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Israeli Plurivocality: Music as a Field of Contestation

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Abstract: Israelis produce a staggering amount of contrasting musical voices, generating a dense sonic cloud of musical memories that at once compete and complement each other, clash and harmonize, conflict and blend. Interpreting the Israeli soundtrack clarifies the complexity of a society marred with contradictions but also blessed with an unprecedent vitality for musical creativity.

Keywords: social tensions around the content; transmission and consumption of music; ideologies; policies and diffusion.

That music in Israel is a field of symbolic social interaction in which contested visions of Israeliness are displayed needs no further elaborations. Such contestation is expressed in various venues and levels of socializing: what is and is not included in the playlists of state-run radio stations; how much public money is allocated to performing artists and organizations; what should the curriculum of music education in public schools include (and not); what is worthy and unworthy music in public spaces; what should be played in state rituals and memorial days; what music should represent the state abroad. Clearly, such social tensions around the content, transmission and consumption of music are not unique to Israel, but rather inherent to the mechanisms of any multicultural modern state and that means nowadays, almost all states. The uniqueness of the Israeli case lays, I would argue, in the extreme concentration of divergent musical traditions, tastes and memories occurring in a short time span in a very crowded country whose population (until very recently) consisted mostly of immigrants.

Thus, at the heart of the Israeli musical contestation are musical repertoires and performance practices imported by continuous waves of Jewish immigrants arriving first to Ottoman Palestine, then to British Mandate Palestine and finally, after 1948, to the State of Israel. The main, but certainly not exclusive, point of contention confronted advocates of the enculturation of all immigrants into a mainstream musical culture (at times defined with the American concept of "melting pot") and those who resisted total integration and argued in favor of a plurivocality (at times defined by another American term, multiculturalism). Mainstream musical culture was conceived and dictated by the dominant political forces and their agents, primarily through the state-sponsored educational system, monopolistic record companies, centralistic music publishing operations, control of major performing stages, and state radio and television stations.

Resistance to grey-out policies appeared first in the form of informal venues of performance, small recording labels, and since the early 1970s, direct reproduction and distribution of music through a new revolutionary medium, the cassette.

All sides in this dissent have claimed ethical, aesthetical, and memorial rationales to justify the primacy of one or another repertoire as foundational to the nation's identity. Put differently, contesting positions claim that the type of music each one proposes as worth of "representing the nation" ensures better human beings, refined artistic taste and reaffirms the historical authenticity of a variety of musical narratives. What this short paper attempts to do is to untangle some processes underlying not the foundation stages of the social contestation in the field of music in Israel but only some of its present manifestations. In the second part of the essay I shall discuss in some detail one unique Israeli musical institution, the Andalusian Orchestra, as an example of how the musical culture of Israeli took (and is still taking) shape out of a constant give and take of the political, economic and aesthetic interests of sub-national associations based mostly on the country of origin of its members or their forefathers.

Israel as a Musical Kaleidoscope

The ecology of music in Israel today, as in any modern liberal and democratic state, is determined by diverse interest-groups competing for power and resources. Music is generated and sponsored by state agencies and by the private market. It is deployed by the music industry and the mass media (including the digital one), and it is transmitted from generation to generation by a wide spectrum of music education instances, from formal and collective public school programs to very informal and private tutoring. In short, music creativity in Israel is inevitable caught, from its beginnings, within the triangle of politics of identity, economics, and aesthetics.

First, some observations on music and politics. Israel is, as mentioned above, a unique nation-state. It can be considered at once as the result of a national liberation movement modelled in the 19th century European frame, a colonial enterprise and a post-colonial entity, all pending on who you ask. At its base it carries strong Central and Eastern European emancipatory Jewish currents, the result of a modern rebellion against the primary role of religious practice and legislation as the basis of diasporic Jewish identity. This social basis of the Zionist enterprise transplanted from Eastern Europe (mostly from the former Czarist Empire) to the ancient/new territory (Zion) claimed by the Jewish national liberation movement encouraged the primacy of Western music as well as modern modes of musical nationalism rooted in Europe. The latter is expressed in the role of folksong as a focus of enculturation into the national commonwealth and the faith in music

education as a tool for the improvement of the citizen's communicative, motoric, and emotional skills.

In spite of claims by Zionist ideologues that religion ceased to be the main bond between Jews as a nation and that the "negation of the Diaspora" was its new ethos, Zionism full-fledged adopted as its own secular symbols and values deeply ingrained in religious practices. Thus, early Zionist musical enterprises included paradoxical products. On the one hand, there was a drive to create a new Hebrew secular song (conceptualized as "folk" but in fact composed) that would be liberated from previous modes of Jewish music. On the other, modern Hebrew lullabies and community dances were based on "diasporic" Yiddish songs and Hassidic tunes from the Old World. Even more ironic were orientalistic trends that advocated musical renewal through a return to the "authentic" remnants of Jewish musical antiquity arguably preserved by the autochthonous Arab population of Palestine. Thus many new Hebrew songs were set to Arab folk tunes or to pseudo-Oriental ones.

The musical culture of the Zionist settlers in Palestine (and abroad, for it crossed the geographical barriers of the Middle East into Zionist youth organizations spread from Vilnus to Baghdad) did not operate in a vacuum and as soon as it emerged was problematized by other musical realities. Since the turn of the twentieth century significant waves of Jewish immigrants from the Islamic sphere soon started to move to Palestine. Jews from Yemen and Bukhara (Uzbekistan), Kurdistan and Baghdad, Morocco and Salonika, brought to the new land additional musical capitals. Soon they became the object of the ethnographic gaze by European musicologists (first among all, Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, 1882-1938; see Schleifer and others 1986) and composers, opening additional venues of musical creativity.

A high degree of heterogeneity then characterized the music of the Jewish community in Palestine from its very foundation. As the national Jewish enterprise took shape during the British Mandate (1918-1948) further immigration waves challenged that incipient musical scene, enriching it immensely but also complicating its mechanisms of production and funding. While the scene of Western art music benefitted tremendously from the German, Austrian, Polish, Rumanian and Hungarian Jewish immigration of the 1920s and 1930s. Those same new European immigrants imported practices of urban popular music that also gained track in the growing cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. At the same time, increasing waves of immigrants from the Islamic world, imported to Israel expert practitioners of Arabic, Turkish and Persian music as well as their consuming publics (for an overview of musical migrations and music in pre-State Israel, see Hirshberg 1995).

The new Jewish state apparatus through its tight control of the media and the educational agencies attempted to enforce upon all its citizens a certain curriculum that will

instill in them a national music consensus, a goal that from the get-go was bound to fail. The steady grow of private access to music through recordings, cinema and live performances challenged any attempt of musical enculturation. Unique hybrid musical configurations, a testimony of the rich tapestry being elaborated in Israel's social laboratory, started to emerge in the late 1970s (Seroussi 2012). Eventually the opening of the Israeli mass media to the free market since the late 1980s coupled another massive waves of immigration since the early 1990s, this time from the Soviet Union and Ethiopia, changed the local musical scene forever (for the Ethiopian musical scene in Israel, see Shabtay 2003; Herman 2012). Israel was exposed as any other country, to globalizing tendencies, and pop-rock music, in its very diverse modes (including the own Israeli brand of "Oriental" pop music called *Musika mizrahit*), became dominant in the public soundscape at the expense of older song genres (see Halper, Kidron and Seroussi 1989; Regev 1996; Regev and Seroussi 2004; Saada-Ofir 2006, 2007; Seroussi 2008/9; Horowitz 2010), such the amorphous corpus usually labelled Songs of the Land of Israel (*Shirei Eretz Israel* in Hebrew; Seroussi 2015) and certainly classical music. Even the enclaves of a growing contingent of non-Jewish foreign laborers, mostly African, enriched Israel's soundscape (Kanari 2005).

The complexity of the musical scene described above cannot be addressed in such a short essay. Therefore, we shall focus on one genre of music as a case study from which we can start to disentangle the complex musical equation of politics of identity, economics and aesthetics addressed above. Our case study is Andalusian music, a topic that was raised during the IPO-KEYNOTE Conference in relation to the Andalusian orchestra of Israel.

Andalusian Music in Israel

Let me introduce you to Andalusian music in its Jewish and Israeli expressions. Since the 9th century, the Andalusian Jewry in the Iberian Peninsula became an Arab-speaking culture immersed, especially among the elites, in the local Arab arts and adapting them to the Hebrew language. In spite of the Christian Reconquista of Spain, Andalusian Jews continued to maintain their Arab music culture also in continuous interaction with the Maghreb (Western North Africa). Massive immigrations of Jews from Iberia to the Maghreb took place following the percussions of 1391 and the final expulsion of the Jews in 1492. The expulsion ended a long historical journey but also reinforced the presence of the Andalusian Jewish stock, consisting by the end of the fifteenth century of Romance language speakers, in the Maghreb. The new incomers settled especially in the northern cities of the coast (especially in Tetouan), in the imperial centers of Fez and Meknes and in Western Algeria. In the course of time, Andalusian Jews moved to southern Morocco, to cities such as Essaouira and Marrakesh. Moroccan and Algerian Jews perpetuated their Andalusian musical practices until their

massive immigration to Israel, France and the Americas in the second half of the 20th century (Chetrit 2011).

This shared Judeo-Muslim musical experience in the Maghreb cannot be perceived exclusively through the lenses of modern categories of ethnic and religious identity. Unequal power relations between Jews and Muslim, reflected in periodical persecutions, were not detrimental to their sharing musical capitals. This understanding of Jewish-Muslim relations that circumvents modern idealizations, derives from a sober interpretation of daily strategies of living together in spite of periodical upheavals.

This historical background is indispensable to understand that the variegated musical genres falling in modern times under the aegis of the rather modern concept of "Andalusian music" (*Al-Ala* in Arabic, literally instrumental music; see Davila 2013). This music became the "classical," "courtly," or "art" music of the Moroccan Muslim elites, a sense of prestige that Maghrebi Jews also shared. Andalusian music had therefore two strands: an Arabic and a Hebrew one. Andalusian Hebrew music developed parallel to and in daily interaction with the Andalusian music of the Muslim majority, catering at times to the specific needs of the Moroccan and Algerian Jewish communities.

Andalusian Hebrew Music performances take place in various Jewish spaces and social contexts: synagogues, other sacred sites particularly the burial sites of holy men and households. Within the synagogue, Andalusian Hebrew Music includes two major repertoires. The first one is the performance of the normative liturgy; the second one included non-normative religious assemblies called *Shirat HaBakkashot* (Heb.: "Songs of Seeking"; see, Seroussi 1986). Pilgrimages to holy sites were the stage for the performance of songs in honor of saints. In the space of the home, one could find repertoires associated with celebrations of life cycle events, most especially weddings.

Andalusian Hebrew Music is overwhelmingly vocal; mostly a capella and only partly with the accompaniment of small traditional ensembles characteristic of Andalusian Arabic music: the 'ud (lute), rebab (traditional violin), alto (viola, adopted following the French colonial presence in the Maghreb), and tar (small frame drum). To this ensemble additional instruments were added in the second half of the 20th century, Arabic one (such as the qanun, ney and darbuqqa) and Western (accordion and, in Algeria, the piano and other types of luths). Andalusian Hebrew Music is the realm of the males' voices; only in the modern period female singers entered performative spaces but only on family occasions such as weddings and *henna* parties. The texts performed in the various contexts differ. While the synagogue liturgy is exclusively in Hebrew (with few prayers in Aramaic), para-liturgical gatherings, life cycle repertoires and pilgrimage songs combined Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic and *matruz* (combined) texts.

Many expressions of Andalusian Hebrew Music have no parallel in Muslim repertoires; they are a unique Andalusian musical capital kept by Jews, while others are identical to the

Muslim practice except that they are in Hebrew (or Judeo-Arabic). Maghrebi Jews in the diaspora, mainly in Israel and France, still practice most of the Andalusian Hebrew Music repertoires in their synagogues, pilgrimage sites and family celebrations.

Bearing all this important historical background in mind, the massive immigration of Moroccan Jews to Israel from 1948 to 1965, one of the largest Jewish contingents to resettle in Israel, shifted the center of Andalusian Hebrew Music practice to a new state whose musical establishment and institutions were through and through European. To put it as succinctly as possible the process of rooting Andalusian music in Israel we should stress that this rather modern construct emerged from the politics of music identity of Arab states and societies outside Israel. The Andalusian music narrative was a major intellectual enterprise of the new, post-colonial nation states called Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. As we have already noticed, these societies absorbed the colonial category of "classical music" with all its technological and pedagogical implications, such as the use of musical notation and conservatory curricula, as a strategy of self-assertion and to distance themselves from the ruling colonial European power.

With the rise of the politics of ethnic identity in the Israeli society in the early 1970s, politicians of Moroccan origin instrumentalized Andalusian Hebrew Music as a cultural capital through which they could express their grievances towards the European-dominated establishment in the public arena of musical performance. Two major cities of southern Israel, Ashdod and Ashkelon, who had a substantial Maghrebi Jewish population, were the cradle of the rise of Andalusian music from its limited communal role to wide state public attention. Moroccan Jewish politicians who gained control of these cities started to allocate budgets to the developing of schools and ensembles of Andalusian Hebrew Music. Finally, in 1994, the Israel Andalusian Orchestra was founded as an ensemble with the direct support of the Israeli government (for the strategies of this orchestra in negotiating with the state, see Aharon-Gutman 2013).

Basically what these Moroccan Jewish politicians did was to adopt the same musical strategy as their Muslim counterparts of Morocco and Algeria, but not at the service of constructing a modern post-colonial nation-state but rather to foster a sub-national collective based on shared ethnic roots and memories. This Maghrebi Jewish collective did not aspire to separate itself from the European-dominated Israeli state apparatus but exactly the opposite; following a nationalist logic that accepts *a priori* the very European idea of a Jewish nation-state they aspired to play a role in making the Israeli Jewish nation sound differently. They wanted the Israeli sound to resonate with the music of their country of origin, however not with any music of that country but with the prestigious Andalusian "classical" (this is a key word in the present discussion) music, the music of the Moroccan King's Palace transmitted by the state-controlled Moroccan radio and TV on Friday

afternoons. As one of the ideologues of Israeli musical Andalusianism put it to me, if our music is ethnic and not classical then Beethoven's music is ethnic music too.

But music and politics is a more complicated subject. By aspiring to design the Israel Andalusian Orchestra as a Western symphony orchestra, and in fact not as any orchestra but as the Israel Philharmonic, the mother of all orchestras, the displaced descendants of the venerable Moroccan Jewry in Israel showed themselves as utterly internalizing Western colonization. Thus, the sheer size and composition of the Israel Andalusian Orchestra substantially transformed the sound of the music. To the traditional ensemble, large Western string and winds sections were added. This move was possible because in the early 1990s Israel was blessed with a massive immigration of professional musicians from the former Soviet Union. That this surplus of skillful performers landed on the shores of Ashdod and Ashkelon at precisely the same time that colonialized musical Andalusianism showed up on the map of the politics of ethnic identity in Israel may or may not be considered as a coincidence. Be as it may, the leaders of the Andalusian orchestral movement in Israel saw in the hiring of "Russian" musicians a crowning jewel in their nationalist agenda: 1) they, the Oriental Jews, provided work to new immigrants from Europe and facilitated their integration into the new society, the most Zionist of any social action one can think of; 2) they were able to stage a vivid sonic proof that Andalusian music is compatible with those who were trained to played "European ethnic music". Furthermore, the orchestra adopted all the protocols of the symphony orchestra, an audience that seats quietly and attentively in an acoustically enclosed space and an apparatus of public relations and marketing department selling subscriptions. It also engaged in a massive project of transcription of a basically oral tradition and its necessary orchestration, the last one a concept that had no paragon in the Arab Andalusian music. This task became possible because an individual Moroccan Jew, Dr. Avraham (Avi) Eilam-Amzallag, the first musical director of the Andalusian orchestra happened to be a Western conservatory-trained professional musician and a university-trained musicologist. Again, the political will of the Andalusian music movement in Israel could not have been turned into action if it had not benefitted from the access to an individual gifted with the musical training and deep knowledge necessary to turn an idea into reality.

To conclude this discussion of music and politics of identity in Israel as seen through the prism of the Andalusian orchestra and to move very briefly into to state-sponsored musical education, let me stress that the Andalusian orchestra, and this is not a very well-known detail, grew out of an educational drive. The Merkaz le-fiyyut ve-shira (Center for Piyyut and Singing) founded in Ashdod in the mid-1980s, the milieu from which the orchestra emerged, started as a school to teach a specific repertoire of Andalusian Hebrew sacred songs from Morocco and Algeria that in itself developed as a sort of musico-poetical hegemony within the Moroccan Jewry in Morocco. This school substituted the traditional

venues of Andalusian music transmission, the synagogue or the private tutoring. This is a fascinating issue that I can only mention here but not discuss. The students of this center were accompanied first by small ensembles, as was customary in traditional performance venues, but the ensemble grew into a chamber orchestra that eventually grew into a larger one, facilitated by the Russian musicians' immigration as I have already observed. Put differently, an educational goal was always a priority of the Andalusian orchestral operation.

Two important final notes. First, the Andalusian orchestra did not render obsolete the small traditional ensembles of Andalusian Hebrew Music. Such ensembles continue to exist (sometimes led by soloists of the orchestra) in more traditional frameworks, mostly in synagogues and other religious institutions as well as in family festivities, especially in weddings. Second, after winning the prestigious Israel Prize in 2006 for its contribution to society, the Andalusian orchestra collapsed in 2009 due to financial mismanagement and insolvency. It was resurrected but split into two (or more, depending on the point in time) ensembles. The use of the title "Andalusian orchestra" has been since then an issue discussed in the courts.

Concluding discussion

All music is political. Sound is a natural resource domesticated by humans for countless needs of survival. As such, music is just one category of the sound structures that surround us and the most politicized of them. The ways music is conceived, performed, transmitted, received, protected and forgotten reflect our needs to manipulate sound as individuals and as collectivities, from the level of the family to the level of the nation-state or the global human community. Music matters because it generates physical pleasure. It is a medicine for the soul, but also creates and maintains sonic boundaries of class, gender, ethnicity and nationality and frames the indispensable rituals that allow us to survive and make some logic out of the chaotic reality in which we live. Music also affirms our sense of place, it marks territories with non-verbal sound. But music also generates an economy of sounds; it has monetary value, and its circulating objects, tangible or intangible, are marketed, sold and purchased. If all music has a political import and all music is not divested of pecuniary interests, then musical education is a mechanism of political instruction as much as it trains individuals for the market of sonic objects.

Curricula of state-sponsored musical educational systems are part and parcel of power relations over what is the right path to train a musical citizen. What I have tried to show with the Andalusian orchestra example and its educational infrastructure is how musical memories and tastes combine with frames of thinking about the role of music in

expressing sub-national identities without shattering the integrity of the Jewish state. In other words, how can you act subversively without subverting the larger social framework.

Convinced that the Andalusian Hebrew repertoire will not become part of the state-sponsored school curriculum and of the Israeli soundscape unless heavy political pressure is built toward the central government, the Moroccan Jewish politicians opted for a long-term plan. Their strategy consisted of three components: ensuring survival (funding of older singers and instrumentalists who still carried the Andalusian musical practice from their experience in Morocco and Algeria), nourishment (establishing a school where young Israelis could learn Andalusian music) and general public display (making the large orchestra a vivid presence in the Israeli musical scene and media).

What one learns from this case study is that resistance to the state-supported musical hegemony can be carried out by private and local initiatives backed my political power that brings with it access to means of creating and maintaining musical institutions. Remember also one last but very important detail: the Andalusian musical agenda in Israel claims a truly Arab tradition (even if heavily Westernized in all parameters) as a legitimate expression within the Zionist state. Considering the wider context in which this process takes place, it is a cause worth celebrating.

To conclude, Israeli society is indeed unique in its musical challenges but also shares many similarities with most other nation-states of the globe in this era of cultural greying-out. We need to address the music education system in its complexity, and most importantly, to decrease its dependence on the narrow interests of the state. The state has proven itself limited in its capabilities to generate a truly open music educational system that can really address the musical universe of the Igeneration. If there is something quite unique to the Israeli musical education scene is the vast array of local private and even individual initiatives that focus on localized musical preferences, memories and sensibilities.

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