important feature of Islamic religious practice, the Arabic terms mūsīqa and ghinā' (singing) have secular connotations and do not correspond to religious performances of melodic chants. Thus, even though, acoustically, the adhan sounds like what is commonly termed "music," it is not necessarily experienced in the same way by individuals from different cultural backgrounds. See Michael Frishkopf, "Islamic Hymnody in Egypt: Al-Inshād al-Dīnī," in Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 6: The Middle East, edited by Virginia Danielson et al. (London – New York: Routledge, 2002), 165–176.

texts are rapidly transformed due to social, financial or environmental crises, or indeed forced migration, then consequent transformations might be expected in the music itself and the ways in which it is meaningful. As Adelaida Reyes suggested, in addition to being an expression of cultural traits relating to their homeland, the music of a migrant group is likely to constitute a response to shifting realities and emerging social conditions in their new environment.[32] Drawing on refugee and forced migration studies, Reyes also suggested that every possible aspect of forced migration should be taken into consideration when studying the music of migrants, particularly those designated as refugees. Hence, researchers should pay close attention to pre-departure circumstances, encounters with conflict, the migratory journey itself, institutional labelling and control, and finally the conditions refugees face when reaching their final destination.[33] In addition to revealing how migrant groups adjust themselves – and their music – to new environments, this approach highlights the importance of social, political and cultural interactions, as well as the power dynamics that develop between migrant groups and wider society, in the development of music.

Of course, it should be noted that this is a very general approach. Identifying tens of thousands of people with a variety of cultural, political, social, gender and other experiences solely as "refugees" simply because they happen to originate in one country and move to another runs the risk of neglecting their individual and collective diversity and the power dynamics of their interactions with one another. To take the case of Syrian forced migrants, it is imperative to consider the intersecting categories of ethnicity, class, gender, religion and political affiliation that were key features of pre-war Syria's heterogeneous society. Within a total population of roughly 21.1 million,[34] 80–85 per cent were Arabs, 10 per cent were Kurds (mainly Sunni with a Yazidi minority, all of whom suffered cultural and political discrimination for many years), 4–5 per cent were Turkmens, 3–4 per cent were Assyrians (mainly Christians) and 1 per cent were Armenians.[35] In terms of religion, 74 per cent of Syrians were Sunni Muslims, while 13 per cent were from other branches of Islam (e.g. Ismailis, Shiites, Alawites and Druze), 8–10 per cent were Christians (Eastern Orthodox, Catholic or Maronite) and there were small Yazidi

32 Adelaida Reyes, "Music and Tradition: From Native to Adopted Land through the Refugee Experience," Yearbook for Traditional Music 21 (1989): 25–35.

33 Adelaida Reyes, "Music and the Refugee Experience," World of Music 32 (1990) 3: 3–21.

34 World Bank, "Population, Total – Syrian Arab Republic" <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=SY> (13 June 2021).

35 Mustafa Khalifa, "The Impossible Partition of Syria" (2013) <https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/storage.arab-reform.net/ari/2013/10/02101305/Arab_Reform_Initiative_2013-10_Research_Paper_en_the_impossible_partition_of_syria.pdf> (13 June 2021).

and Jewish communities.[36] The country also hosted approximately 500,000 Palestinian and 1.2 million Iraqi refugees.[37] Half of the population lived in cities, and there were deep urban–rural class and educational divides.[38] Entrenched patriarchal values, coupled with political, religious and legal constraints, rendered Syria's women significantly less powerful than their male counterparts.[39] Finally, the authoritarian Assad regime has held power for more than half a century, during which time it has restricted freedom of speech and artistic expression, outlawed unionisation, banned independent political parties and ruthlessly suppressed all forms of anti-government protest with deadly violence. For instance, in 2011, when Syrian protesters joined the Arab Spring movement and started to demand democratic reforms, the authorities reacted by ordering snipers to shoot into the crowds. The violence rapidly escalated into civil war and then a proxy war in which a number of states and armed militias attempted to assert control over the region. The carnage not only drove almost half of the Syrian population to leave their homes but also created polarised groups of migrants. After realising that the progressive demands of the Syrian uprising in the domain of civil and political rights would remain unfulfilled, the young organisers of the musical protests in Thessaloniki explained that they had been forced to flee Syria because they refused to join any of the remaining warring factions. This was a decision that left them vulnerable to attack from both the government and Islamist militias, with the latter playing an increasingly dominant role in the conflict, especially after 2013.

Although the complexity and heterogeneity of pre-war Syrian society and the individual characteristics and personalities of the migrants themselves mean there is no such thing as a uniform experience of forced migration from Syria, a number of commonalities may be identified: the high-risk nature of the journey due to strict border controls; the migrants' loss of control over many aspects of their own lives, including their security, especially if they end up in refugee camps; temporary or permanent deprivation of basic human rights due to the migrants' categorisation as "stateless"; and ill-treatment at the hands of particular EU member states and often hostile local societies. Even though forced migrants from Syria who make their way to Europe are entitled to protection under international law, all the above fac-

36 Bureau of Democracy – Human Rights and Labor, United States Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report, 2011" <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2011religiousfreedom/index.htm?dlid=192907#> (13 June 2021).

37 Heritage for Peace, "Demographics" <http://www.heritageforpeace.org/syria-country-information/geography/> (13 June 2021).

38 Jo-Anne Dillabough et al., The State of Higher Education in Syria Pre-2011. (London: Council for At-Risk Academics, British Council and University of Cambridge, 2019).

39 Freedom House, "Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 – Syria" <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4b99011dc.html> (13 June 2021).

tors render them relatively powerless. Thus, Syrian refugees may be perceived as socially, politically and legally delineated minorities.

Ethnomusicological research has found that power asymmetries between dominant and weaker groups – such as those that prevail due to the spatial, political and social segregation of refugees from mainstream society in Thessaloniki – can play a determinative role in minorities' musical expressions and responses.[40] It is my contention that the musical expressions of Syrian refugees in Thessaloniki are linked to both their pre-departure circumstances and their experiences during their journeys. In particular, they resonate not only with the political conflict back in Syria but also, following adaptation to a new context of confrontation, with the closure of borders and the EU's hotspot approach to the accommodation of refugees.

Accounts from the field

During my time in Thessaloniki, "Janna, Janna" ("Paradise, Paradise") was one of the most popular songs in the city's refugee camps.[41] When asked about it, one of the protest singers immediately associated it with the start of the Syrian revolution, the protest movement and the ensuing violence and repression, and explained that all of the songs they performed in Thessaloniki were sad.[42] I asked him to sing it for me, but he said that only a large group could convey the true depth of the song's sentiments by singing – and indeed dancing – in unison. He stressed that singing was psychologically beneficial because the music connected him to his past but also allayed some of his harsher memories. In addition, he believed that the protests would help him achieve his ultimate goal – to leave the camp and move to another part of Europe.

Another protest singer revealed that he had started singing in public during the anti-regime protests back in Syria.[43] He insisted that singing could play a key role in any protest movement because of music's power "to create feelings." Moreover, it enabled the protesters to attract more support and to subvert their representation as terrorists or foreign provocateurs in the government-backed media. Music had always been a central feature of everyday life in his home town, especially during social events and local festivals, because "without music and singing [any gathering of a large group of people] has no meaning." As he classified protests as social events,

40 Ursula Hemetek, "History, Theory and Methods of Minority Research in Ethnomusicology: The Past, the Present and Visions for the Future," in World Music Studies, edited by Regine Allgayer Kaufmann (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2016), 93–112.

41 Original title in Arabic: جنة جنة

42 Based on an interview conducted by the author in Thessaloniki on 25 October 2016.

43 Based on an interview conducted by the author online on 13 July 2020.

he suggested that they would be similarly "cold" and "soulless" without musical accompaniment. Singing, for him, was a means to create and maintain a sense of collectivity and common purpose among the young protesters in Thessaloniki and to stir emotions among their audiences, including non-Arab speakers who could not understand the precise meaning of the words. However, in non-protest contexts, he preferred to sing old popular or improvisational love songs, or even *tarab* songs, to evoke memories and create a sense of relief for himself and his companions.

Musical acts of citizenship

Rather than being a tool to promote a specific political agenda in the narrow sphere of institutionalised politics, young Syrian refugees' musical performances in Thessaloniki became political in the sense of what Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen term "acts of citizenship":

> [D]eeds that […] disrupt habitus, create new possibilities, claim rights and impose obligations in emotionally charged tones; pose their claims in enduring and creative expressions; and, most of all, are the actual moments that shift established practices, status and order.[44]

In a similar vein, the ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino insists:

> The arts are founded on the interplay of the Possible and the Actual and can awaken us from habit. The arts […] are a type of framed activity where it is expected that the imagination and new possibilities will be given special license.[45]

Moreover, he suggests that certain types of music-making, such as group dancing and singing, foster collectivity, voluntary engagement and direct pleasure, and therefore contribute to the "fundamental habit change" that "is required to forge lasting alternative forms of citizenship."[46] Following this line of thinking, it is worth considering that participatory musical expressions might be the best means of articulating and empowering values linked to social change, especially in contexts where citizens' rights are either unprotected or simply ignored.

In March 2011, the Assad regime's "Kingdom of Silence" was disrupted by mass protests that often included performances of *dabke* music and dance routines, collo-

44 Isin and Nielsen, Acts of Citizenship, 10.

45 Thomas Turino, Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 17–18.

46 Thomas Turino, "Music, Social Change, and Alternative Forms of Citizenship," in The Handbook of Artistic Citizenship, edited by David J. Elliott et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 298.

quial-Arabic or local-dialect pop music and reworkings of folk wedding songs with modified lyrics.[47] These empowering musical choices reflected the social importance of the protests, while their dissemination on social media encouraged further participation and counterbalanced state-backed propaganda.[48] Although the demonstrations were violently repressed, they may be seen as public acts of citizenship that ruptured Syria's socio-political habitus, created new citizens and used music to articulate and renegotiate the values of freedom (*al-hurriye*) and dignity (*al-karama*).[49]

Conclusion

The musical protests in the hotspot camps of Thessaloniki illustrate how musical meaning can be transformed during refugees' journeys in response to depoliticising and dehumanising external factors. Moreover, they highlight the importance of refugees' individual and collective creativity and agency in the process of turning camps into "hyper-politicized spaces."[50] Young Syrian men performed their songs and dances in the midst of a stringent European border regime and its harsh local implementation in Greece to create visible and audible communities of reference in the struggle for greater freedom of movement across borders and greater respect for their basic human rights. Although most of their songs owed a large debt to Syria's musical traditions, the performers also made full use of innovative tactics that had first emerged in the anti-Assad protests of 2011. Therefore, it could be said that the musical performances in Thessaloniki's refugee camps echoed the earlier struggle for freedom and dignity in Syria, albeit amended in response to a new context of repression. The young protesters used their songs and dances to transform themselves and the other residents of the camps from "stateless" individuals into "active citizens" and thereby issued a powerful challenge to conventional notions of statehood and citizenship and indeed to the EU's refugee regime. Hence, their musical performances – first in Syria and then in Greece's hotspot refugee camps – could

47 Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country* (London: Pluto Press, 2016); Shayna Silverstein, "Syria's Radical *Dabka*," *Middle East Report* 42 (2012) 263: 33–37; Sadam Issa, "Ibrahim Qashoush's Revolutionary Popular Songs: Resistance Music in the 2011 Syrian Revolution," Popular Music and Society 41 (2018) 3: 283–301.

48 Miriam Cooke, Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution (New York: Routledge, 2017).

49 The Syrian Revolution is often termed the "Revolution of Freedom and Dignity." See Malu Halasa et al. (eds), Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline (London: Saqi Books, 2014).

50 Simon Turner, "What is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29 (2016): 139–148.

be interpreted as acts of citizenship that the singers employed not only to recreate a sense of belonging to a community of shared values but also to influence political decisions that would have a profound effect on their lives in a context where the right to be political had been withheld.