

Ben Steinberg

JEWISH YEMENITE SONGS FROM THE DIWAN

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Recordings and Commentaries by **Naomi and Avner Bahat** from "Anthology of Musical Traditions in Israel" produced by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jewish Music Research Center; Director – Israel Adler

In October, 1980, I had the pleasure of interviewing the affable Dr. Avner Bahat at his apartment in Tel Aviv. While he is probably the ranking authority on Yemenite Jewish music in the world today, his approach to the subject struck me as being not only one of scholarship, but also one of love and respect. In answer to my question, "Why should Jews in North America, most of whom are of Ashkenazic origin, be interested in Yemenite Jewish music?", this Israeli of Jewish-Ashkenazic parentage replied simply, "Because it's beautiful." That sentiment permeates the music of this recording as well as the words of the highly informative booklet which is included in the record jacket.

Yemenite music is indeed beautiful but it does not immediately reach western ears that way because the poetry is unfamiliar and the accents somewhat strange. Because of these things the music must be approached as a new and exotic taste. This is the real achievement of this recording, which not only presents and informs, but does so with loving care. After all, to gain an accurate glimpse into the culture of fellow Jews in such an isolated, far-off land, is a rare privilege. While the acquisition of this record will not transform a listener into an expert, it will bring both understanding and appreciation within his grasp through the excellent booklet contained in the record jacket.

The study booklet, for this is what it really is, is written in both Hebrew and English and is noteworthy for its technical information which is generally presented in a clear, readable way. While there is much here for the musician, there is also material which is accessible to the ordinary listener. First, the authors have written an essay describing the history, forms and character of the Yemenite Diwan (book of religious poetry). Following this, there is a description of the pieces on the recording: the general meaning of each piece is discussed; the author of its text given; the performers mentioned and the music described. It is these musical descriptions dealing with the technicalities of melody, rhythm and form which so add to the value of the booklet.

They are extremely helpful, if at times somewhat detailed for the layman, and even include musically notated fragments of various pieces on the record. Happily, the performers are introduced at the end of the booklet and we learn briefly from whence they came, their ages, their occupations and a bit of their backgrounds.

A weakness is the lack of complete text transliteration for non-Hebrew readers and of full literal text translations for those who can read the Hebrew but cannot understand it. This record-study booklet is valuable enough, it seems to this writer, to merit this kind of care which would make it accessible to a non-Jewish ethnomusicologist or even a non-Hebrew speaking Jew.

The Yemenites are a gentle people, possessing a wonderful appreciation of language and poetry as well as a keen sense of humour. I remember attending a concert at Kibbutz Ein Hashofet in 1968 when the best standup comic in the area came to entertain – he was a Yemenite from the nearby village of El-Yakim. He had his audience alternatively roaring with laughter and applauding his efforts. This kind of goodwill and good humour is captured in some of the songs, in their descriptions and even in the illustrative photographs of the booklet. One would like to see a wider use of this music in the west, but to make the music interesting to western ears without losing its essential character is a real challenge for the composer-arranger. Some of these melodies are so tuneful and delightful – it is regrettable that they are not adapted and used more widely.

"For the Jews of Yemen", write the authors, "song and dance are a source of joy as well as fulfillment of a mitzvah." We might well add that the same is true for any Jew who studies and hears this music.

Ben Steinberg, a noted composer and lecturer, is the Music Director of Temple Sinai, Toronto.