

Review

***Popular Music and National Culture in Israel*, by Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi. Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 2004. Paperback, 308 pp., ISBN 0 520 23654 8**

The study of popular music in Israel is a relatively new field. Although it has a history of more than a century, since the beginning of the Zionist establishment in Israel in the late nineteenth century, the bulk of this genre was created after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

The few studies of the popular music of Israel's Jewish population that were carried out before the 1980s dealt mainly with the genre known as "Songs of the Land of Israel."¹ From the early '80s until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the range of subjects covered by this research was expanded. "Songs of the Land of Israel" still played a central role,² but other categories of Israeli popular music, such as "Oriental" or "Mediterranean" music,³ and Israeli rock,⁴ were also studied, as was the influence of foreign music on Israeli popular music.⁵ Another field of research developed in the early twenty-first century was the detailed analysis of the musical and linguistic characteristics of composers and poets whose work was set to music. This music, too, belongs to the category of "Songs of the Land of Israel."⁶

The book reviewed here differs from previous studies in that it provides a broad, overall view of popular music in Israeli society. It is the first attempt to survey Israel's popular music as a complete field of research. It does not concentrate on the diachronic aspect of the history of Israeli music, or on the musical characteristics of the various styles. It provides a broad picture of popular music as a central component of the efforts to create a national Israeli culture.

The authors' basic claims are:

- a. In Israel, the concept of a new nation is deeply linked to the creation of new culture and art.
- b. Popular music in Israel is an important area, in which the definition of the new culture undergoes simultaneous processes of construction and competition.
- c. Popular music is the most prominent symbol of "Israeliness," and is the most convincing proof of Israel's existence as an "indigenous," or authentic, entity.

The theoretical framework of the book is the research field of national cultures. In their research, the authors emphasize two central themes: the links between existing national cultures and the earlier cultural entities from which they were created; and the existence in every nation of different cultural forms— regional, ethnic, class and religious.

Another question connected with the study of national cultures is the issue of cultural globalization. The authors point out that globalization makes the concept of a single "national culture" questionable. Moreover, within the national state there exist subgroups, and other subgroups within them—and the fact that they exist also raises doubts about the existence of a national culture within the modern state. Today, there are three versions of

¹ See Smoira-Cohen 1963; Shmueli 1971; Cohen and Katz 1977.

² See Bayer 1980; Shahar 1989; Hacoheh 1993; and Eliram 2000.

³ See Cohen and Shiloah 1985; Halper, Seroussi and Kidron 1989; Horowitz 1997; and Feingold 1996.

⁴ See Regev 1990, 1992.

⁵ See Toppelberg 2000; and Goldenberg 2005.

⁶ See Wagner 2005; Shahar 2005.

national culture, each of which is, in effect, the foundation, the creation, or an imagined version of the collective identity: the pristine or traditional version, which was generally founded and created at the time when the nation came into being; a globalized version, in which elements of contemporary global culture are combined with traditional elements, resulting in a modern contemporary national culture; and, thirdly, a variety of sub-national version, in which old or new groups create a separate identity, other than the traditional national identity. The existence of these three versions may be interpreted either as a state of pluralism or as an indication that the nation no longer exists as a single cultural community. But those who represent these versions often share a common ideological belief in a single nationality, and consider that the cultural community is congruent with the state. Thus, the different groups are in constant conflict over the definition of the dominant national culture. Typically, one group holds that it is traditional, is in possession of a generally acknowledged cultural heritage, while the other groups struggle to achieve recognition and legitimacy.

Regev and Seroussi link the field of national culture with that of popular music. They maintain that it is generally recognized that music in general, and popular/folk music in particular, is an essential cultural instrument for the construction of a modern collective, whether national, ethnic or other, and for the creation of a sense of place. Popular and folk music serve as a cultural symbol. In the second half of the twentieth century, new popular trends emerged, such as rock and pop, which should also be recognized as national music. The basis of the contention that popular and folk music can represent basic ethnic and national collective existence is the special potential of music as a system of symbolic representation. Israeli popular music, which is the core of this book, is considered in the theoretical framework of the study of national culture and popular music as part of that field.

The book's contention is that the creation of popular music and its acceptance in Israel have very clearly been influenced by the commitment to create an authentic "Israeli national culture." This commitment was part of a deep belief in the concept of "one nation with one culture" that was dominant in cultural activity in Israel throughout the twentieth century. In the course of time, as a result of the aspiration to create a musical expression of secular "Israeliness," distinct popular music cultures were created.

In the authors' view, three musical cultures constitute the subject of the book: Songs of the Land of Israel (Israeli folk song); Israeli rock (which is cosmopolitan); and Oriental music (popular "ethnic" music). These three main cultures are the most significant from the point of view of their historical context, the extent of their presence in the media and in public discourse, and their ties to broad sectors of Israeli society. One of the authors' central contentions is that these three musical cultures have no melodic style or local variety of music that can be called "Israeli." Nor are they alone: there are many other different styles of popular music in Israel. The book concentrates on these three musical cultures because they are the main components of "Israeli" music. The authors say that, had they related to all the other musical cultures, it would have been difficult to present the complex subject of "Israeliness" in music. They suggest that any future study of Israeli popular music should include two more musical cultures: that of the Orthodox Jews, and that of the Arab sector.

The book's main concept is that popular Israeli music should be understood first and foremost as a leading sphere in the symbolic representation of "Israeliness." The authors see it as an arena in which a number of musical genres and styles, representing the musical cultures of Jews with differing ethnic and social backgrounds, contend for supremacy. Each of these styles and genres considers itself to be "true" Israeli music. The book describes the changes in Israeli popular music over the first fifty years of the State's existence as an attempt to create and develop authentic local Israeli music.

The first section of the book includes the opening chapter, which claims that Israeli culture is composed of a number of subcultures: "Hebrew" culture, "global" Israeli culture,

ethnic-Oriental Israeli culture, religious Israeli culture, and Israeli Arabic culture. The second chapter deals with the institutions of popular music in Israel, including the system of musical education, the *Histadrut* (the biggest trade union in Israel), the communications media—radio, press and television, and the music industry (recording companies).

The second section of the book considers the connection of popular music with the Israeli national ideology. In the third chapter, the authors discuss “Songs of the Land of Israel”: the definition of this genre; the characteristics of its songs; songs of the Land of Israel as a form of popular music; literary aspects of the genre; processes of “canonization;” various aspects of their performance, such as broadcasting in the media; and the publication of the repertoire. The fourth chapter deals with songs that were popular before the establishment of the State and in its early years. There are accounts of the Hebrew theater, from its beginnings; popular songs that were written for various plays; cafés and their role in the development of popular music; prominent culture stars who performed popular music; popular genres from the outside world that were adopted by the Israeli public; Tel Aviv as a center of popular music in the early years of the State; and musicals as a source of a broad repertoire of popular songs. The fifth chapter deals with the Israeli army’s entertainment groups and the songs they created, including their stylistic development and their influence on popular music. The sixth chapter describes the phenomenon of festivals of popular songs, which grew and developed from the 1960s onwards: song and singing competitions, with their different styles at different periods; and various types of festivals, such as the Festival of Oriental Song, the Festival of Hassidic Song, and children’s song festivals.

The third section deals with Israeli rock music. Chapter 7 discusses the processes whereby Israeli rock has evolved, starting from the early 1960s. It surveys the first groups to perform this genre, and the most prominent soloists who influenced its development. The eighth chapter describes the way in which Israeli rock became an established element of Israeli popular music from the 1980s on; it discusses the central figures who continued the early rock style and turned it into the most fashionable genre of popular music in Israel. It also discusses other types of rock, such as alternative rock and ethnic rock.

The fourth section deals with what is known as Oriental music in Israel. Chapter 9 explains the process of the development of “Oriental” or “Mediterranean” music. Chapter 10 describes how this genre became an established part of Israeli popular music during the 1990s, and includes a discussion of the roots of this genre in the music of the Jews of Yemen and North Africa, as well as in Greek popular music. It explains the social context of this type of music, the music industry that supports it, the different styles it embraces, and explains how Oriental music became an established part of the Israeli national culture.

The book’s primary conclusion is that Israeli popular music reflects, quite simply, the fact the Israel is a multicultural society. Therefore, there is no single Israeli identity. The identity of Israeli society embraces many types and forms, and its music reflects this fact. The authors conclude that, although there is as yet no answer to the question of Israeliness in music, those who are active in this area still feel themselves obliged to relate to it.

Regev and Seroussi point out that, despite their conclusion that it is impossible, in the course of the history of the State of Israel and the Jewish community which preceded it, to speak of a “typical Israeli music,” a complex process has taken place whereby the combination of various influences and mutual links between the different approaches and groups has produced a body of popular songs that may be considered a “canon”; and this “canon” is considered by the Jewish Israeli public to be “pan-Israeli.”

The struggle over “Israeliness” has generated systems of borrowing, adoption, modification and adaptation—not only of stylistic components of a particular musical culture by musicians of a different culture, but also of a repertoire of outstanding and important songs. Songs that originally belonged to a particular musical culture are to be

found in the context of other musical cultures. They are adapted to the typical tonal structures and methods of performance of other musical cultures, and are performed in several cultural contexts.

The authors attribute great importance to the connection between Israeli popular music and globalization. The underlying assumption of the book is that popular music in Israel is no different from the national sphere of popular music in other countries. The variety of influences and the profusion of musical cultures in Israel are similar to what is happening in popular music throughout the world. Because of the short and concentrated history of popular music in Israel, however, it can be examined as a test case to explain the connection between the globalization of culture, the desire for a local and national identity, and popular music. Israeli popular music is described as being representative of the concept of combining cultural processes that involve homogeneity and crystallization with approaches that promote diversity and uniqueness. The three musical cultures described in the main part of the book exemplify this theory very well. Oriental music, whose self-image is of local Israeli authenticity, is also linked to stylistic aspects of the Turkish Arabesque, the Greek Laika, and the French Algerian Rai. Similarly, the typical instrumentation of this music, which includes synthesizers, drums, and electric guitars, makes this style part of the global genre known as “world beat.” This music contains many aesthetic elements common to other genres and styles, which are also considered to be representative of the unique collective identity of other world cultures. Israeli rock, too, shares many aesthetic and formal characteristics and components with Anglo-American rock, as well as features similar to certain versions of ethnic rock in different parts of the world. Land of Israel songs, which today have the status of “national folk music,” and some of which are considered to be popular music, have become the Israeli parallel to the local music that exists in various parts of the world.

I think it of some importance to make one comment, which does not detract from the value of this book. In several places the authors claim that “it is impossible to show that there is any typical Israeli music” (pp. 240, 242). As far as I know, this question has not been the subject of any research. Such a definite conclusion would have to be based on far-reaching musicological and ethnomusicological research, comprising musical analysis and comparison between all the existing styles and genres. Only when such a project has been completed, will it be possible to decide whether a typical style of Israeli popular music does or does not exist.

In conclusion, Regev and Seroussi’s book is the first to consider Israeli popular music as a subject for research in the framework of the field of international study of national culture. Moreover, it surveys an exceedingly wide range of popular music in Israel, in most of its genres. This wide vantage point makes it possible for this study to be the basis for further research in a variety of fields, including, among others, ethnography, sociology of music, ethnomusicology, musicology, and musical education.

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