The Musical Traditions of the Oriental Jews – Orient and Occident

(**The World of Music**, vol. XVII, 2/1980, pp.46-58)

The notions "Orient" and "Occident" are not unequivocally defined with regard to traditional divisions within Jewish culture. A purely geographical criterion would certainly be fictitious – Russia, an "Occidental" Jewish community, is far to the East of Morocco, yet the latter is considered "Oriental". The boundary traditionally separating East from West, then, is mainly a cultural one, traceable to historical circumstances. Oriental Jews may be roughly described as those originating from countries formerly belonging to the Ottoman Empire and East of it (i. e. Persia, India), as well as those whose ancestors were exiled from Spain and spread throughout the Mediterranean Basin; Occidental Jews generally include those of Northern European origin – Eastern, Central, and Western Europe – as well as their American descendants.

It is commonly accepted, both within the Jewish community and outside it, to refer respectively to the Oriental and Occidental communities as Sephardi and Ashkenazi (Sefarad and Ashkenaz are the traditional Hebrew names for Spain and Germany respectively). The distinction between these two traditions stems from a historical split in the Jewish Diaspora, but became particularly acute in recent centuries with the rise of the Ottoman Empire. It was then that two completely separate centers of rabbinical training were established – in Istanbul for the Sephardim and in Eastern Europe for the Ashkenazim.

In Israel, this separation is institutionalized only in the Rabbinate; efforts are made elsewhere to overcome the historical rift, which constitutes a danger to the nation's unity. Still, an examination of Jewish cultural traditions unearths an even richer pluralism within each of these

two main streams. It is the aim of this article to explore the many musical traditions of Oriental Jews.

Inherent Characteristics vs. External Influences

A problem arises: What is "really Jewish" in these Oriental Jewish traditions, and which influences were adopted from the surrounding peoples among whom the Jewish communities had lived until their recent return to Israel?

An important consideration in answering this far-reaching question is the fact that the Jews were distinguished from their neighbors not only by their faith, but by a culturally distinct modus vivendi: The Hebrew language – traditionally defined as the Sacred Tongue and restricted to prayers and devotional poems (*piyyutim*) – was taught to every Jewish male child from the age of three; reading, writing, and *chanting* the sacred texts were compulsory skills. Hence, another important and unique feature of Jewish culture – combination of oral and written tradition: Jewish folklore consists, in most cases, of written texts accompanied by orally transmitted music and dance.

The function of music in Jewish tradition is always subordinate. Unimportant per se, it serves the text as a sort of "carrier wave". Thus, Jewish culture never created its own musical theory: while music in the Ancient Kingdom of Israel played a major role, Biblical references to music are limited to *practice*.

Another important factor: Instrumental music was prohibited after the destruction of the Second Temple, and Orthodox Jews refrain from playing musical instruments to this day. (Two sole exceptions are wedding feasts and the feast of Purim, Jewry's annual "carnival" celebrating the liberation of the Jews in Persia under Xerxes.) Thus, even dance is traditionally attached mainly to vocal music. While the sound of

ancient Jewish music – as performed in the Temple in Ancient Israel – has been lost forever, we can nevertheless mention certain common traits of Jewish music as kept and transmitted in the traditions of various Jewish communities:

1.**Vocal Medium**. Despite a broad variety of places and occasions (to be discussed later on), Jewish music is originally vocal. The reason, as stated above, stems from the prohibition of instrumental music following the destruction of the Temple. In cases where we do find some instrumental music, it clearly stems from external influences, mostly recently and mainly in the Occident. (Oriental Jewish music has not been influenced in this regard, and remains almost purely vocal.)

2. **Monophonic or Heterophonic Texture**, Jewish music is **monomelic**. Consequently, when performed by one singer, it is monophonic; performed by the congregation – as in the synagogue – the result is a heterophonic texture of the single melodic line, caused by minute differences in performance on the part of the congregants.

3. **Oral Transmission**. The Jews never created a real system of musical notation. The so-called "cantillation accents" (**te'amim**) standardized sometime around 1000 A. D. in Tiberias, take the form of a kind of neumes written above and beneath the Biblical text. These symbols, whose function is primarily syntactic rather than musical, also serve as mnemonic devices for certain melodic formulas employed in chanting the texts. But their use is limited to reminding one of a previously learned melody, and these melodies differ tremendously from community to community – often in every locality. It follows that the music itself is transmitted purely orally. While there have recently (from the 16th century on) been experiments in Europe aimed at transcribing the **te'amim** in Western notation, transmission within the Oriental community remains exclusively oral to this day.

4. **Improvisation on Traditional Formulas**. This is a natural consequence of the characteristics listed above: oral transmission encourages personal improvisation, based nevertheless on fixed patterns. Thus, a sort of balance is attained between the permanent, well known, and anticipated on one hand and, on the other hand, the new, unexpected, individual contribution. This improvisation often consists mainly of lavish ornamentation and relatively free rhythm, though the words and their meter in general dictate rhythm.

5. **Scales and Modes**. In this respect, Oriental Jewish music is quite a part of the Oriental world in general. We find in the music of Oriental Jewish communities the same modes (**maqamat**) as in the music of their neighbors, be they Arabs, Persians, or Indians. The vocal range is generally limited – usually to about half an octave in synagogue music and a little more in secular music.

Functions of Oriental Jewish Music

Observing the functions of Jewish Music in the Orient, we note three distinct levels:

1. **Liturgical Music**. Music for worship is practiced mainly by the congregation men and boys – in the synagogue, and is often responsorial – cantor and congregation – and consequently heterophonic. Texts are either prayers in Hebrew or Aramaic, or scriptural passages; the latter are chanted using the "cantillation accents" (**te'amim**) mentioned above. Music here has no independent function: The singing is actually a sort of recitation on a **recto tono** with two or three additional tones, the total range being limited to a fourth or fifth. Rhythm is dictated entirely by the text. Pluralism is the rule: even the actual pronunciation and accentuation of the text differ considerably from one Jewish community to the next, not to mention the music itself. Needless to say, synagogue music is the

most "Jewish" form of Oriental Jewish music, i.e. least affected by surrounding influences.

2. **Paraliturgical Music**. These are medieval devotional poems (**piyyutim**), usually Hebrew, sung at home at family celebrations and traditional festivities, and may be classified somewhere between the sacred and the secular. The music is less monotonous than the prayers and Biblical cantillation, and manifests more external influences, as will be shown later on. This is the most vivid part of Jewish musical tradition, its importance stemming from this very combination of devotional text and a broadened musical repertoire, as well as from its performance at home on festive occasions. Here dance is sometimes added, creating a significant triptych of poetry, chant and dance, all of which are closely interrelated and interdependent. The poems are transcribed in Hebrew orthography, but are actually written in a harmonic combination of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, which remains faithful to their meter, rhyme, and form.

3. **Secular Music**. These songs are sung by women in a vernacular dialect, and are devoid of any particularly Jewish content. They represent true folklore in the sense that their composition and transmission – referring to both music and text – are purely oral. Only in modern times have some of them been recorded, translated, and transcribed by researchers and folklorists.

The chanting of Hebrew poetry began its emergence in the early Middle Ages in Palestine, later spreading throughout the Jewish community. The practice flourished, however, in Spain from the 10th to the 13th century. This period is considered to have been the Golden Age of Hebrew poetry. Here it was an extension of Arabic poetry, then at the height of its development, and the formal poetic rules governing the

Hebrew poetry were accordingly influenced by the Arabic: meters, rhyme patterns and forms were adopted and adapted to the Hebrew language.

With regard to meter, the Arabic language has strict quantitative prosodic values. It features only three vowel phonemes – /a/, /i/, and /u/ – each of which may appear in short or long form. Ancient Hebrew also featured long and short versions of its five vowels, but this differentiation had already become obsolete by the Middle-Ages. Hebrew poets were therefore compelled to find another prosodic distinction (involving the differentiation between vowels and **schwas**) in order to be able to adopt Arabic quantitative meters. .

Two basic poetic forms which were widespread in the Middle Ages, may be found later throughout the Jewish Orient, where they are still common today:

1. The **qasida**, a monorhyme and manometer poem was characteristically epical and long in the Middle-Ages. Today, it is generally lyrical and shorter, and may bear other names, like the **nashid** of the Yemenite Jews.
2. The **muwashshah** (also called "girdle song") is a more variegated form, with more than one meter and many strophes, each having its own internal rhyme, though one leading rhyme stands at the beginning of the entire poem and at the end of each strophe, thus unifying the piece. In this form, it was customary as early as the 11th century to finish with a rhyme in a foreign language or dialect, a trait, which was later developed in the trilingual poems (i.e. Hebrew-Arabic-Aramaic) mentioned above.

One may well wonder on what grounds we base our assumption that this poetry was chanted. First of all, it is still chanted today in most Oriental communities, as if to show us the strength of oral tradition. Secondly, we find at the head of many ancient manuscripts the Arabic word **lahan** ("melody" or "tune"), usually along with a title or first line of another song, which we assume to have been popular at the time.

Unfortunately, almost nothing can be ascertained about those original melodies (except, of course, for the fact of their very existence, proving that the poems were indeed sung).

Musically, one may distinguish between two main types of paraliturgical singing:

1. The "opening song", a sort of prelude sung by a soloist, sometimes answered by another one or by the group. It is characteristically slow, improvisatory, mostly ornamented and melismatic, and lacking in instrumental accompaniment. The "opening song" bears many names throughout the various oriental Jewish communities, like **mawal** in Morocco and **nashid** in Yemen (using the poetic form **nashid** mentioned above).

2. The "main song" a rhythmic piece sung by the group with soloists, often accompanied by drumming and – in some communities – by other musical instruments. Some communities also add dance (like Yemen, where it is called **shira**, ("singing"). The poetic form used is the **muwashshah**.

It is in this form that music is more prevalent, although the importance of the text is nevertheless well guarded. If in a particular community an instrumental accompaniment is added at all, it is in this genre. To be sure, this instrumental playing is a non-Jewish feature: Some communities try to disguise it, like the Yemenites, who drum only on such "innocent" domestic articles as tin cans and copper plates, rather than on "real" musical instruments. Less orthodox communities now found in Israel, use such drums as the Arabic **darbuka**, while others – even less observant – play Oriental instruments openly without pretext.

Interspersed between these two musical forms, as well as preceding and following them, are short benedictions; at the end, a real **Hallel** (Heb.

"praise") is sung, beginning and ending with the word **Halleluya** (lit. "Praise God").

Thus, a musical event at home is not a formal ritual with strict laws and procedures as is the case with the synagogue service; still, it may be characterized as a sort of ceremony, answering – albeit with a certain degree of flexibility – certain expectations of the family which comprises its audience.

The following are characteristic features of the music of several Jewish communities, starting with the most closed and proceeding in order of foreign influence:

1. The **Samaritans** are the most ancient Jewish community; since Biblical times, they have never strayed from the Land of Israel, Though extremely small (ca. 200 at the turn of the century; approximately 600 today) and divided into two sub-communities in Nablus and the Tel Aviv suburb of Holon, the Samaritan community ardently guards its ancient tradition, originally based in Samaria, the old capital of the Kingdom of Israel. Their music is purely vocal, and very flexible in intonation, and passes almost unnoticed from a sort of musical recitation to real singing. It is very often sung in parallel intervals, in a sort of organum or gymel style. To the uninitiated ear, Samaritan music may seem boring and monotonous, but the trained listener – even European – may find in it an unexpected richness of expression and beauty[1].

2. The Yemenites are traditionally considered the Diaspora Jewish community with the most closely guarded tradition. Exiled to Yemen with the destruction of the First Temple (6th century B.C.), theirs is one of the oldest extant Jewish communities; throughout over two millennia in Yemen, they refrained from intermingling with their neighbors; a brief comparison of their music with that of modern non-Jewish Yemenites will reveal their originality and uniqueness.

In the Yemenite-Jewish tradition, a strong distinction is made between liturgical, paraliturgical, and secular music: (a) Liturgical music is sung mainly on a recitation tone embellished with some short melodic formulas, within a very limited range of a fourth or fifth.

(b) Paraliturgical music is much broader in range and much richer in melodic and rhythmic content, and serves as a vehicle for dancing and tin can drumming.

(c) Women's secular music is sung in a vernacular dialect, with several dances, and accompanied by drumming on copper plates. A few melodies may occasionally drift from one domain to another, but this is rare: generally, most are kept in their original and traditional place.

Yemenite music has always had a great impact on Israel's professional musicians; much of it has been arranged, borrowed, quoted, and extended in a broad range of original Israeli compositions[2].

3. The **Sephardic** tradition – belonging to Jews of Iberian extraction – is one of the greatest in Oriental Jewish music. Noting the position of the Iberian peninsula on the Western shore of the Mediterranean, it may seem ridiculous to refer to this music as "Oriental"; still, as explained above, most of the Jews belonging to this community have lived around the Mediterranean basin for almost five hundred years, mainly in Asia (Turkey and the Middle East), a fact which justifies this classification.

Sephardic music is characteristically very melodious; the European influence is strongly felt. European modes and scales are very clearly heard, with major and minor predominating; nonetheless, oriental-flavored modes and intervals are common – like the Hejaz mode with its augmented second. Rhythmically, too, Sephardic music is relatively simple and "European": most songs are in duple or triple meter, though here and there more subtle rhythmic complexities may be found.

In addition to a very rich and broad-reaching treasury of melodious music for liturgical and paraliturgical use, Spanish Jewry has preserved and transmitted a repertoire of hundreds of romanzas – love songs in Ladino, the 15th-century Spanish which remains the Sephardic vernacular even today. Some of these are of such extraordinary beauty that they have been translated into Hebrew and adopted as a part of the general repertoire of Israeli song[3].

4. Related to the former but more variegated is the music of the **North-African** Jews, particularly those of Morocco. Here two distinctive influences may be recognized: the Spanish (or Andalusian) and the Arabic traditions; through centuries of coexistence, these two cultural forces engendered the creation of a sort of hybrid. At times, one of the two may be clearly distinguished; generally, however, organically – intermingled elements of both may be discerned. In the North-African Jewish tradition, instrumental playing is the rule outside the synagogue. The main instruments are the oriental lute (Arabic: **'ud**) and the jug-shaped **darbuka** drum. Here, as in many countries in the Middle East, Arabic **maqamat** are employed. Even the paraliturgical books of **piyyutim** (sacred poems) are often edited and arranged according to these modes: these are at least mentioned beside the titles of the songs, recalling the medieval **lahan**. Some of the North-African Jews have been settled in the region for a considerable amount of time, like those on the island of Djerba; it follows that despite many influences – both Arabic and European – we may assume the existence of an ancient nucleus of Jewish origin in their music[4].

5. At the other extreme of the Arab world we find so-called **Babylonian** Jewry, today comprising the Jewish communities of Iraq and Kurdistan. Apart from their religious music – which as everywhere serves the text of prayers and scriptures – these Jews participate vividly in the music

making of their surrounding neighbors. Thus, the Jews of Kurdistan have brought with them to Israel the songs and dances of their rustic culture, sung in Aramaic (some of them speak this ancient Semitic language today, a noteworthy fact in itself) or in Kurmangi, a vernacular dialect. Two instruments characteristically accompany their vigorous dances: the **zurna**, a kind of **shawm**, perhaps descended from the ancient **aulos**; and the **dhola** – a huge drum tied and hung on the player's chest and belly. Both are played while walking and standing next to the dancers and encouraging them verbally.

Baghdad has always been a center and cradle of refined Arab urban musical culture. In recent generations, Iraqi Jews have played an essential role in enriching and cultivating art music in that country. Some of the best Iraqi musicians have immigrated to Israel, where they are now an integral part of Israel's multicultural music scene. Their main instruments are the **'ud** and the **qanun**. Needless to say, these are played with no musical notation, purely through improvisation on fixed traditional patterns and forms. However, the musical themes on which this improvisation is based may be borrowed from Arab, traditional Jewish or even general Israeli repertoire, the main characteristic remaining the style of playing itself.

The above are only a few of the main oriental musical traditions existing in Israel today. Most Oriental Jewish communities have been forced or urged to leave their countries of origin and have come to Israel; consequently, a pluralistic and multicultural center of Oriental musical activity has been created there, developing side by side with the manifestations of Western culture. In the generations ahead, this pluralism may lead to a new, truly Israeli culture; still, the present situation is one of a variety of flourishing traditions, which enrich not only each other, but the general cultural life of the country as well.

Notes

1. Bibliography:3: discography: 3
2. Bibliography: 1, discography: 1, 2, 3, 4.
3. Bibliography: 1, vol. IV: discography: 2. 3
4. Bibliography: 1, vol. IV 2; 4; discography: 1, 2 and 3.
5. Bibliography: 1, vol. II-III; discography: 1, 2, and 3

Bibliography

1. Idelsohn, Avraham Zvi – **Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies**
   Volume I – Songs of the Yemenite Jews
   Volume II – Songs of the Babylonian Jews
   Volume III – Songs of the Jews of Persia, Bukhara and Daghestan
   Volume IV – Songs of the Oriental Sephardim
   Volume V – Songs of the Moroccan Jews
   First published in English and German, 1922-1925; reprinted 1973, New York: Ktav Publishing House.

2a. Lachmann, Robert – **Jewish Cantillation and Song in the Isle of Djerba**, Jerusalem, 1940.

2b. Lachmann, Robert – **Zwei Aufsatze: 1) Die Musik im Volksleben Nordafrikas; 2) Orientalische Musik und Antike**, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1974.

3. Ravina, Menashe – **Organum and the Samaritans**, Tel-Aviv, Israel Music Institute, 1963, 62 pp.

4. Levi, Isaac – **Antologia de Liturgia Judea-Espanola** – 9 ,volumes, Jerusalem, 1964-79.

5. Avenary, Hanoch – **Encounters of East and West in Music** (Selected writings), Tel-Aviv University, 1979.

Discography

1. **Musik der Bibel – La Musique de la Bible**

   Enregistrements réalisés et présentés par Edith Gerson-Kiwi, Lumen AMS 8.

2. **Jewish Music**, Unesco Collection Musical Sources, Religious Psalmody IV-1, Philips 6586001. Recordings and Commentary: Amnon Shiloah.

3. **Heritage**, authentic songs of ambiance and ritual from the musical heritage of Jewish communities in Israel, CBS (Israel) 63437. Recordings and commentary :Amnon Shiloah.

4. **Jewish-Yemenite Diwan**, Unesco Collection Musical Sources, Sung Poetry VII-2, Philips 6516037. Recordings, commentary and photos: Naomi, Ofer and Avner Bahat.