

The Composer Matti Caspi's Harmonic Language: A Study of the Song *Mishehu*

Preface

The composer Matti Caspi's harmonic language is the richest in musical resources to have emerged since the revival of Hebrew Song.

During the twenty years of particularly intensive creativity (1970-1990), his "creative apparatus" had no need for a process of development: it was flawless from the very beginning. Early songs such as *Shir sheli veshela* or *Ani met*, still from the period of "Shlishiat lo ichpat lahem" (a trio from his army service days) are already clad in that immediately recognizable "Matti" language. As a child he devoted himself to the study of the guitar (his favorite instrument) and the piano, and since then he has been exposed, in a completely natural, undirected manner, to all kinds of music — there was no way he could avoid listening to whatever was playing on the radio, the television, on a record or in a concert. This total internalization of all kinds of music by a son of Kibbutz Hanita shot him up to any musical heights to which he aspired and later caused him to venture on a compositional journey of renewal of his own.

In addition to his extraordinary individualism,² he is at home as an arranger, instrumentalist and singer in cooperation with many of his colleagues who feel privileged to work with Matti the entertainer, and who enjoy his easy-going humor. They marvel at the rapidity and precision with which music flows from that same "creative apparatus". At times this musical outpouring has brought with it the composition of melodies that burst out and only later are provided with words.

His compositional process can be described as one in which the mood of the song is always the starting point. Immediately after, the rhythmic image and harmonic color and character are added. If the song's words come first (he has also composed more than a few texts by poets — for example, *Eich ze shekochav*, and *Kshe'elohim amar bapa'am harishona* — both by Natan Zach, and *Beyom massa* by Moshe Tabenkin), their settings are done subsequently;³ if the words of the song creep into the process of composition, then, at the point at which the song's mood is internalized and defined by the composer and the rhythm and harmony already flow from the very same mood, the author of the words joins in and the process of creation becomes a partnership. When it happens that the melody bursts out so quickly that it is almost perfected, or less so, or even completely formulated — the author of the text becomes involved on this basis.⁴ Mention must be made here of Ehud Manor who has often cooperated with Caspi in this type of work, always at one with the mood of his songs.

1 My study of the composer's harmonic language will be published as a monograph entitled "Matti Caspi's Harmonic World".

2 During the process of composing and performing his songs, he spends much time on his own as vocalist and performer on a number of instruments.

3 Later Caspi deals with the sensitivity and seriousness of the text — down to the very last detail.

4 The whole of the album "Matti" of 1993 is in a gloomy mood, each song adding its weight to that same mood. Caspi directed the whole album in the difficult days before leaving Israel for a four-year sojourn in the United States. The sad melodies were composed first and then given suitable words by Ehud Manor.

The basic elements coming together in his work as source material for the special language he has created are extremely varied. First of all come the harmonies of the jazz world and the world of samba and bossa-nova (a strong emphasis on the rhythmic elements of Latin America is much in evidence), a rich modality in the extension of tonality to its maximum, textures and lines (most obvious are the walking basses) making use of baroque concepts, ways of constructing a motif — using and developing it as in the classical period, the best of the world of the newest rock rhythms.⁵ All these come together in Matti Caspi's distinctive creativity and merge into a tightly-knit language in which harmony is the most conspicuous element. The combination of all the elements into a single fabric is only one side of the coin; the other side — from this tightly-knit language a particular statement has emerged, easily identifiable in every single song.

These are the main elements of Caspi's harmonic language

His favorite chord is the half diminished seventh-chord (*Brit olam*); he favors the diminished fifth without the top of the triad within compounds of seventh-chords, ninth-chords and more complicated ones (*Chelek mehanof*); Caspi likes to delete notes of a chord (*Yom yom ani holech lim'onech*).

His rich use of tonality includes "Phrygianization" and Dorian moments, the interchanging of major and minor tonic, combinations of modes, chromatic transitions and surprising enharmonics.

His harmonic coloration is all-embracing — from veiled Russian-influenced sounds to unadorned jazz, and contrasts such as modal rock and blues in the minor key come most naturally to him.

From the legacy of the baroque and classical periods which he absorbed almost unconsciously — note the precision of the progression of voices within the harmony and in the bass lines (*Lakachta et yadi beyadcha*), the art of development of a motif into rich melodies (*Makom lede'aga*), different harmonizations of an identical melody as well as different melodies to an identical harmony (*Tsiporim barosh*).

In spite of this legacy, Caspi feels the need to dare to diverge from the norms; his reasons are always both dramatic and musical. He regularly uses parallel octaves (*Od yom*), the second chord often rises in the bass (*Habalon sheli*), he blurs the tonality in one of two ways — either by swinging between tonal centers (*Yemei Binyamina*) or by means of rich chromaticism (*Ir atsuva*).

Note: At this stage we are not discussing the area of his favorite rhythms — but mention must be made of their variety: the samba — bossa-nova, rock and funk as well as the "esta" of the theatre songs and the "largo" of the lyric songs.

⁵ The last is expressed mainly in the group of songs composed for Riki Gal.

The song *Mishehu*

The song *Mishehu* (words by Ehud Manor) contains some of these features as reflected in one of his most popular songs; it is one of the group of quiet songs in minor tonality.

Below are the words of the song with indications of the musical structure:

Verse A

Sections of
musical form

A	<i>Mishehu, Mishehu do'eg, Do'eg li sham lema'la...</i>	Somebody, Somebody cares, Cares for me up there above...
B	<i>Anu sovevim bishtei drachim shonot Yom valaila le'orkan.</i>	We move around in two different ways During the long day and night...
C	<i>Anu nipagesh besof drachim ushe'eilot Nipagesh betom yamim rabim...</i>	We'll meet at the end of ways and questions We'll meet after many days...
D	<i>Ani yoda'at she'ata karev achshav Aviv chalaf...</i>	I know that now you are near, Spring has passed...

[B-C-D: a type of long refrain]

Ehud Manor

The mood of the song in general

The mood of this song in general may be summarized — in somewhat poetic language — as being of a “devotional character, à la Bach, setting the atmosphere for the individual worshipper’s prayer”. *Mishehu* is indeed a prayer. The word “prayer” immediately evokes the idea of communion, of tranquility in faith. When Matti Caspi first came across Ehud Manor’s words, it would appear that, instinctively, Johann Sebastian Bach’s religious music began to exert its influence on him. And from then on he worked it over inwardly, internalized it, and what emerged was a melody fashioned from the many-faceted harmonic features in Bach’s music, primarily in his chorales. Even the soul-searching of Bach’s Passions has infiltrated here. And the slow tempo, moving quietly and peacefully, provides the framework.

The history of the song

It was commissioned for the first "Pre-Eurovision" event in 1978, after it had been decided that the annual Israeli Song Festival would serve as a "Pre-Eurovision" as well. Ehud Manor's calm words for *Mishehu* came first. Yehudit Ravits performed the song, which she immediately included in her first long-play record "Yehudit Ravits" that same year. Later Matti Caspi began to perform it regularly in his shows. Ravits' interpretation with the Israel Philharmonic in May 2000 was in a particularly slow tempo; it was impressively arranged and conducted by Ilan Mochiah who made extensive use of the orchestral strings.

Even though the song was not awarded a prize at its first hearing, it has already become one of the acknowledged icons of Hebrew Song. The "Pre-Eurovision" event, which makes for momentary hits, gave birth to one of the most important songs of the Manor-Caspi partnership.



Illustrator:
Amos Biderman,
"Ha'aretz"

The song in full with indications of all the harmonic degrees

מישהו

In Am

פילים: אהוד מנור
מוסיקה: פזמי כספי

♩ = 65

Am B[♭] Am/C Dm (E^b) D[♯] E⁷

3 mi - she - hu mi - she - hu do - 'eg do - 'eg li sham le - ma' - la ...

① ② ③ ④

I II⁷ I⁶ IV IV⁷ V⁷

Am B[♭] Am/C Dm B⁷/D[♯] E

3 לי - קם - הו - י קא בים - ק - פו - טה - ק לי - קם - נו - קם - י דו - טו דו - טו

⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧

I II⁷ I⁶ IV II⁶ V

(B⁷/E^b) B⁷/D[♯] E⁷/D A/C[♯] Am/C

א - נו - נ - שתי - ק - כים - דן נות - שו - כים - דן לו - לא - ל - יום יום

a - nu so - ve - vim bi - shtei dra - chim sho - not yom va - lai - la le - or - kan ...

⑨ ⑩ ⑪ ⑫

II⁶ V⁴ I⁶ I⁶

B^b B^b Dm/A

אֵת-לַ כְּבוֹד-יְהוָה וְלֹא-לִי וְלֹא-לְבָנִים וְלֹא-לְדָוָד וְלֹא-לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-יִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה בְּשֵׁם-יְהוָה וְיִשְׁבַּע בְּשֵׁם-יְהוָה וְיִשְׁבַּע בְּשֵׁם-יְהוָה וְיִשְׁבַּע בְּשֵׁם-יְהוָה

13 14 15

II⁷ II^b1 IV⁶

E⁷/G[#] Am E⁷ Am Am/C A⁷/C[#] Dm Dm/F D⁷/F[#]

אֲנִי-נִפְגַּשׁ בְּסוֹפֵר דְּרַחֲמֵי שְׂעֵי-לֹת

a - nu ni - pa - gesh. be - sof - dra - chim u - she - ei - lot

16 17 18

V⁶_{#1} I V⁷ I I⁶ I⁶_{#1} IV IV⁶ IV⁶_{#1}

Gm⁷ C⁷ B⁷ E⁷ Am Am/C A⁷/C[#]

נִפְגַּשׁ בְּתוֹמֵי-יָמַי רַבִּים כִּי-תִסַּח-בִּי רַבִּים לִי וְיִשְׁבַּח יְהוָה וְיִשְׁבַּח יְהוָה וְיִשְׁבַּח יְהוָה וְיִשְׁבַּח יְהוָה

ni - pa - gesh be - tom - ya - mim - ra - bim... a - ni yo - da - 'at she - 'a - ta

19 20 21

VII⁷ III^b7 II[#]₅ V⁷ I I⁶ I⁶_{#1}

Dm Dm⁷/C B⁹ Am G⁷ C⁷ Fmaj⁷

ק־רֵבְּ אַח־שָׁוֵי אֶ־חַיִּיבֵי לָ־לֵךְ כֹּ־חֵי אֶ־חַיִּיבֵי חַיִּיבֵי אֶ־חַיִּיבֵי
 ka - rev ach - shav a - viv cha - laf...

22 23 24

IV IV² II⁷ I VII⁷ III^{b7} VI⁷

Bm⁷ E⁷#^s Am

p p - - -

25 26

II^{#s} V^{#s} I

Am

Mishehu — a Schenkerian Graph

A, A_I B

$\hat{5}$ $\hat{3}$ $\hat{2}$ || $\hat{1}$ $\hat{5}$ ||

1 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

5 5 4^{1/2} 4^{1/2} 5 5 6 4^{1/2} 5 6 6

minoriz.

I II⁷ I⁶ IV-⁷_{#1} V_# V^{#4}/₂ III II⁷ II^{b1} V⁶/_{#1}

T D (T) SD D

C

|| $\hat{3}$ $\hat{2}$ $\hat{2}$ ||

17 18 19 20

10 10 10 10 7 7 10

minoriz.

I IV—⁶_{#1} VII III^{b7} II⁷/_{#5} V_#

T SD D

C
D

$\hat{3}$ $\hat{2}$ $\hat{1}$ ($\hat{5}$ —————) $\hat{1}$

21 22 23 24 25 26

10 10 7 5 8 7 7 4 8

minoriz.

I IV I VII III^{b7} VI⁷ II⁷/_{#5} V_# I

T SD D T

In Explanation of the Schenkerian Graph

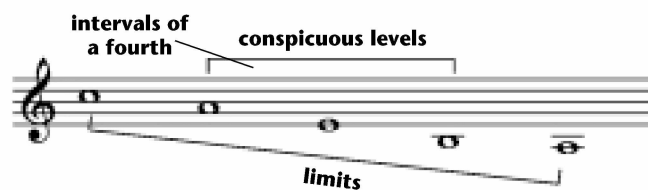
The graph makes for a fuller comprehension of the analysis of the song.

1. There is an obvious symmetric structure of 4 measures for all the large sections, except for the last section, which has 6 measures (from the words "*ani yoda'at she'ata karev achshav*" until the end) in which there is a drastic dropping off in the melody.
2. The difference between the sections is according to the level of attack at the beginning of the melody in each section:
A — The tone of the fifth
B — The tone of the octave
C — The tone of the tenth
D — The tone of the tenth (D is derived from C, in imitation of its first six tones and later in a drastic dropping off).
From this we learn that, in the extended areas, there is a steep ascending gradation as against the fixed contours in the descent in the smaller dimensions!
3. There is lively polyphonic motion between the bass and the soprano in the walking of the long lines with the bass reflecting the harmonic progressions, inspired by baroque music.
4. Sections B, C, D may be considered a long refrain — both in the music and in the words.
5. The indication of gradations in the graph is rather detailed; take note of the many sixth-chords (as in baroque music, although they are resolved differently from what is accepted in the baroque), the triads and the inverted seventh-chords of the dominant type.
6. Each appearance of the lowered supertonic is also indicated. The various contexts are fully explained.
7. The little inverted V signs (= prominent notes of the scale) are in completely acceptable order: $\overset{\wedge}{5}$ $\overset{\wedge}{3}$ $\overset{\wedge}{2}$ $\overset{\wedge}{1}$.

The musical message

- The scent of the past has wafted in our direction — this is the baroque spirit with its unlimited preeminence in music: whether in the bass steps or in harmonic progressions in general, filled as they are with sixth-chords, seventh-chords of the dominant type with their inversions, and triads, or whether in progressions of descending seconds of the sung phrases with their connotation of the clearly baroque principle of gloom. The pure triads and the relatively slow harmonic rhythm contribute to the serene mood, supplementing the power of Caspi's inexhaustibly rich language.
- The entire melody moves in the genius of the minor mode with its nuances, without modulations. This time Matti was happy to stay home...yet the varieties of the melodic, harmonic and natural minor may be discerned, and the Phrygian moments are particularly fresh-sounding — either as a lowered supertonic (m. 14) or as a means of emphasizing degrees **VII, III** (mm. 19, 24). Refer to the examples following.
- The moderate motion of the melody in seconds or in repeated tones creates small units that accumulate into clear descending contours within a very wide general range: see in the tonal diagram of Example No. 1.

Example No. 1



The structure may be seen as an interesting exception: a sort of very long refrain has been created — and this is the core of the entire song. The graph also successfully illustrates this secret inherent in the song.

Note the repeated motto with which the song begins. It is heard many times and its characteristic stamping rhythm stands out against the melody itself which immediately starts to flow freely.

A detailed analysis of the song

M. 1

The repeated recitative-like tone presenting the rhythm of the word *mishehu* creates the motif that becomes the motto of the song. It is repeated many times.

M. 2

The II^7 degree in the structure of the half diminished chord appears in four places and this reinforces the fact that it is an important harmonic motif. It returns in the exact form in m. 6, then again in m. 13 in a different context and in m. 22 in a particularly prominent appearance as the climax of the harmonic process.

M. 4

This is a good example of a baroque process in which the chords move in opposite direction to the melody (even though the tones of the seventh are not resolved in the usual manner). The diminished seventh-chord on the raised subdominant in the minor scale is a baroque-classical characteristic, preceding a dramatic emphasis at a specific point (see Gluck's arias).

Mm. 9 — 12

The successive chords containing inversions of seventh-chords of the dominant type with their normal resolutions now intensifies the baroque feeling. At the moment when V^2 resolves to I^6 (between m. 10 and m. 11), a very special combination of tones is created between the melody and the chord: Caspi provides an interval of a third between the soprano of the chord and the melody ($\text{E} - \text{G}\sharp$), and a perfect fifth between the melody and the bass ($\text{C}\sharp - \text{G}\sharp$) stands out against the general harmonic coloration of the A major chord; in m. 11, because of the $\text{G}\sharp$ in the song's melody, we suddenly hear a I^7 in the form of a major seventh-chord erected on the $\text{C}\sharp$ in the bass! This is a clear peak in a localized majorization process — from which Matti retreats unexpectedly in the next chord while executing descending parallel fifths (Example no. 2).

Example No. 2



Mm. 14, 19

In both these measures the lowered supertonic appears. It is always fresh-sounding. We may compare the two measures, particularly since they represent different contexts of the lowered supertonic (Examples 3, 4).

Example No. 3

Am B \flat

אֵת - לֹא - יָדָעוּ - אֵת

II b1

This chord appears within a process of descending half-tones in the bass. This Neapolitan II is most surprising after the routine II⁷ that preceded it. This momentary “Phrygianization” (B \flat) may be seen as delaying the natural descent from II⁷ to IV₄⁶ which does, however, appear as the next chord. The transition creates, amongst others, parallel octaves between B \flat and A, but the F in the melody smooths out the differences between the two measures.

Example No. 4

Am Gm⁷ C⁷

וְיָדָעוּ - אֵת - לֹא - יָדָעוּ

VII b III b⁷

This time the lowered supertonic serves the stringent minorization almost as a deviation to the scale on the VI = the relative major (F Major). In addition, in this measure the bass starts descending into the depths, which causes a shiver to run through us. It also accompanies the descent of the melody that intensifies as it continues. The severe minorization belatedly clarifies the first hint given us in this direction in m. 14.

M. 16

There are also versions of the last quarter of the measure performed with $V^{\#4}_3$ instead of $V^{\#}_7$.

M. 20

The dream of completing the journey in the scale of F major has faded. We anticipated an F major chord in this measure but Matti Caspi surprises us with an opposing severe majorization: a seventh-chord on the supertonic with all the raised notes possible, as a secondary dominant to $V^{\#}_7$.

The chord $II^{\#}_5$ is surprising, chromatic and daring, and seems to say: enough of fooling around with the minorization of the lowered supertonic — let's return to our original scale of A minor. But no! Not so! See what happens at the end of the song (Example No. 5 below).

Mm. 21-22

II^7 (the half diminished seventh-chord) was mentioned since it first appeared in m. 2. It makes its last appearance in this song at the end of m. 22 at the climax of the process which returns us to the feeling of the standard A minor; it receives increased emphasis because of the gradual transition to it: $IV - IV^2 - II^7$.

Mm. 23 — 26

See the harmonic evolution towards the end of the song in Example No. 5:

Example No. 5

Am

The musical score consists of a melody line and a piano accompaniment. The melody is written in treble clef and starts on the note A. The piano accompaniment is written in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). Above the melody, the chords are labeled: Am, G7, C7, Fmaj7, Bm7, E7(b9), and Am. Below the piano part, Roman numerals are provided: I, VII⁷, III^{b7}, VI⁷, II^{#5}, V^{#6}, and I. A circled number 23 is in the first measure of the piano part.

This VII⁷ calms and refreshes.

Again the lowered supertonic. This time the freshness of the minorization of the lowered supertonic is at its height since the transition to the F major area (the sixth degree) occurs, even though on a tonic which is a major seventh-chord. We understand that these minorizations became more and more stringent during the progress of the song until the appearance of the lowered supertonic here, for the last time.

The chromatic transition from F \flat in the preceding measure to F \sharp stands out clearly. Again, in this measure, Matti Caspi departs from the F major = a natural VI, moving to the II in a melodic minor, and the majorization brings its own reward by leading to the appearance of the fifth degree with the leading tone in the next chord.

This is a unique harmonic V in which the fifth tone of the chord is raised; it may be interpreted as a contrapuntal delaying of the actual tone of the fifth or as a tone of the sixth replacing that of the fifth. The "blues" feeling of this last V is particularly conspicuous in the song since it serves, at this point of the song's conclusion, to indicate the merging of the natural modal minor with the V, which ends off as a strong dominant chord containing the leading tone.

In conclusion, the analysis of Matti Caspi's song, *Mishehu*, introduced us to the rich features of the composer's harmonic language. Eluding to distant traditions, the careful voice leading procedures, within the harmonies and in the bass, perhaps indicate a Baroque influence, while the rich sounds of the Minor Phrygian mode combine with hidden Russian sonorities. Looking towards the future, there is no doubt that Matti Caspi's songs deserve to be included as part of the curriculum of advanced harmony studies.⁶

⁶ My forthcoming study of the composer's harmonic language (2007), "Matti Caspi's Harmonic Language", will include in depth analyses of forty songs, similar to the one presented here, further enriching our understanding of the composer's boundless harmonic language.