



Fado and the Place of Longing: Loss, Memory and the City

Richard Elliott

Farnham, UK: Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, 2010

ISBN: 978-0-7546-6795-7 (HB)

RRP: £60.00 (HB)

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Sometimes referred to as Portuguese blues, *fado* has become a rather trendy 'world music' genre in recent decades. The Portuguese word 'fado' means 'fate', and the mournful voice and emotionally stylised performance style of *fadistas*, as well as the nostalgic and fatalistic themes of loss, love and despair of *fado* song, are deeply entangled with Portuguese national sentiments and cultural history. It is particularly associated with the back alleys, cafes and shady figures populating the poor quarters on the steep hillsides below the Castelo de São Jorge in the city of Lisbon, where *fado* emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. This urban folk music is also characterised by the distinct tinkle of the drop-shaped Portuguese *guitarra*, and the all important quality of *saudade* – a Portuguese word that conveys multiple meanings of sorrowful yearning and loss.

Richard Elliott's *Fado and the Place of Longing; Loss, Memory and the City* explores the changing contexts for *fado* practices in the second part of the twentieth century. It is a nice fit with Ashgate's Popular and Folk Music Series, established to publish popular music research that expands the theoretical and methodological horizons beyond those of musicology. Elliott draws on a wide range of literary, visual and musical sources, as well as theorists in a range of disciplines, as he sets out to examine not so much the music itself, but a "fadoscapes" (2010, p. 180) – the interlocking processes in which *fado* mythology and ontology of place, loss, memory and mourning are presented, re-presented and reconfigured. Hence, *fado* devotees who expect the book to fill a gap in English language work on the music itself may be left yearning for more. However, scholars who are looking for ways to understand the complex dynamic of (any) music as mediating local and global place-making, memory and deeply held national sentiments and imagination, as well as the authenticating role of recording technologies and global commercial production, may find the book intellectually inspiring and analytically rich.

The chapters move gradually from theoretical density to more descriptive overviews of musical contexts, recordings and performers of contemporary *fado*. Chapter One, "Songs of disquiet: mythology, ontology, ideology, fadology", outlines the mythological themes and musical styles of *fado*, and how these have been reproduced and reinvented in essentialised but contested terms of origins, race, nation and Portugueseness. Elliott proceeds to challenge *fado* sentimentality as specifically

Portuguese by “zooming out” of the world of *fado* to consider other “grammars of nostalgia” (2010, p. 30). He provides a well informed theoretical discussion about loss, memory, melancholia and urban place and space, drawing on a diverse range of thinkers such as Edward S. Casey, Sigmund Freud, Samuel Beckett, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and singer-songwriter Nick Cave. The theoretical strands are further explored in the concluding section of the chapter, appropriately focussing on the uncontested queen of *fado*, Amália Rodrigues, who “remains the single most paradigmatic performer in modern Portuguese musical culture” (2010, p. 51).

Chapter Two, “Taking place: the role of the city in *fado*” illuminates the central role of Lisbon in *fado*. Elliott approaches the city as a “memory theatre” to show how the combination of word, music and gesture in *fado* “performs place in a very particular way, summoning up a mythology that attempts to trace the remembered and imagined city of the past via a poetics of haunting” (2010, pp. 70, 65). The chapter becomes a walk through “the sounded city” (2010, p. 90) of Lisbon that *fado* conveys and represents lyrically. We walk in conversation with literary writers such as Italo Calvino and Fernando Pessoa, and theorists of space and place such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Yi Fu-Tuan. Theories of the practice of everyday life, sounded experience, music and spatiality are tied together with memory and loss as conditions of urban modernity and postmodernity, themes that are further developed in Chapter Three, “‘Trago *fado* nos sentidos’: memory, witnessing and testimony in *fado*”. Shifting emphasis to the temporal aspects of *fado* song, Elliott here develops his ideas of “the city of Lisbon and *fado* songs as bearing witness to each other” (2010, p. 97). Using Derrida, Barthes and Pessoa, and writers such as Paul Ricoeur, Jorge Luis Borges and Edgar Allan Poe, *fado* is discussed as a testimony of everyday city life and people; a process of presenting and re-presenting aspects of the past in the present in which something is inevitably lost.

This line of thought is applied to the recording of *fado*, in which sounded and lived experience of real and imagined place, and sentiments of fate, become fixed, unburdened and lost at the same time. Concluding with an analysis of what is enacted and passed on in *fado*, Elliott discusses performances of the hauntingly beautiful *fado* poem and song *Ó gente da minha terra*. I recommend readers to view and listen to online video clips of the performances when reading this section, as it highlights the issues raised in the chapter, including the role of recording and performance technologies for constructing “sonorous moments” of *fado*/fate.

Chapters Four (“New citizens of the *fadista* world”) and Five (“Tudo isto ainda é *fado*? *Fado* as local and global practice”) change the mental pace considerably with their descriptive and detailed overviews of performers of *novo fado* – the local and international ‘new *fado*’ scene that has emerged in recent decades. The main focus is on the broader Portuguese and global popular music contexts, mass media and networks, as well as economic and political forces that shape contemporary styles, careers and recordings of *fado*. These chapters address one of the questions Elliott is trying to answer in this book: “to what extent global mediation has become ‘necessary’ for the memory of the local to be voiced” (2010, p. 5). The answer that “the very factors that threaten to destroy *fado* as a local practice are simultaneously the conditions of possibility for *fado* to continue” (ibid.) is not a new insight. But this doesn’t detract from the highly valuable contribution this book makes to the field, by providing novel combinations of ways of understanding and thinking about music as mediating intimately felt place, memory and loss.