

Hearing Israel: Music, Culture and History at 60

It is often said that Israel is a country in which music plays a particularly central role in cultural, social and even political life. Yet Israeli music – like Israel itself – is more talked about than actually studied. Part of this, no doubt, is due to the perennial challenge of defining the subject. What we hear when we set out to confront the sounds of Israel at the sixtieth year mark depends, first and foremost, on what are we listening for. If we were to take our cue from Israel's obvious Jewish historical roots, echoed in Judaism's *Shema* prayer (Hear, O Israel), we might reasonably approach Israeli music seeking to hear the sound of an undeniably Jewish nation-state that has drawn on its older religious and cultural heritage, including the Hebrew language, to fashion a modern national music. However Zionism also sought to fashion a new Israeli national music in explicit opposition to the Jewish music of the Diaspora. In that sense, we might do better to understand Israeli music as a national culture in terms of its political aims, as evoked by the phrase *Kol Yisrael* (Voice of Israel), the name of the official national radio station and a fitting symbol for the new state's quest to carefully control the form and contents of Israeli music.

Of course, beyond Jewish versus Israeli, we could easily argue that Israeli music must be heard more broadly, as a colorful jumble of competing and intermingling voices – a “musical Tower of Babel” in the words of Israeli musicologist Amnon Shiloah – loud and soft, old and new, Jewish and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Muslim, Christian, Samaritan and Druze, Ashkenazi, Sephardi and Mizrahi, Russian, Hebrew, English, and so on, that reverberate through Israeli culture. Yet parsing the larger meaning of this multicultural chorus of voices still depends on our starting assumptions about Israeli music, and Israel, as a whole. Is this polyphony the sound of Israeli democratic pluralism made manifest? Or the cacophony of competing forces representing rigid religious and national ideologies? The end of Zionism? Or the vigorous sound of its success?

Like the overall title itself, the papers in this special double volume of *Min-Ad* suggest multiple aural narratives of Israeli music. This collection grew out of a conference on Israeli music held at the University of Virginia in April 2008, the first major international conference of its kind. While Jewish music had been the subject of a huge number of academic conferences, especially in the last two decades, to our knowledge an open international conference on Israeli music had not yet been undertaken. In sending out our call for papers, we were curious to see who would respond, and what the current musical research might reveal about the vibrant interior of Israeli culture that remains all too opaque to foreign observers accustomed to focusing only on the obvious political, military, and religious aspects of Israeli society. At the same time, we wanted to subject Israeli music to a critical interdisciplinary examination that would fully recognize its complex internal diversity and larger social and cultural meaning without prejudging the results.

Venturing into a still emerging field, we were overwhelmed with the response – over sixty proposals for a two-day conference with space for only fifteen papers. Over the course of two days, a group of some twenty-five scholars from the disciplines of musicology, anthropology, history, literature, sociology, religious studies, media studies, political science and Middle Eastern studies from Israel, Europe, Canada and

the United States came together in Charlottesville, Virginia to address the theme of Israeli music at sixty.

Since the focus of the conference was on music, the nearly 150 conference attendees as well as the general university community and local public were also treated to performances by noted Israeli musical artists, Etti Ankri and Moussa Berlin. In Ankri and Berlin we found ideal representatives for the terrific diversity of Israeli music at the beginning of the twenty-first century; artists who over many decades have each synthesized a number of the supposed binaries in Israel's musical culture: folk and popular, religious and secular, East and West, Hebrew and Arabic. We were also lucky to feature a program by the Charlottesville and University Symphony Orchestra including works by Jewish composers with cello soloist Uri Vardi.

We are pleased to present a selection of eight papers from the conference here, in revised and expanded form. Others will appear in different form in other venues. The complete conference program is available at:
<http://www.virginia.edu/jewishstudies/music-conference.html>.

Together these essays offer a fascinating tour of current scholarship on Israeli music. Eschewing the favorite obsession of scholars of Israeli culture, the problematic theme of its Israeliness, these authors instead focus their attention on specific case studies of different spaces within Israeli music. Naturally enough, one of the main themes to emerge is the question of how the dilemmas of national identity and political conflict for Israelis and Palestinians are echoed in music. Three of the papers address this subject, noting the ways in which music functions as a site of heavy cultural interaction, imagined peace and real conflict. Yet interestingly, the scholars who deal directly with this theme arrive at a range of conclusions. Galeet Dardashti, for instance, demonstrates how the optimism of the Oslo era translated into frustrated attempts to broker symbolic peace through Arab musical performance. By contrast, Benjamin Brinner makes a convincing case for Arab and Jewish musicians *performing* coexistence through musical collaborations. From a very different angle, David MacDonald shows how otherwise pessimistic Israeli Arabs (also known as Palestinian Israelis) reflect their painful dilemma of national identity by pioneering a hybrid form of Israeli/Palestinian hip hop that appeals across national lines, but for very different reasons, to Jewish and Arab audiences. All of these studies reveal the ironic ways in which music complicates simple equations of Jewish Israeli music with the Hebrew language or Arabic music with Muslim Palestinians. Beyond the questions of identity, they also show how musicians stand both inside and outside the cultural markets in which they perform, simultaneously independent agents making individual artistic and commercial choices and subjects in a larger set of stories they strive to understand and affect.

The same theme of liminality appears in Jehoash Hirshberg's major study of the question of aesthetics and national identity for Israeli Jewish composers caught between East and West, Europe and the Middle East. Professor Hirshberg treats us to a continuation of his broader project of documenting the stylistic evolution of Israeli art music from its earliest roots down to the present. His work on the intermediate, indeterminate cultural geography of Israeli art music fits nicely against Francesco Spagnolo's fascinating treatment of the Israeli relationship to the musical Mediterranean as a cultural interzone. Spagnolo's intriguing documentation of Italian-

Israeli musical links reveals the presence of an important regional European dimension to Israeli music that is often ignored in the focus on its global, transnational dimensions or its immediate contacts with Arab and Middle Eastern music. Spagnolo's suggestive discussions about the role of media in forming Israeli musical identity are taken further in the groundbreaking work of Amit Schejter and C. Michael Elavsky. They provide an insightful survey of Israeli governmental policies and legislation that represent attempts to define and control Israeliness in popular music through state regulation.

There is perhaps only one scholar who could do justice to the rich variety of musical genres, themes, sources and theoretical questions that this conference raised. We were very fortunate in having Professor Edwin Seroussi as our keynote speaker. His talk, a veritable tour-de-force, not only engaged in a dynamic fashion with the other papers presented at the conference, but also offered a breathtaking personal ethnographic account of one day in the life of Israeli music. In sharing his broad scholarly insights as a pioneering founder of Israeli music studies, a path-breaking scholar, musician, educator, public intellectual, consumer, collector and citizen, he offers a brilliant bricolage of Israeli music.

These papers clearly stand on their own as academic articles; but they also very much reflect the positive atmosphere of collaboration and exchange that emerged at the original *Hearing Israel* conference. We therefore want to thank our colleagues in the University of Virginia Jewish Studies Program, Music Department, Religious Studies Department and History Department, for their considerable help in making the conference a reality. In particular, Gabriel Finder helped launch this idea and secure funding in his capacity as Director of the Jewish Studies Program and his successor, Alon Confino, embraced the idea and generously committed a huge amount of time to organizing and actively participating in the conference, during which he shared his own critical perspectives on Israeli culture and history. Finally, the current Jewish Studies Director, Asher Biemann, offered invaluable support for the publication of this volume, as did Katharine Maus, Interim Chair of the McIntire Department of Music.

In conclusion, we reserve our greatest thanks for the editor of *Min-Ad*, Dr. Adena Portowitz, for her generous invitation to guest edit this volume, and her role in shepherding us through the publication process, as well as to Dr. Morel Koren for his technical work on the online presentation of the contributions. Finally we are grateful to Edwin Seroussi for his unstinting support, encouragement and counsel, including his brokering the match between our conference proceedings and this journal.

In the months after our conference, we received the terrible news of the tragic passing of our dear colleague, Galit Saada-Ophir, *zikhronah levrakha*, who presented at the conference. A note of remembrance by Edwin Seroussi and Motti Regev follows that gives some sense of the great personal loss that also robbed our scholarly community of a fresh, engaging and intellectually potent emerging voice. We dedicate this volume to her blessed memory.

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