

THE YEMENITE DIWAN:

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH – POETRY-CHANT-DANCE

(Published in **Proceedings of the World Congress on Jewish Music**, Jerusalem 1878: 81-85)

The Yemenite *Diwan* is a book of paraliturgical poetry. Most of the poems it contains are sung and many of those sung are also danced to. Since, therefore, the *Diwan* represents a combination of three arts, poetry, music and dance, any attempt to study only one of these can at best yield only partial results and at worst give a distorted picture of what the *Diwan* really represents. It is thus obvious that any responsible scientific investigation of this collection must be based on an interdisciplinary approach, i.e. on a simultaneous study of each of the three aspects of the art which it contains (poetry) and generates (music and dance).

Interdisciplinary work invariably implies team-work, since few of us can claim to have the knowledge and experience required in all the fields that have to be covered. In the present case my wife Naomi and I are collaborating, she being the ethnochoreologist and dealing with the dance, I concentrating on the poetry and the two of us sharing responsibility for the music.

Much of the work hitherto done in this field has been of a general nature and has produced results that were frequently nothing more than insipid generalities. It seems to us that a new approach is required. We ourselves are dealing not with the wider field of Yemenite music but with the more contained, specific subject of the *Diwan*. This, though of course presenting a narrower field of study than Yemenite music as a whole, occupies a unique position midway between secular and sacred, impinges on both, and has a width and depth that more than justify its exclusive analysis.

This last remark may at first sight appear to contradict the principle of interdisciplinary study, by which we mean that musical or other art phenomena are not isolated from their immediate context, and each socio-musical art event retains its significance as an integral unit, another way of saying that the scope of investigation must not be narrowed down to one specialized aspects of the subject in hand. But the contradiction is more apparent than real: in the case of the *Diwan* each of the three aspects of its art must be subjected to simultaneous in-depth study.

Tradition, Written and Oral

In many national cultures a clear separation can be observed between the literary or written tradition reserved for the literate minority and the oral tradition of the illiterate majority, commonly termed folklore. The Jewish people – "*am hassefer*" – is perhaps unique in that most Jewish males (and many females) have in all generations learnt to read from an early age. Consequently the separation between a literate minority and an illiterate majority never existed, and the distinction between the written and the oral tradition was never very clear cut. The *Diwan* of the Yemenite Jews is a good reflection of this state of affairs, being handed down from one generation to the next both orally and in writing. For centuries the texts were copied by hand and when printing facilities became available they were printed and could be obtained in book form. At the same time the music and dance that were an integral part of the *Diwan* were only transmitted orally. The ethnomusicologist, then, in pursuing such a subject is bound to relate to both its written and oral aspects at the same time and cannot afford to concentrate on one at the expense of the other.

The Yemenites regard the text as the most important element of the song. Poems may be sacred, devotional or secular, but they are always written. The role of the music is secondary, merely the transmission of the text. Melodies are interchangeable: one melody may be used for several poems of similar meter and structure, one poem may be sung by several melodies, and a new melody may be introduced in the course of a poem; at times the melody changes with every stanza. We must, therefore, be constantly aware that the text comes first; that each art event we record is primarily a literary event with music and dance inseparable but additional components.

Artistic and Functional Aspects

The ethnomusicologist generally seeks to study musical activity in its social as well as its functional context. No one will deny that in order to arrive at as correct an evaluation as possible of any "ethnomusicological" musical event, it must be observed under authentic functional circumstances. In the case of the *Diwan* the "event" is not exclusively musical. The basis, as we have said, is poetry and the latter has a well-defined form. As a result the music and dance will also have a structure that can be analyzed and precisely described. This established, we must examine each of the three forms – poetic, musical and choreographic – in relation to the socio-functional circumstances under which they are observed.

In a changing society the functional framework within which an art event takes place may be subject to extremely rapid change. Take for example wedding celebrations in the Yemenite community in Israel. These often conform to what has become for many the accepted norm – what is popularly known as the "quarter-chicken wedding": the hired hall, hired band, ear-splitting amplification of the music and a meal which centers on a portion of chicken. Many of us find this newly-established custom rather unattractive. The genuine traditional wedding ceremony and attendant celebrations as performed by Jews while they were still living in the Yemen are rarely to be seen. If we wish to investigate the authentic tradition, we are forced to reconstruct it, to get the Yemenites to relive their tradition in a specially prepared "show", as if they were putting on a play about how things used to be.

Having used the word "authentic" we must hasten to add how questionable its use is here. For what is really "authentic"? The quarter-chicken affair or the reconstitution of what might have been? I have little doubt as to the answer. Surely we must regard the coherence of poetry, chant and dance in a single unit of social and artistic creativity recreated in performance down the generations according to a revered tradition, and now still transmitted and cultivated, as traditional art.

Such art-units, for want of a better term, may each serve several different social events: weddings, circumcisions, Sabbath, etc. Some indeed are reserved for special occasions, but many are multipurpose. As the younger generation adjusts its way of life to suit the modern environment, new occasions arise for performance of the traditional arts, but the art-unit we have spoken of proves resistant to change, retaining its traditional manner of performance and conventions of structure and form despite changing circumstances.

Poetry-Chant-Dance Relationships

The singers of the Yemenite *Diwan* are usually aware, even if the degree of their technical knowledge varies, of the meter and structure of the poems they sing. The *Diwan* contains some poetry from the Golden Age in medieval Spain but most of it was written in the seventeenth century by Salem Shabazi, some of his forerunners and some of his disciples, all of whom follow the poetical patterns of medieval Hebrew poetry. The relationships between the poetical and the musical meters in themselves constitute a complete field of research. Since many of the medieval poems in the Yemenite *Diwan* also appear in the books of other Oriental communities, there is obviously room for a comparative study of the musical

treatment of identical texts by the different communities.

An artistic unit of the *Diwan* may consist of **nashid-shira-hallel** sections. The **nashid** is a kind of prelude sung in an improvisatory style, in free rhythm, and not danced; the **shira** is the main section, sung and danced, with drummed accompaniment, and with a distinct rhythm and meter; the **hallel** is the concluding prose section, in a liturgical mould and mostly sung in monotone.

Dances performed by Yemenite males are attached exclusively to the *Diwan*, more precisely to the **shira** sections in it. They are chamber dances, in the sense we use in speaking of chamber music. Indeed, one of the meanings of the word *Diwan* is a hall or large room and in the present context it is applied to the place where the music-dance event occurs. Performance may be occasioned by any celebration or festivity in which mood and atmosphere are felt to be suitable. The number of performers is never more than four, often only two, and the dances are all improvisations on several basic forms. The traditional and the spontaneous are nicely balanced. The basic steps mark the meter clearly and are connected to the musical as well as the poetical structure. Dancers may, indeed are expected, to dance creatively, that is, to add their own personal touches, using torso, hands and head movements. They must be expert in the traditional basic steps and able to superimpose on them a personal style of their own. The same dances are performed at various celebrations with different melodies and texts. Close rapport between singer and dancer is crucial; they inspire one another and are totally dependent upon one another.

I would add a few words on preservation, dissemination and encouragement of the artist, continuing where my friend Simha Arom left off. The work of preservation – recording, filming and documenting for research purposes – is in itself a source of encouragement. Simply by engaging in this work we are encouraging the artists not only to perform but also to retain, or restore as the case may be, their self respect and dignity. We also stimulate the artists to transmit their art to the younger generation. Our purpose must be to encourage and stimulate but not to interfere. We must strive to be disinterested outsiders, as objective as possible, difficult though this may be. Dissemination, i.e. bringing this Yemenite art to the attention of a wider public, is another, no less important problem, but this subject must be left for another occasion.