Review

Shelleg, Assaf. *Jewish Contiguities and the Soundtrack of Israeli History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 279 pages.

I'll begin with two general statements: first, this book is a tour-de-force of a brilliant mind, rich with new ideas; it should reside on any musicologist's bookshelf. Second, due to its political agenda and extreme views, it cannot, however, serve as a sole source of information or knowledge about the history of Israeli music.

Assaf Shelleg offers some original ideas that do contribute to a better understanding of the historical and cultural processes that Jewish music went through. Particularly enlightening is the phenomenon of auto-exoticism, in which Jewish composers deliberately adopt "Orientalist clichés" from music of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as East European onto-vernacular stylistic elements adopted from Ukrainian and Roma transforming them into musical topics of "Judaism." The book is also rich with musical examples and analyses that throw new light on several compositions, in some cases for the first time.

Like most "New Musicology" books published in the last few decades, *Jewish Contiguities* is focused on the connections and mutual influences between music and its political, cultural and social environment. In this particular case the focus is on the relationship between compositions created by Jewish composers, mostly those residing in Israel, and the State's political, cultural, and social history, covering the time period from as early as the beginning of the 20th century to the aftermath of the traumatic 1973 war. This historical chronology is divided into four parts, preceded by a general introduction. Each part contains several sections, each dealing with one of the issues/composers named in the introduction. Each part and many sections open with expansive quotations that, in Shelleg's opinion, are relevant to the cultural, political, or social background of the subject discussed, albeit without a clear connection to the compositional "soundtrack" that is supposed to be the core of the book.

The general introduction presents the author's main views of the "Jewish soundscape" and its transformation into an "Israeli" one. The first pages of the introduction set the tone and the agenda of the book. Titled "Jewish Contiguities: Translocated Pasts Facing the Levant," the Introduction opens with a long quotation from Amos Oz's novella "The Hill of Evil Counsel" (1976), from which Shelleg chose the phrases that include references to the night sounds of a 1946 poor Jerusalem neighborhood: classical music from a British broadcasting service, the howling of jackals, some chamber music of piano and cello, a lullaby with Hebrew words sung to an East-European tune, and the piercing screams, in Russian, of a Holocaust survivor haunted by nightmares. This desolate, hyper-realistic "soundscape of a Jerusalemite suburb on the cusp of statehood discloses," according to Shelleg, "part of the contiguities that became available in the advent of the Zionist project" (p. 2). It is important to note that the Zionist movement, that resulted in the foundation of Israel, is here presented as a "project", which, moreover, uses a "redemptive Zionist rhetoric of Hebrew culture (hereafter Hebrewism), which aimed at separating from both former exilic worlds and the Arab community of Palestine" (p. 2).

The expectation from the readers, therefore, is an acceptance of this agenda and its adjacent terminology as given facts, for which there will be no justification within the book: the following descriptions, analyses, choice of composers and discussions of their compositions, is affected by this agenda.

The cultural picture that Shelleg presents in the book is, indeed, complicated, and the many literary descriptions that he quotes serve as deliberate spotlights on particular jigsaw pieces that contribute to the whole musical culture of Israel. The book presents as its aim the presentation of a complicated scenery, full with clashing divergent trends; its commitment to a particular political agenda, however, actually inhibits a full presentation of this very multi-dimensional reality. While music allegedly represents aesthetic choices, it is also the expression of a whole psycho-social, often subconscious structure that ties into (often asymmetrical) knots of stylistic preferences, emotional commitments and ideological loyalties.

The fact that the Jewish Yishuv mostly consisted of people who were not native to the area means that it reflected a mixture of different cultural traditions and values, also opening the gate to a political "post-colonial" assessment of the situation. For example, Shelleg's choice of the lukewarm term "immigrants" to describe the nature of the approximately half a million people who resided in Palestine in the pre-statehood years is, in fact, misleading. Many of these Jewish "immigrants," if not most, arrived to Palestine by necessity more than by choice, and by any standards of today's political assessments, they would be considered "refugees." Starting with those who escaped pogroms in East Europe in the 1890s–1900s, through people who managed to leave Europe during the 1930s, just before the 2nd World War, many after losing their jobs and sources of livelihood (as were most, if not all, musicians playing in the Palestine Orchestra, founded by Huberman), and up to the last Holocaust survivors who arrived in the years 1946-1949, owning just the clothes on their back, followed by the large wave of Jewish refugees from Arab countries that expelled them, virtually carrying no material assets.

The perspective offered in the book is not only unjust, but also lacks empathy toward the social, political and cultural complexity of the Yishuv, constantly under threat by surrounding hostile Arab communities, that required political unification in order to survive. Seeing Palestine/Israel as their home was part of the newcomers' Jewish cultural DNA, and indeed was a major unifying semiotic factor, applied to their own cultural musical roots. These consisted of a mixture of East-European popular tunes; classical and classical-popular music; reminiscences of Hazzanic and liturgical tunes from home; and Klezmer-style tunes, mostly inspired by Ukrainian and Roma musics.

Part of the complexity that Shelleg does point at is that these very same musical roots, with all their diversity, were not only a part of the collective psyche but also rejected; these musical styles also symbolized the murderously hostile Europe, and also, paradoxically maybe, the ghostly personification of the "diasporic," weak, persecuted and wandering Jew, a figure abhorred by the new (renewed) proud, independent and strong Jews in their old-new homeland, and ideal that so many aspired to. And if this internal struggle of self-love/self-hate is not enough, the aspiration to become part of the cultural landscape of the Levant as the "true" historic cradle of the Jewish culture was added, leading at a fascination with Arab music (performed and used by both Palestinians and Jews who arrived from Arab countries, and particularly from Yemen), perceived as "what should be" the "true" nature of Israeli music.

Shelleg's hardly-dissimulated allegations of a governmental, or at least political conspiracy, are an unnecessary spice that turns the focus of the reader to a misleading partial post-colonial agenda and interpretation. His florid style of writing (uncoincidentally?) inhibits understanding of his core statement, camouflaging the book's agenda. For example, speaking about Hebrew literature that described –

> … popular and folk music (authentic, borrowed, appropriated, invented), and classical music, which was often a metonym for utopian or dystopian Europe. Authors and poets' stylistic radius of mainly folk and popular musics could be reasoned by the presence of the Hebrew text whose linguistic layers (ranging from biblical to modern Hebrew) were the substance from which Jewish nationalism had been animated, and by the absent diasporic European locations whose musics now carried new ideologically charged lyrics. […] Their oeuvres would soon be labeled 'Israeli art music' even if the institutionalization of this field predated statehood. But like many equivalent national tags, the term attests not only to its post-statehood coinage but also to the *presence of a steering Zionist hand* (p. 3 – emphasis added).

Shelleg's mapping of what he calls "Jewish Contiguities" is original and surprising. For example, in a scheme that distributes composers among "Europe 1910s–1930s"; "British Palestine, 1930s – Israel, 1960s"; and "Israel 1960s–1970s" we see Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Arnold Schoenberg and Ernest Bloch grouped together as part of a "non-Ashkenazi scenario," (huh?), almost as much as the strange grouping (stylistic? ideological? biographical? traditional?) of Ben-Haim and Boskovich with Erich Walter Sternberg and Stefan Wolpe. All these names, together with Mordecai Seter, Tzvi Avni, Josef Tal and Mark Kopytman are presented as "control cases." Control cases of what? Shelleg's convoluted phrasing explains that these are control cases in "a discussion on the historiography of modern Jewish art music and the musical dialectics that went unheeded during the paradigmatic shift from essentialism to anti-essentialism." Such cumbersome sentences (here's another example: "Deliberate or unintentional transgressions from what the 'Zionist Powers That Be' deemed desirable therefore shed light on a tentative and selectively culled center that prioritized exoticist euphonies donned in tonal scaffold" – p. 10), that abound in the book from cover to cover, bringing to mind a disturbing question: What is this king, actually, wearing?

On the other hand, the book is interesting, albeit needs to be read with a critical eye and with constant comparison with other views, remembering that complex cultural phenomena need to be perceived, analyzed and assessed with discerning mind, always keeping one's awareness of its multi-dimensionality. The "Soundtrack of Israeli music" presented here does stimulate thought, but truth is that there is no one "soundtrack of Israeli music," but multiple soundtracks, sometimes parallel but more often interlaced into knots and textures that need more than a one political view to be appropriately studied and explained.

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