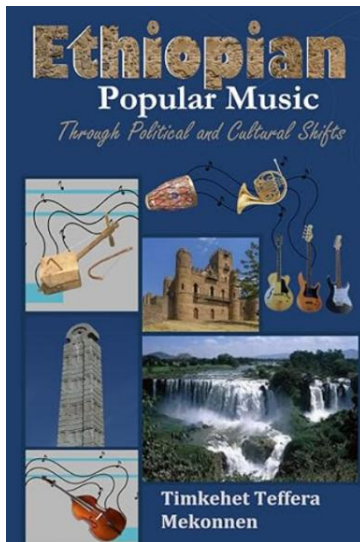




REVIEW ESSAY ON “ETHIOPIAN POPULAR MUSIC THROUGH POLITICAL AND CULTURAL SHIFTS” BY TIMKEHET TEFFERA MEKONNEN, 2024. WROCLAW: AMAZON PRINT

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Abstract

This review essay has been overdue for a long time. Popular music, as well as Ethiopian music, is rarely the focus of current research by musicologists or ethnographers. This might be an opportunity to bridge the gap and do what needs to be done. Ethiopia, an important country with many connections, offers more than just simple examples in music. Both the author and the field of African area studies deserve support in this endeavour.

Keywords

Ethiopia, music research, popular music, band developments, individual achievements

Such works of monumental significance (comprising 478 pages) focusing on parts of the world linked to the flow of European and Asian cultural influences are rarely reviewed in detail. This is an attempt to do just that. The book comprises a collection of articles, essays, and papers presented at various international conferences, symposia, and workshops. However, the author compiled and worked through all these research outcomes from the perspective of popular music in Ethiopia. It is widely unknown whether the author considers the commercial necessity of their development; however, starting with Chapter 4, there is an attempt to discuss musicianship in a more specific context, focusing on professionally educated and employed musicians within commercial contexts like recording studios, record labels, and entertainment venues. The compilation also serves as a testament to the structural shifts that these musicians have influenced. Unfortunately for music enthusiasts, the text primarily consists of song analyses and links to official videos, which aim to provide further insights.

Targeting both book and video lovers, the author has organized the text clearly into seven chapters following an introduction that includes the most needed acknowledgments, a list of abbreviations referring to writing styles in the Ethiopian language, and a list of figures used in this book. Then, right away, the author starts with an introduction of the chapters, followed by detailed issues regarding the most basic observations of popular music in Ethiopia. All pictures and tables are properly labeled with content descriptions and sources, although some dates may be missing (for instance, the score on page 141). Copyright issues are not mentioned except for the book producers in a general way, which makes additional remarks unnecessary. The book also tries to accommodate

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readers familiar with the Ethiopian language, but it always comes back to English. This seems to be a good approach for the audience, as well as the use of simple language and not the expected complicated academic style. Most welcome is the unpretentious print, which allows for a lot of creativity for the author and the readers, who may learn to detect easily hidden meanings.

Chapter 2, without further denomination, goes straight to two parts of the book: *The Adwa Victory: New Waves of Alien Music* (46–57) and *Armenian Legacy in Ethiopia and the Birth of a Fanfare Band* (68–77). Both parts of Chapter 2 are highly interesting to the overarching topic, and hence, they are placed at the beginning of the book. The first part offers a lot of political insights from both personal observations and officially documented ideas. The shift started from here. The Armenian musicians encountered during travels to the Near East were obviously not matched by people within the reach of the country. They were imported first with strict contracts, which were soon converted into longer stays based on employment. Chapter 2 also dedicated some paragraphs to musical instruments that were used during this time and were of national interest, highlighting their importance for representation and performances in those remarkable times.

Chapter 3 might be the core chapter of the publication, primarily detailing the emergence of music bands in Ethiopia. Nobody should be surprised that the very beginning of commercial music bands dedicated to the modernization of repertoires and the distribution of a rather passive joy is connected to the defence system of Ethiopia during the period between the 1940s and the late 1970s. This chapter is the most intriguing regarding song-text analyses and depictions of determining historical value. However, there is an issue with numbering throughout all chapters as can be easily seen in the contents list at the beginning. Nevertheless, all hints, quotes, and captions can be exactly traced, which is important to prove the given statements, for instance, about Frank Zellwecker and his role in establishing a general jazz formation (97–98).

Chapter 4 talks about first bands surrounding the centre of power and its extensions, starting with *Formal Training and Its Impact on Musicianship* (137–141), the *Musical Mastery at the Yared Music School (YMS)* (142–153), and the final section on *Ethiopia's Private Music Bands and Their Artistic Essence* (154–164). It is visible from the introduction of some of the most popular bands, for instance, the Ras Band. Although these sections are independent, they connect well with Chapter 3. There is a slight hint that song-texts and artistic essences may reflect different ideas. This is interesting, but not further followed, as it would disrupt the stringency with which the author goes for the explanations of current music consumption in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 (165–266) is rather dedicated to highlighting crucial individuals, for example, Negradas Tessema Eshete's recordings, marking an era of significant recordings. Without these recordings, the music—often referred to simply as songs—could not be effectively distributed. The author provides detailed descriptions of song-texts, life events, and steps toward becoming a music legend, creating a good picture of the era. Additionally, the mention of individuals surrounding these musicians, such as the couple Holtz (179) and others, contributes to the entire biographical context. Again, the author is basically making a strict distinction between song-texts and music in general (184). Although this asks for more theory, there is a limitation regarding time spans. The author turns to productions within Ethiopia, using Amha Records as an example. That is seemingly the ultimate innovation. However, it mainly established better regulations for advertisements, which were executed with precision and became memorable due to this publication.

Chapter 6 deals with a later era, starting from the 1970s to the early 1990s. It is the time of the so-called Revolution in Ethiopia (267), which ended the royal dominance. The following years were marked with insecurity, overshadowed by propaganda imitations and widespread piracy. The unquestioned focus on song-texts is one of these imitations. Additionally, there was a strong emphasis on the use of keyboard instruments, particularly the organ, which had a notable influence on structural designs and melodic shapes of commercially produced music in Ethiopia (288). It made many previous attempts superfluous, which was not always well received. A kind of nostalgia lived among musicians and musicologists of that time, who looked with wet eyes on the **golden era**, which was best described as the **previous times** in Chapters 3–5. In small steps, theoretical issues deriving from that are unpacked and introduced. There is even the attempt to *Navigate Past and Present Perspectives on Ethiopian Popular Music* (299). The author tries to show continuities and

to mark popular music as creative. Yet, this attempt is just one among many others. Too many terms are just taken without further convincing explanations. For instance, what was seen as Western music or notation? It is widely known that there is not much classical music performed, and only a few classical composers have clear copyright options. The significance of five-stave notation is also questionable, as it remains unclear how essential it truly is.

Nevertheless, the author tries her best not to disappoint the readers with details on the musical lives of some legends in Chapter 7 (310–464). Here, the author shifts back to the described **golden era** by the musical lives of legends such as Buzunesh Bekele, Sahle Degago, Girmay Hadgu, Shewandagen Weledeye, Tilahun Gessesse, Tezera Hailemichael, Zewge Gebremedhun, and finally Lemma Demissew. Each of these individuals is remarkable and widely recognized in Ethiopia. While this list is not exhaustive, it suffices for the time being. They are also nicely summarized in tables and translations. Many thanks go to the author, who may not have fulfilled all formalities but left us with a stunning work on popular music created by Ethiopians, a book that should not be missed in any library or private musicological collection.

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