

## Music in Israel at Sixty: Processes and Experiences<sup>1</sup>

Edwin Seroussi (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Drawing a panoramic assessment of a field of culture that resists clear categorizations and whose readings offer multiple and utterly contrasting options such as Israeli music is a challenge entailing high intellectual risks. For no matter which way your interpretations lean you will always be suspected of aligning with one ideological agenda or another. Untangling the music, and for that matter any field of modern Israeli culture, is a task bound to oversimplification unless one abandons all aspirations to interpret the whole and just focuses on the more humble mission of selecting a few decisive moments which illuminate trends and processes within that whole. Modest perhaps as an interpretative strategy, by concentrating on discrete time, spatial and discursive units (a concert, a band, an album, an obituary, a music store, an academic conference, etc) this paper attempts to draw some meaningful insights as sixty years of music-making in Israel are marked.

The periodic marking of the completion of time cycles, such as decades or centuries, is a way for human beings to domesticate and structure the unstoppable stream of consciousness that we call time.<sup>2</sup> If one accepts the premise that the specific timing of any given time cycle is pure convention, one may cynically interpret the unusually lavish celebrations of “Israel at Sixty” as a design of Israeli politicians to focus the public attention both within and outside the country on a positive image of the state

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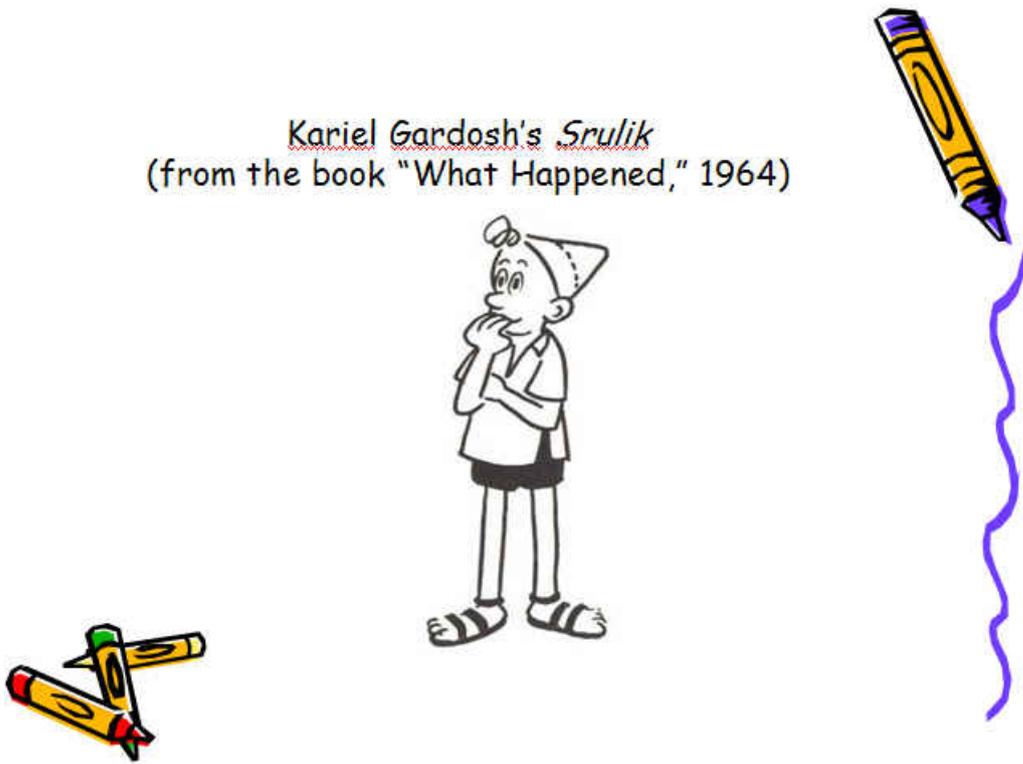
<sup>1</sup> This paper was read as the keynote address for the conference *Hearing Israel: Music, Culture and History at 60*, held at the University of Virginia, April 13-14, 2008. I am thankful to the organizers of the conference, Prof. James Loeffler and Prof. Joel Rubin, for their kind invitation and for their gracious hospitality during my stay at the University of Virginia.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on this subject is immense. It is thoroughly connected to studies of the articulation of the past and the construction of collective social and cultural memory, a subject addressed by sociologists and anthropologists. The volume of publications on this subject increased dramatically towards the end of the second millennium. See, as an example, Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995); Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105-140. Lyn Spillman, in her book *Nation and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) compares the role and manipulations of centennial and bicentennial celebrations in forging two national identities, American and Australian.

and its achievements. Agencies such as the Ministry of Tourism, the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency came aboard to reap the benefits of these celebrations. Displays of cultural assets, such as books fairs and performing arts festivals, as well as academic gatherings, are events deriving from the same motivation. Fueled by political opportunism or intended as a distraction for the masses from the more urgent and pressing burdens with which Israeli society must cope, the celebrations were harshly criticized in Israel also due to their cost to the taxpayers (a low estimate being twenty-eight million dollars). Yet the results of these protests on the ground were meager.

Certainly, the year 2008 is not more worthy of attention than any previous or forthcoming one in the history of the State of Israel. The sages of the Mishnah, well aware of the psychological underpinnings of humankind's hardship in coping with the concept of time passing, marked each decade of life with an essential trait. *Ben shishim le-ziqna*, "sixty for aging" is the verdict in the passage in the Avot tractate (chapter five). But today, when the average life span is substantially longer than in Mishnaic times, one may contest such an evaluation, and of course, nation-states are supposed to last longer than individual humans do. For the sake of the literary figure of speech, however, one can ask if the State of Israel has indeed reached a stage in its existence when a certain maturity allows for more solid evaluations of its cultural scene. In a lighter vein, one can ask if the disappearance from the Israeli public scene of "Srulik," the innocent boy-hero dressed in kibbutznik attire, head-covered with the iconic *kova tembel* that signified consensual Israeliness in the weekly cartoon by the Israel Prize laureate caricaturist Dosh (Kariel Gardosh, 1921-2001), marks a decisive structural turning point in Israel's collective self-perception. Furthermore, how do such tectonic shifts in Israeli social consciousness affect the country's cultural production in general, and music in particular?

Kariel Gardosh's *Srulik*  
(from the book "What Happened," 1964)



Broad overviews of music in Israel are riskier than those of other fields of cultural production because they call for clarifications of an entanglement of forces and interests that bring with them deep emotions. At times such emotional baggage invades our intellectual territories as interpreters and blurs our capacity to look at processes and experiences of musical creativity, consumption and evaluation with lucidity. I am the last individual who can claim a safe distance from the Israeli musical entanglement, being an active player in the very field that I discuss as a scholar. This reflection about the crossing of borders between academia and “real musical life” will return towards the end of this paper, but the idea of permeable borderlines serves as a natural bridge to the main body of this essay.

This essay comprises three sections. The first part is a contextualization of the conference *Hearing Israel: Music, Culture and History at Sixty*, held at the University of Virginia, April 13-14, 2008 and a profile of the issues addressed by the participants that are found in the articles included in the present volume of *Min-Ad*. These papers introduced a variety of fresh readings of specific cases, figures and moments of the music of Israel, proposing various theoretical approaches to interpret their objects of inquiry (and, sparingly, the inquiring subjects too). The second section of this article

tackles from a slightly different perspective the issues that were addressed by these papers within a more general interpretative framework but referring to a sample of discrete musical moments. Many of these moments are unsurprisingly absent from the academic discourses about music in Israel. Finally, as seed for future discussions, the concluding chapter of this essay suggests new vistas for studies of music in Israel that are introduced through a series of short “etudes.”

### **“Conferencing” Music in “Israel at Sixty”**

A sociological profile (I make no claim here to represent this social science’s discipline) of the representative group of scholars that gathered for the *Hearing Israel* conference can serve as an instructive starting point to unravel the discursive traditions and tendencies that today dominate academic research on music in Israel. With one exception, all the speakers were Jews and, again with one exception, they were all American or Israeli Jews. One can immediately ask why the music of Israel hardly concerns non-Jews or non-Israelis. Language barriers present no impediment, for Western scholars in the field of music address other no less “exotic” locations than the Hebrew one. Physical danger is also not a reason, for many scholars carry out research in war zones as intimidating as the Middle East. Did this situation develop because, *a priori*, the Israeli cultural territory is perceived as the exclusive domain of local or American Jewish scholars out of deference to a social and political enterprise jealous to the extreme when it comes to the construction of its own self? Yet the flip side of this phenomenon is that academic discourse about the State of Israel, its history and culture, seems to be increasingly tainted by the ideological agendas of the “world out there.” Perspectives from safer distances could therefore offer alternative and less emotionally invested readings than those by scholars whose involvement in shaping the “world inside here” is second nature. It is clear that the community of scholars who participated in the conference *Hearing Israel* comprised a small, interconnected network. One can therefore ask how to expand this network and turn it into a more inclusive one that will attract outsiders who are further detached from the debated issues.

The conference showed that recent studies of music in Israel had explored previously uncharted areas and contributed new theoretical insights. Yet many papers revolved around genres and styles that have been a point of gravitation for students of music of

Israel, clearly underscoring the inexorable weight of political concerns on scholarly agendas. That the musical reverberations of the unrelenting Palestinian/Arab-Israeli conflict occupy a respectable share of attention in music scholarship is not a surprise. That the overtones of the internal tensions among Israeli Jews of diverse ethnic origin, religious allegiance and socio-economic classes run a close second is no revelation either. The weight of these two poles, however, obscures no less thought-provoking areas of what I call the Israeli musical experience.

Music is contaminated by politics, but as Philip Bohlman long ago claimed, musicology too is politicized.<sup>3</sup> Musicology nourishes the canons of music, determines the issues that “matter,” and change its discourse, as one patently detects in the *Hearing Israel* conference presentations, according to shifts in intellectual paradigms deriving from larger frames of thinking. Meanings and emotions in music are constructed by critics as much as they are by active and passive practitioners. In short, the role of musicologists in the arena of what is called “musical culture” is more conspicuous than ever before and interpretative endeavors call therefore for a growing dose of responsibility and self-awareness.

A focus of several papers presented at the conference that I perceive to be extremely beneficial is what Ben Brinner calls “discrete social networks of musicians.” After all, music-making results from rather imperceptible human encounters that are methodologically hard to trace. In Israel these encounters are not only determined by patterns of residence, social class, and religious or ethnic identity as it is anywhere else, but also by subtle clusters of relations that subvert any of those categories. Musical competence, as Brenner points out in his new book, is one of these subversive criteria.<sup>4</sup>

Focus on discrete and ever-evolving networks of musicians that disclose the fluidity of Israel’s musical culture also occupied Amy Horowitz in her conference paper. She sees community identity as a network of interactive and context-sensitive forces constantly shifting their centers of gravity. Brinner and Horowitz each address

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Bohlman, “Musicology as a Political Act,” *The Journal of Musicology* 11:4 (1993): 411-436.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Brinner, *Playing Across a Divide: Musical Encounters in a Contested Land* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

musical genres that are in a constant process of (re)configuration, so-called “Israeli ethnic music” in the first case and “Mediterranean Israeli Music” in the second. Related and yet opposed to Brinner and Horowitz’s primary focus on the permeability of musical genres was Galit Saada-Ophir’s stress on the paradoxical nature of the Arab-Jewish musical borderland, where frequent crossings of musical borders not only fail to challenge boundaries but also reinforce them. Common to these three presentations, however, is the idea that analyses resist sets of binary oppositions such as traditional/modern, popular/folk, sacred/secular, and above all, us/them. Problematizing binary polarities was also the concern of Nissim Calderon in his paper, which addressed the concepts of high and low in Israeli Hebrew literary genres set to rock-pop music.

Music as a display of the multiplicity of identities in Israel was the concern of several papers. David McDonald proposed that processes of globalization and transnationalism in a post-colonial and post-national world can help to clarify stereotypical representations of Palestinians in the mainstream Israeli media and open new spaces for a public discourse on Palestinian rights. Following his work on music performance as a mode of Palestinian resistance,<sup>5</sup> he showed how the semiotically open transnational medium of hip-hop can serve as a means to alternate the tuning of political messages according to the audiences targeted across the borders between Israel/Palestine. Galeet Dardashti, on the other hand, focused on the divergent identities exposed in the multiple interests of diverse segments of the Israeli publics (Palestinian-Israelis, *mizrahim*, and, I would guess Ashkenazi, peace activists) on Arab (read “Egyptian”) classical music. Abigail Wood, more attuned to British approaches to the study of “music in everyday life,” a subject I shall return to later in this paper, considered musical performance as a spatial phenomenon that maps the complexity of identities in a specific geographical area, Jerusalem. Amit Schejter and C. Michael Elavsky, in a long overdue undertaking, explored the legal backdrop against which an assumingly hegemonic Zionist narrative imposes its music on the civic sphere, a music that is in Hebrew, represents the “ingathering of the exiles” (and I would add “*shlilat ha-gola*,” or “Negation of the Diaspora”) and disregards the interests of non-Jews. Finally, Motti Regev stressed glocalization as a seminal

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<sup>5</sup> David McDonald, “Performing Palestine: Resisting the Occupation and Reviving Jerusalem’s Social and Cultural Identity through the Arts,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 25 (2006): 5-18.

concept helping to contextualize Israeli popular music developments since the 1960s. Specifically, he traced the styles of the most salient Israeli pop-rock electric guitarists and offered a contextual reading of their playing techniques with their metaphorical overtones of global-local dynamics.

Scholars in the area of music in Israel marked by the labels “art,” “classical,” or “learned” in their hegemonic Western European signification, are more concerned with the composer as an individual or with clusters of composers grouped on the basis of commonalities of historic, stylistic or technical traits. Jehoash Hirshberg focused on a typology of trends that have shaped the widespread narrative about Israeli art music until the present. Another set of binary oppositions, dominating the discourses of other papers in the conference as well, emerged from Hirshberg’s presentation, that of the national versus the global. Ronit Seter, on the other hand, looked beyond the tensions embedded in nationalism, into what she termed postmodernist trends which paradoxically express national concerns that can be interpreted as “cosmopolitan or world-music-like.” Distancing himself from rigid typologies and common narratives, Assaf Shelleg considered a set of specific musical techniques used by Israeli composers, neo-baroque and neo-tonality, as expressions of historicist modernism rather than postmodernism. Looking at the present through the prism of the past, Shelleg proposed that we “assign to non-Jewish [Western] music history a mediating role in mapping Israeliness in art music as a counterpoint of the Jewish, the Israeli, and the cosmopolitan.”

Music in Israel also shows strong shifts in an opposite direction, away from the cosmopolitan, the Israeli and even the Jewish. These are inward strategies, seeking the discrete, the local or even the insular, as well as a certain distance from the present. Barbara Johnson’s examination of the revival of songs by “Cochini” women in Israel (and the no-less interesting relation of this revival to academics) and Evan Rapport’s assessment of multiple homelands as a key to the diasporic condition of Bukharian Jews, fell under this category of studies. Finally, Francesco Spagnolo invited us to look outwards, not to the cosmopolitan, but rather to a vaguely defined transnational maritime identity, to the larger narrative of cultural coexistence across the Mediterranean as reflected in the unexplored relations between Italy and Israel in diverse registers of popular music-making.

Several discursive *topoi* dominated the presentations in the conference reflecting modern theoretical constructs in the study of music, i.e. current (and sometimes hegemonic) modes of interpretation in academia: nationalism, national identity, transnationalism, post-nationalism, cosmopolitanism, globalization and glocalization. In short, the construction and politics of identity through music emerged as the dominant concern. Obviously, the music stemming from the conflicting nature of the “Israeli situation” is unique and patently calls for musical interpretations based on an ecology of disparate identities. While conflict is found at the very heart of social relations in Israel at all levels, shaping delineations of various variants of self and other and marking boundaries of the most diverse types of social corporations, the “Israeli situation” intensifies the idea of colliding identities by the nature of its genesis. Born out of the already deep and long-term conflictual encounter between traditional Judaism and modernity in Europe, Zionism moved on, without a breath, straight into a clash with Arabic and Judeo-Arabic sensibilities and identities. No wonder that music indistinctively marks and reifies the diverse and constantly evolving moments of conflict between the various modes and shades of configuring Jewishness, Israeliness and Palestinianess.

Another theme occupying many papers included in this volume is the Mediterranean, which can be interpreted, as I have proposed in earlier studies, as a metaphor for movable perceptions of self, as a subversion of clear-cut identities and as challenge to rigid typologies.<sup>6</sup> Within the Mediterranean topic, we encounter *musika mizrahit* as a category that relentlessly continues to fascinate scholars due to its seemingly endless reservoir of multiple, contrasting and elusive interpretations. Such a disproportionate representation of *musika mizrahit* in the discourse about music in Israel could be taken as a mild case of musicological Orientalism. When we drew the attention to this genre of music made in Israel back in the mid-1980s (which one can better define

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<sup>6</sup> Edwin Seroussi, “*Yam tikhoniyut*: Transformations of the Mediterranean in Israeli Music,” in *Mediterranean Mosaic: Popular Music and Global Sounds*, ed. Goffredo Plastino (New York and London: Routledge, 2003 [*Perspectives on Global Pop*]): 179-198; idem, “‘Mediterraneanism’ in Israeli Music: An Idea and its Permutations,” *Music and Anthropology* 7 (2002), at <http://www.levi.provincia.venezia.it/ma/index.htm>.

today as a strategy of music production) we hardly expected to unleash such a long-standing and passionate academic discourse.<sup>7</sup>

### A Diary of Everyday Music



The agendas of the papers included in the present volume were generated by concepts of genre, style, network, memory and personality. I would propose to depart for a moment from this set of fixed categories into another research strategy, the one that music sociologist Tia De Nora calls “Music of the Everyday.”<sup>8</sup> The object and subject of this new inquiry of mine were the random aggregation of music and all other music-related experiences that I was exposed to over a certain time. A diary was kept to register these experiences. While this strategy collapsed due to the sheer amount of information streaming into the diary on a daily basis, the methodological breakdown actually provided insights that nurture the rest of this article. I would like to share with the reader a page or two from this musical diary as a backdrop to my subsequent thoughts.

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Halper, Edwin Seroussi and Pamela Squires-Kidron, “*Musica mizrahit*: Ethnicity and Class Culture in Israel,” *Popular Music* 8/2 (1989): 131-141. The original paper, read in 1988 at a conference in Bar-Ilan University, was published only ten years later as “Ethnicity and Class Culture in the Popular Music of Israel,” in *Studies in Socio-Musical Sciences*, ed. Joachim Braun and Uri Sharvit (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1998): 171-181.

<sup>8</sup> Tia de Nora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

The diary started on Monday, November 13, 2007. On that day, I attended the Monday afternoon concert series at the Hebrew University, a wind quintet program that included pieces by two Israeli composers, Elie Jaffe and Tzvi Avni. That evening I attended a concert of the Tarshiha Orchestra of Arab Music conducted by Taiseer Hadad, a Ph.D. student of mine, with the soloist Ibrahim Azzam, an Israeli-born star singer who resides in London and presents himself as a sort of reincarnation of Mohammad Abdul Wahab. It was an all-Abdul Wahab program played to a packed audience of Palestinian Israelis, Palestinian Palestinians from East Jerusalem, *Mizrahi haredi* ('ultraorthodox') Jews, and ethnically unaffiliated "ethnic music" connoisseurs at the symphony hall of the Jerusalem Theatre. In the cab on the way back home, I heard for the first time the remake of the title song from the legendary rocker Shalom Hanokh's seminal album "Hatunah levanah," "White Nights," (1981), performed by the younger rocker Evyatar Banai (b. 1973). "Remaking" is a meaningful phenomenon of cultural production to which I shall return later on in this article.

On the morning of November 14 I was approached by Bar-Ilan University to lecture at an event to take place in May 2009 celebrating the life of legendary Israeli singer and composer of Moroccan origin, Jo Amar. The rest of the day, I spent in dress rehearsals and in the concert titled *Maftirim: Hebrew Sacred Song from the Ottoman Empire* that was produced by the Jewish Music Research Centre in the framework of the International Jerusalem Oud Festival. The concert included *El har bat tziyyon*, a *piyyut* that was "Israelized" and made famous as a *shir eretz-yisraeli* ("song of the Land of Israel") in the 1930s by another legendary Israeli singer (of Yemenite origins), Bracha Tsefira (ca. 1911-1991).

## Jerusalem Billboard from Another Angle



On Friday, November 16, I visited *Ha-tav ha-shmini* (“The Eighth Note”), probably the largest retailer of CDs in Israel today. The CEO, Yuval Nissenbaum, gave me a present: a brand new production of *dati le’umi* (“national religious”) popular singer/composer Yonatan Razel, produced by “The Eighth Note” that recently entered the field of music production too to reduce expenses and compete with the major labels in the market. While writing the entry on Saturday night, November 17, I read the electronic newsletter *Carta de Sefarad* (“Letter from Spain”) announcing that on November 23-24 (2007) at the Barcelona “No Logic Festival,” an encounter of independent producers and a festival of alternative music, the Israeli label Ak-Duck Records would participate. Founded in Jerusalem in 2002 by Itamar Weiner, Harel Schreiber and Ariel Tagar, this label was created to promote Israeli artists of electronic (techno) music at the international level and to promote dialogue with artists from other countries working in the same field. The event was promoted by *Casa Sefarad-Israel*, a new organization from Spain dedicated to promote Israeli culture in that country. This showcase of avant-garde Israeli electronic music included Israeli stars Nico Teen and the DJ Spark O.

On the week starting November 18, I learned of the soprano saxophonist Ariel Shibolet. On the forefront of new experimental and improvised music in Israel, Shibolet presented a special concert in celebration of the new release “Live at the Tel Aviv Museum.” Shibolet collaborated in this album with the *Between the Strings Trio*, a new Israeli string and electronics trio consisting of Jean Claude Jones (born in Tunisia in 1949, educated in France, and a graduate of the Berklee School of Music, Jones is a virtuoso bass player and one of the deans of Israeli avant-garde jazz), Nori Jakobi (an outstanding young Sabra violist and composer) and Daniel Hoffman (a new immigrant violinist from San Francisco who specializes in klezmer music). “Live at the Tel Aviv Museum” was described by Barry Davis, music critic of the *Jerusalem Post* and *Downbeat* correspondent in Israel, as “a prime example of going out on a limb, a bungee jump into wild blue beyond. All four players here have checked their safety belts and their preconceptions at the door of the Tel Aviv Museum. This is art in joyous freefall.”<sup>9</sup>

During a visit to Jaffa later on in that week, I visited the store of the Azoulay brothers in Jaffa to purchase recordings by Jo Amar for my lecture at Bar-Ilan University. Hardly fifteen square feet, this space holds one of the most efficient musical enterprises in the world. Following their father who owned a music shop in Morocco, the Azoulay brothers have produced (under several labels of which Kolyphone is the best known one) a copious catalogue of LPs, cassettes and CDs over the past fifty years. Their output has influenced music in Israel beyond proportion, evading some of the constraints imposed by the “conventional” or regulated music industry, namely stringent contracts, strict bookkeeping and copyrights. Many of the major Israeli artists labeled as “Oriental” were produced by them amidst recordings of religious and secular repertoires in Hebrew and various modes of Judeo-Arabic as well as copies of productions by all the major stars from the Arab world. But this is not the whole story; the Azoulay brothers also risked capital in producing the first recordings of rock star Tzvika Pick (who is Polish). A sort of Israeli version of Prince, Pick’s emphasis on ‘glam’ (fancy dress, make-up, etc.), sexuality, publicity and gossip caused reviewers of the 1970s to deride him as a vulgar imitation of rock stardom practices. For those reasons, he was rejected by all the major recording labels to be

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted from the website of the ensemble: <http://www.betweenstrings.com/index.html>. Accessed October 6, 2008.

rescued only at the idiosyncratic recording studio of the Moroccan-born Azoulay brothers with its acoustic panels made of cardboard egg cartons pasted together on to the walls.

The impossibility of sustaining this ethnography of my everyday musicking for a long stretch of time is clear (out of exhaustion, I forgot to record in the diary additional events that occurred on the same week, such as a concert by the Israeli Contemporary Music Players at the Jerusalem Music Centre). What I want to distill from even this limited sample, however, is the intensity of musical life in Israel as well as its extreme multifaceted character considering its small population. Of course, I am not the average Israeli consumer of music. Music is my business, and therefore my exposure to the Israeli musical scene is much more varied and intensive. Yet, I propose that the theoretical projections of this diary can be applied to the musical experience of other, more typical music consumers in Israel. I would like to stress three ideas:

- the futility of typologies, a lesson that we should learn from modern aesthetics;
- the constant tension between an imagined core of Israeli music (including musical works and their accompanying narratives) and its multiple satellites as a working hypothesis for the interpretation of any music created and consumed by the Jewish sector of the Israeli society;
- finally, as suggested earlier, the intense blurring and overlapping of boundaries between modes of music production, training and research, in other words, an emphasis on the construction of more discrete musical subjectivities, as a characteristic of music-making in Israel.

### **Typologies, Core and Periphery, Boundaries**

Let me elaborate on these three tenets. Music in Israel today, at all registers, refuses rigid typologies. It refused typologization in the past too, but in the present, we can firmly state that each designer of music in Israel, each composer or performer, listener or critic, is a type of its own. Moreover, the registers themselves, folk, popular and art music, and the authoritative agencies that are committed to the production of music on each of these registers are as fluid and blurred as they have ever been. Take the Israel Philharmonic's willingness to accompany any pop star wearing jeans; take

hard rock bands recording with classic string quartets, or for that matter, with “Oriental” synagogue cantors; take the former all-Israeli diva and Yiddish/klezmer revivalist Hava Alberstein’s recent recording (March 2008) produced by prime contemporary jazz musician Avi Leibovitch and founder of the “Orkestra”, a mini big band that performs original Israeli jazz; take any Israel composer of “art” music whose age is between thirty to sixty, the absolute majority of them native Israelis or immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and you cannot find two that can be matched together as a type. It can be adduced of course that there is nothing surprising in this portrait of the current Israeli musical output. Hybridity of musical genres, styles and contexts of performance is after all the marker of modes of cultural production that are too easily thrown into the trash can of post-modernity. But this is too simplistic a solution, a jargoned escape from a deeper reading of the Israeli musical map which has been “tainted” by hybridity ever since one could delineate it as a discrete area separated from previous (Jewish) musical practices (which needless to say, were also quite hybrid themselves).

**All-time Israeli diva and Yiddish revivalist  
Chava Alberstein with Avi Leibovitz, founder and director of  
the “Orkestra” Big Band, announcing their collaboration**



As a counterforce to hybridization, one can argue that there are still in Israel enough social forces with the power to promote a core musical culture representing normative Jewish Israeliness; thus, decentralization and hybridization need to be addressed in a

more subtle mode. The idea of a core culture (*libah* in Hebrew, of which *kur yitukh*, the melting pot, is just one of its variants) was cultivated by the dominant political forces within the Zionist movement as a necessity.<sup>10</sup> But did this hegemonic core ever attain the colossal and even intimidating canonical status that some circles within the academia, I would say a mobilized Israeli Jewish academia, attributed to it? I doubt it. Perceived from the vantage point of “Israel at Sixty,” the frontiers of this cultural core are perhaps more negotiable than ever before.

The permeability of the Zionist musical core, if there ever was one, can be seen for example in the wide acceptance of softer (some harsh critics will say “watered down”) lyrical styles of *musika mizrahit* by a large majority of the Israeli public. The music of the new generation of *mizrahi* artists such as Eyal Golan, Sarit Hadad, Amir Benayoun, Zehava Ben and many others, is considered more consensually Israeli today than many classical *shirei Eretz yisrael*, the quintessential sound of Israeliness according to most academic and non-academic narratives. But the seeds of this apparently “new” perception of *musika mizrahit* were actually embedded in this repertoire ever since the first generation of *mizrahi* artists. It could be traced back to Haim Moshe’s appearance as the representative of Israel at the Eurovision contest of 1988 or at the Israel Prize ceremony in the early 1990s (two decisive staged embodiments of Israeliness), or to the towering figure of Zohar Argov, whose 1987 funeral was one of the most attended ones in the history of Israel. In 2007, a street was named after Argov in his hometown of Rishon Letsion, an honor that very few Israeli musicians ever receive.

Motti Regev and I have proposed a neo-Gramscian reading of this triumphal “success” of *musika mizrahit* in penetrating the core of Israeliness, based on the idea

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<sup>10</sup> The term *libah tarbutit* (“core culture” or “cultural core”) is not a metaphor but was used in practice, for example by a committee established in 1999 by the Ministry of Science, Culture and Sports under Minister Matan Vilnai. The committee (called “Hazon tarbut 2000,” “Prospect/Vision for the Culture of 2000”) headed by Prof. Zohar Shavit from Tel Aviv University was commissioned by the government to define a unifying policy in the field of culture and sort out a repertoire of shared cultural assets and values to be taught in all schools in Israel (secular and religious). A two hundred page report was issued, public discussions and hearings were held but the program was not implemented (a destiny shared by countless reports of this kind issued by committees in all fields). For a manifesto in defense of the idea of *libah tarbutit* by Zohar Shavit titled “Laḥzor la-libah ha-tarbutit,” [“To return to the cultural core”] see: <http://lib.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=7204> (Accessed October 6, 2008).

of its stylistic domestication by the music industry.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in spite of the acceptance of softer *musika mizrahit* into the core of mainstream Israeli popular culture, one still hears a relentless growling over its discrimination or laments over the disintegration of its authenticity at the most diverse public levels. The subtext of these attitudes is that centrifugal cultural forces are still generated by acknowledging that there is, and perhaps there should always be, a core, even if its boundaries are relentlessly contested. At the risk of indulging in poor literary metaphor, I would say that the core of the music made in Israel is an imaginary punching bag that is constantly hit by the most diverse array of sound boxers.

But the core is not only the victim of its contesting boxers. Privatization of musical production in Israel, in both its neo-liberal and public grass-roots modes, are at the same time challenging and reinforcing the core in the productions that they promote. Surprising or not, the steady retreat of the Israeli nation-state from its classic role as the main source of nourishment of the core cultural values has not been detrimental to the centripetal power of the core. The core, in other words, has a life of its own; it does not need oxygen supply from the state to remain alive as a pervasive topic in the politics of Israeli identities.

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<sup>11</sup> Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and Israeli National Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004): 234-235.

## A Special Event: The *Piyyut* Festival of the Avi Chai Foundation in Jerusalem and Yerucham (Negev Desert)



This constant negotiation of a core musical culture can be also interpreted as an outcome of the latent anxiety of most Israelis over the survival of their society. This hypothesis can be supported, for example, by the grass-roots public revival of *shirah be-tzibbur*, the venerable sing-alongs of Hebrew songs, *shirei Eretz yisrael* (now at pubs and wine cellars rather than at kibbutz dining halls) and *mizrahi* songs as well (in “Greek” taverns). Another case is the huge financial investment of the private Avi Chai Foundation in the revival of the singing of religious Hebrew poetry, the *piyyut*, by using clever strategies such as the establishment of singing communities and the promotion of rock crossovers. By bringing rockers to weekend retreats in which they meet with synagogue cantors, the Avi Chai enterprise is the epitome of the contemporary processes that I am trying to describe: it cultivates the quest for an imagined core while at the same time promotes more diversity, more hybridization and more tensions.

and the Jerusalem Theater offers an evening of songs from the first decade of the State of Israel directed by poet, translator and scholar Dr. Dan Almagor



Yet another case of permeability of boundaries in the production and consumption of music is the Israeli scene of rap and hip hop.<sup>12</sup> Which Israeli song can be at the same time more consensual and more disruptive than the “Sticker Song” of the *Dag Nahash* (“Snakefish”) band, whose text was conceived by no less than the super-canonical, if left-wing, writer David Grossman? As journalist Sam Freedman put it, “imagine the dazzling unlikeliness of Russell Banks having collaborated with Mos Def or Chuck D on a chart topper.”<sup>13</sup> The Israeli bumper sticker culture itself is a powerful linguistic allegory of the collision of centripetal and centrifugal forces shaping (or dismantling) Israeliness at sixty.

Some basic dialectics govern the imagined nucleus of the Israeli musical core and its relentlessly encircling neurons linking it to the more general and ubiquitous debate over the nature of Israeliness in Israeli academia and other public arenas in “Israel at Sixty.” While anthropological scholarship has stressed the strengths of the integrative forces (sometimes perceived as quasi-sinister designs) shaping the Israeli Jewish

<sup>12</sup> See Arie Judd Hasit, *Everybody Talks about Peace: Politics and Identity in Israeli Hip Hop*. BA Thesis (Harvard University, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Sam Freedman, “Honk if You Love to Sing Bumper Stickers,” *New York Times*, August 16, 2004. The song has its own independent entry in Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shirat\\_Hasticker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shirat_Hasticker) (relying mostly on Freedman’s article) (Accessed October 6, 2008).

society, its rituals and national myths, the deconstruction of such a unitary national identity is at the center of many contemporary studies of Israeli culture and society, especially after the assassination of Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin.<sup>14</sup> This traumatic murder is perceived by many analysts as a turning point, not only for its political dimensions but also for its historical and even mythical ramifications that are crucial to the understanding of Israeli society and culture in the past decade or so. The assassination also occurred when what became known as the post-Zionist debate, another sign of the weakening of the hegemonic Zionist narrative (at least among intellectual elites) that dictated cultural paths as well, was already in full swing. I tend to agree with sociologist Uri Ram who proposed seeing this debate not as a purely academic dispute among Israeli academics over memories and identities, but rather as a reflection of deep structural changes in the political culture of Israel on the backdrop of regional and global processes.<sup>15</sup>

Following the logic of the theories stressing the weakening of the Zionist state, one notices since the early 1990s, on the façade, a decentralization of the Israeli cultural field and a move toward a multi-cultural society by default and circumstance rather than by design. A more sensitive analysis will detect deeper forces at work in general and in the music scene in particular. For example, the unique character of the late 1980s-early 1990s massive Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia challenged the homogeneity of Israeliness, if it existed at all prior to this period. Substantial numbers of non-Jewish foreign laborers from the Far East, Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America joined the ranks of the new immigrants and all together intensified the sense of cultural decentralization.

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<sup>14</sup> For consolidating myths and rituals see, Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and Don Handelman, *Nationalism and the Israeli State: Bureaucratic Logic in Public Events* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004). One of the most influential exponents of the deconstructive approach is Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and see also the collection of essays *Israelis in Conflict: Hegemonies, Identities and Challenges*, ed. by Adriana Kemp et al. (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Uri Ram, *Ha-globalizatzyah shel Yisra'el: Maq'world be-Tel Aviv, Jihad bi-Yerushalayim* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005) translated as *The Globalization of Israel: McWorld in Tel Aviv, Jihad in Jerusalem* (New York: Routledge, 2008). For overviews of new trends in Israeli historiography, see Anita Shapira and Derek Jonathan Penslar (eds.), *Israeli Historical Revisionism: From Left to Right* (Potland, Or: Frank Cass, 2003) and Laurence J. Silberstein, *Postzionism: A Reader* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

The music scene of Israel changed dramatically in this period too, with the establishment of entirely new circuits of music-making and consumption run by and for these most diverse constituencies. Clubs run by Russian immigrants host Russian rock bands who sing in Russian songs such as “I hate Shlomo Artzi.” Some Uzbek and Tajik Jewish immigrant musicians were “absorbed” by the nascent Israeli scene of world music and by newly established schools of “ethnic” music. The most picturesque among them, the eminent Aliev family of percussionists, gained visibility and clout in mainstream Israeli scenes. A successful TV ad campaign promoting *Mif'al Ha-pais* (Israeli State Lottery) in 2009 features four generations of Aliev virtuosos with the younger one, a four-year old rebel, kicking away the *doira* (traditional frame drum) given to him by his parents as if it was a soccer ball. The happily Alievs smile with comprehension at the rebellion of their little Israelized rascal who may end a venerable chain of several generations of professional Uzbek-Jewish percussionists. A scene of reggae night clubs in Tel Aviv serves the Ethiopian Israeli-educated Jewish secular and yet marginalized youth that sees Bob Marley, Mahmoud Ahmed, Aster Aweke or Gigi (Ejigayehu Shibabaw) rather than Shoshana Damari, the Givatron, Sasha Argov or Shalom Hanokh as their cultural icons.<sup>16</sup> Do not look for the music of these young Ethiopian Jews in state-run radio stations, unless it is mediated by “authoritative” Israeli pop stars such as Shlomo Gronich’s “Sheva Choir” or Idan Raichel’s “Project.”

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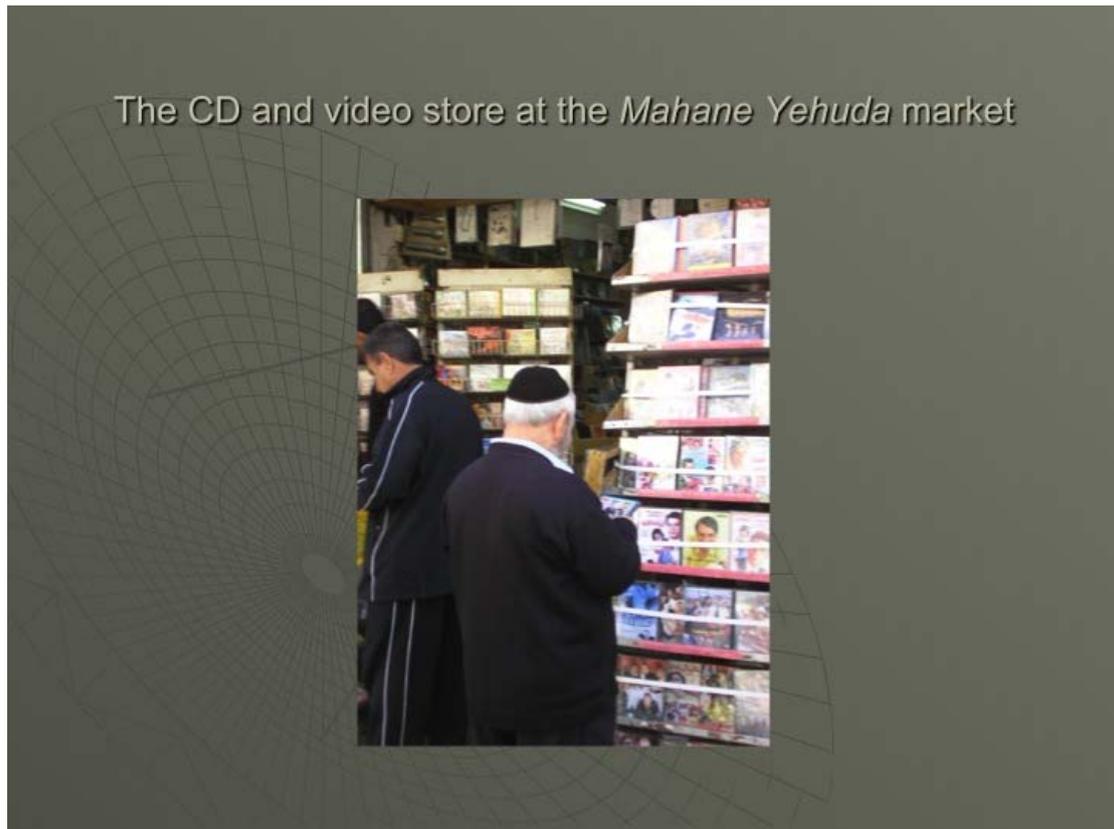
<sup>16</sup> Malka Shabtay, *Between Reggae and Rap: The Challenge of Belonging for Ethiopian Youth in Israel*. Tel Aviv: Cherikover, 2001 (In Hebrew).

Catering to the Ethiopian Jewish population shopping at the nearby Ethiopian goods store in the *Mahane Yehuda* market



While the weakening of the young Israeli nation-state by globalization and indomitable waves of immigrants refusing to abide to its socializing structures has shaken the foundations of established Israeli cultural practices, critical social theory has contributed its share to the decline in the prestige of the ethos of cultural homogeneity transpiring from those practices. For example, Uri Ram's perception of the Israeli Jewish sector as split across a divide with two camps, a *Mizrahi*-religious-nationalist-right vs. an Ashkenazi-liberal-globalist-left, each one proposing its own vision of the core of Israeliness is partial and reductionist when applied to the study of music. Such dualities are weak because substantial segments of the Israeli population do not participate in such alignments. Besides the ones that I have already mentioned, the Russians, the Ethiopians and the foreign laborers, two other major sectors of the Israeli society strongly contribute to the process of decentralization. One is the *haredi* sector that is absent from Ram's scheme, for apparently it does not participate actively in the shaping of Israeliness. Yet, one can hardly imagine the Israeli soundscape without the latent presence of the *haredim* (ultra-orthodox Jews) in the music market. "Regular" Israelis do not "hear" *haredi* music because of the voluntary segregation of its makers and consumers. Yet, *haredi* music is out there and cannot be discarded on

the basis of an outdated distinction between “Jewish” and “Israeli” music.<sup>17</sup> The second absent sector is of course the Arab one. Even though marginalized from the main discourses of Israeliness, the younger generations of Israeli Arab intellectuals have been increasingly contesting the Jewish hegemony over Israeliness. Today Arab musicians are inseparable from the Israeli music scene at various registers and in diverse genres thus adding a further layer of complexity to a music scene that is already saturated by contrasting interests.<sup>18</sup>



In conclusion, scholarship of music in Israel needs to be more attentive to and come to terms with this plethora of authentic voices which decentralizes the imagined core of musical Israeliness as much as it contributes to it. A final addendum to this point:

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<sup>17</sup> Studies of *haredi* popular music in Israel are almost nil because research has focused on “traditional” music, especially those of the Hassidic communities which comprise only a small section of the *haredi* public. Because the *haredi* community is a transnational one (in fact mostly tri-urban, moving between Brooklyn, Bene Berak and Jerusalem), its music is not necessarily tied to place. One can therefore refer to studies by Marc Kligman on popular music among *haredim* in Brooklyn that are partly applicable to Israel, e.g. “On the Creators and Consumers of Orthodox Popular Music in Brooklyn,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 23 (1996): 259-293. Yet, there are certain musical phenomena unique to the *haredim* in Israel, as this community interacts, in spite of its activist exclusiveness, with its non-*haredi* Israeli surroundings. An example that comes to mind is the Argentinean-born Israeli singer/composer Yehuda Glanz who combines Latin, Middle Eastern and Hassidic elements in his music.

<sup>18</sup> For a concise introduction to this subject see, Motti Regev, *‘Ud ye-gitarah: tarbut ha-musikah shel ‘Arviye Yisra’el* (Ra’ananah: ha-Merkaz le-ḥeker ha-ḥevrah ha’arvit be-Yisra’el, 1993).

scholars of music in Israel hardly address the musical culture of the substantial Israeli Diaspora, especially in the US. No one can deny the strong long-distance Israeli national identity of this sub-culture.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps Israeli and American Jewish scholars feel, each of their own reasons, uncomfortable by discussing the culture of those who having been born or educated in Israel deserted a basic tenet of the Zionist project by abandoning the physical occupation of the land and returning to the Diaspora. An enlightening chapter by Moshe Shokeid on the role of *shirah be-tzibbur* (“communal singing”) among Israeli immigrants in the US in the 1980s may serve as an inspiration for future studies of this long-distance Israeli national minority that has dramatically increased since the time of Shokeid’s ethnography.<sup>20</sup>

### **Five discrete etudes**

Having detected some of the crucial intersections where music in Israel can be perceived in a new light, the last part of this paper consists of five case studies, short snippets that illustrate a wide range of angles and discrete situations. These cases aim at reinforcing my claim that we need to circumvent rigid typologies and binary oppositions by addressing various levels of tension between individualized expressions of musical creativity (styles, genres, contexts, etc) and the powerful, pervasive, unattainable and yet ever-present idea of a core repertoire. At the same time, I propose viewing music as the reflection of the multiplicity of identities surfacing and disappearing from the Israeli social fabric at an increasing pace. These musical identities are constructed through a constant elaboration of memories, real or imagined, by specific networks of artists, producers, media people and audiences. After one hundred and twenty years of Zionism, sixty years of statehood, and two decades of postzionism, many of these memories are utterly local, a result of an accumulated experience of Jewish Israeliness bearing no necessary rapport with the Jewish Diaspora or for that matter, with Palestine before Zionism.

- ***Hag ha-musika ha-yisraelit***

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<sup>19</sup> I have borrowed the concept of long-distance nationalism from Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron, *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (Durham, [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2001). This book presents a strong theoretical foundation for the study of the concept of nation outside territorial boundaries and the relations between this and the territorial modes of national identity in a global world.

<sup>20</sup> Moshe Shokeid, *Children of Circumstances: Israeli Emigrants in New York* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988): 104-125.

Let me start with art music. The peripheral status of this mode of music production in Israel can be interpreted just as the local version of the more widespread decline in contemporary art music consumption in other Western societies, as well as the conundrum affecting composers in the post-Darmstadt era (remember that Israeli art music is mostly post-World War II music). The discourse of local art music hardly attracts major public attention in Israel, even from the audiences of classical music.<sup>21</sup> Some understanding of this situation can be gleaned from the 2007 edition of the Celebration of Israeli Music (*Hag ha-musika ha-yisraelit*). This two to three-day event that has taken place for the past few years in Jerusalem near the end of the summer is a sort of official celebration of local art music creativity. It is sponsored by the Music Section of the Culture Authority at the Ministry of Culture, the professional statutory committee in charge of advising the government on budgeting performing entities. Originally restricted to the field of art music with a more or less fixed format of chamber performances leading to a major symphonic concert in the evening, the Celebration of Israeli Music succumbed to forces coming “from the field” (*mi-ha-shetaḥ*, a common Hebrew aphorism for “grass-roots” initiatives). “Ethnic music,” the Israeli code for almost any music that is not Western, was the first to be included, in the form of respectable Arabic classic music.

The 2007 edition of the Celebration of Israeli Music went even further towards the decentralizing approach. The composer Michael Wolpe (b. 1960) was commissioned to direct it. More than one hundred works, many of which could not abide any ordinary definition of Western art music, were performed on three consecutive days. In spite of its plurality, harsh criticism of Wolpe’s programming arose from the music critic Noam Ben Ze’ev of the influential daily *Haaretz* (self-defined as the “newspaper for people who think”).<sup>22</sup> “Whose celebration is it and what is there to celebrate,” Ben Ze’ev asked rhetorically. “If art music that is at the bottom of the government’s priorities is to be celebrated, then a funeral is more proper,” he answered. Wolpe is accused of reflecting in his selection of the pieces a one-sided narrative that honors a series of canonical composers of Israeli art music at the

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley Waterman, “Variations on a Hebrew Theme: The Politics of Art Music in Israel,” *GeoJournal* 65/1-2 (2006): 113-123.

<sup>22</sup> Noam Ben Ze’ev, “Shel mi ha-ḥag ha-zeh?, *Haaretz Online*, October 1, 2007 (Accessed October 6, 2008) <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/908424.html>. More than 150 online heated responses followed up in the following days, mostly critical of the critic.

expense of avant-garde. Ben Ze'ev depicted this repertoire as “conservative pieces by contemporary composers from which the spirit of tradition (*masoret*) transpires and who try to create Israeliness inspired by music of the Jewish communities (*'edot*), Sephardi and Ashkenazi prayers, and popular songs as ‘Jerusalem of Gold’. Is this all there is to Israeliness?” Ben Ze'ev offered an alternative to Wolpe's approach: a fringe event led by young composer Sivan Cohen-Elias that took place two weeks earlier in Tel Aviv. “This event,” claims Ben Ze'ev, “was not supported by a team of governmental bureaucrats that have done the same work for decades, detached from any contemporary experience.”

From this incident, we learn in a nutshell that discourses surrounding Israeli art music are still informed by the core idea of one exclusive variety of Israeli authenticity. Of course, in the tight-knit and parochial scene of Israeli art music, issues are personal too, and the Ben Ze'ev/Wolpe incident can be interpreted on the level of clashing individual (and political) sensibilities. The point is, however, that the stylistic decentralization and pluralism of the 2007 Celebration of Israeli Music did not play in favor of Wolpe in the eyes of Ben Ze'ev precisely because it made concessions to an excessively “Jewish” and “Zionist” vision of Israeliness. Wolpe's innovative moves were still judged from the perspective of a pervasive, unifying core paradigm.

- **Naomi Shemer**

Clearer expressions of tension over the status and nature of the core surfaced in the discussions that burst open immediately after the death of songwriter Naomi Shemer on June 26, 2004.<sup>23</sup> Was Shemer an index of consensual Israeliness, what Israeli journalistic jargon terms *medurat ha-shevet* (“the tribal campfire”), or was she the representative of an outdated (and right-wing) mode of being Israeli that is practiced only by an aging (and politically conservative) minority? One would have assumed that the untimely disappearance of the canonical composer whose contribution to the core repertoire of Israeli songs was notable, (see above the remark by Ben Ze'ev on “Jerusalem of Gold”) would stir pure grief and sorrow. Well, it did, but only for a few days until after her funeral on the shore of the Kinneret, the Sea of Galilee, an iconic location of the “classical” Zionist ethos.

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<sup>23</sup> *Haaretz Online*, July 2, 2004, page B1.

Today when most Israelis conceptualize the Kinneret as a string of expensive and crowded beaches controlled by private contractors, or, on the contrary, as the location of religious pilgrimage sites such as the tomb of the saintly Rabbi Me'ir Ba'al Ha-Nes, Zionist myths such as Naomi Shemer's are hard to uphold. Controversies over the aesthetic value of her musical and poetical legacy were not new. They accompanied her for most of her adult life. She was harshly criticized by literary critics such as Dan Miron, and was accused by the left of supporting the cause of the right, most especially the Israeli settlers who refused to evacuate Sinai in the aftermath of the peace treaty with Egypt.<sup>24</sup> One year after her death, a series of controversial articles were published in *Haaretz*, including a posthumously published letter to composer Gil Aldema in which Shemer seemingly confessed to unconsciously basing "Jerusalem of Gold" on a Basque folksong, a fact that was not totally new to Israeli song connoisseurs.<sup>25</sup> Demystifying one of the most Israeli of all Israeli songs (and Jewish, if one considers its extensive liturgical uses) ever composed (voted number one in polls held during "Israel at Fifty" and "Israel at Sixty") as an act of plagiarism exposed in a symbolic manner the fragility of the core repertoire.

The contrasting attitudes to Shemer's persona and work clearly show that binary opposites are of no avail as analytical tools of music in Israel. It would expected, for

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<sup>24</sup> Dan Miron, "Zmirot me-eretz lahadam: mekoma shel Naomi Shemer be-hayenu," *Igra* 1 (1984): 173-206. Miron's polemical attack on Shemer's messianic tendencies still stirs controversy a quarter century after its publication. It was the subject on an entire panel at a conference on the Israeli song held at Bar-Ilan University in June 2008. One of Shemer's most enduring songs ever, "Al kol eleh" (1981), containing the famous verse, "al na ta'qor natu'a" ("do not uproot the rooted") became in 1982 the anthem of the Sinai Jewish settlers and was recycled by the opposition to the disengagement from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005.

<sup>25</sup> The articles by Tom Segev ("Yerushalayim shel zahav ke-te'unat 'avodah") and Idit Avrahami ("Ha-mikhtav she-e'evira li hu tzava'atah ha-ahronah") were published in the weekend edition of *Haaretz* on May 6, 2005 (Israel's Independence Day). They were preceded by a teaser published a day earlier by Idit Avrahami and Nurit Wurgaft ("Paco Ibañez: sham'ati et Yerushalayim shel zahav ve-amarti: 'hey, zeh ha-shir Pello Joxepe!'") in which the Spanish Basque singer Paco Ibañez recalled singing the Basque lullaby in Israel back in 1962 with Naomi Shemer in attendance (for an English version see, "Shemer had no reason to feel bad, says Basque singer of copied tune," [www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=573042](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=573042), accessed August 25, 2009). These articles were followed up by several, mostly apologetic responses defending Shemer's oblivious borrowing. This news traveled fast in Jewish cyberspace. On May 13, 2005, Ofer Shelah published "Basque Twist Tarnishes Jerusalem's 'Gold'" in the Jewish *Forward* ([www.forward.com/articles/3461](http://www.forward.com/articles/3461), accessed August 25, 2009). By May 22, 2005, this rather local Israeli musical quarrel was already featured in the USA's National Public Radio ("Questions over Israel's 'Second Anthem'," [www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=4662107](http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=4662107), accessed August 25, 2009). One may surmise that the shaky grounds of an Israeli cultural icon were an appealing issue for the newscast rather than the pure musicological debate over the act of borrowing.

example, that the *mizrahi* sector of the Israeli Jewish public will be antagonistic to her songs, an ultimate symbol of the dominant Ashkenazi mode of Israeliness. In fact, Shemer was much more criticized by members of her own social ranks than from *mizrahi* singers and their publics, who assiduously performed, recorded and consumed her songs since the early days of her career.<sup>26</sup>

- **The Israel Andalusian Orchestra**

In his long career, the Moroccan-born singer Jo Amar (1933-2009) sought a consensual Israeli acceptance by singing and recording a variety of songs from miscellaneous genres, including Naomi Shemer's, but his attempt was doomed to fail. What remained in the Israeli collective memory was a Moroccan *paytan*, a singer of religious poems and "flamencoized" popular songs such as "Barcelona." Lacking a clear-cut space on the main stage of Israeliness, in spite of his remarkable success, Amar disappeared from the scene, moving to Canada and the US. He returned to Israel for good only very late in life (1999), in the wake of the astounding renaissance of Moroccan Jewish music in Israel.

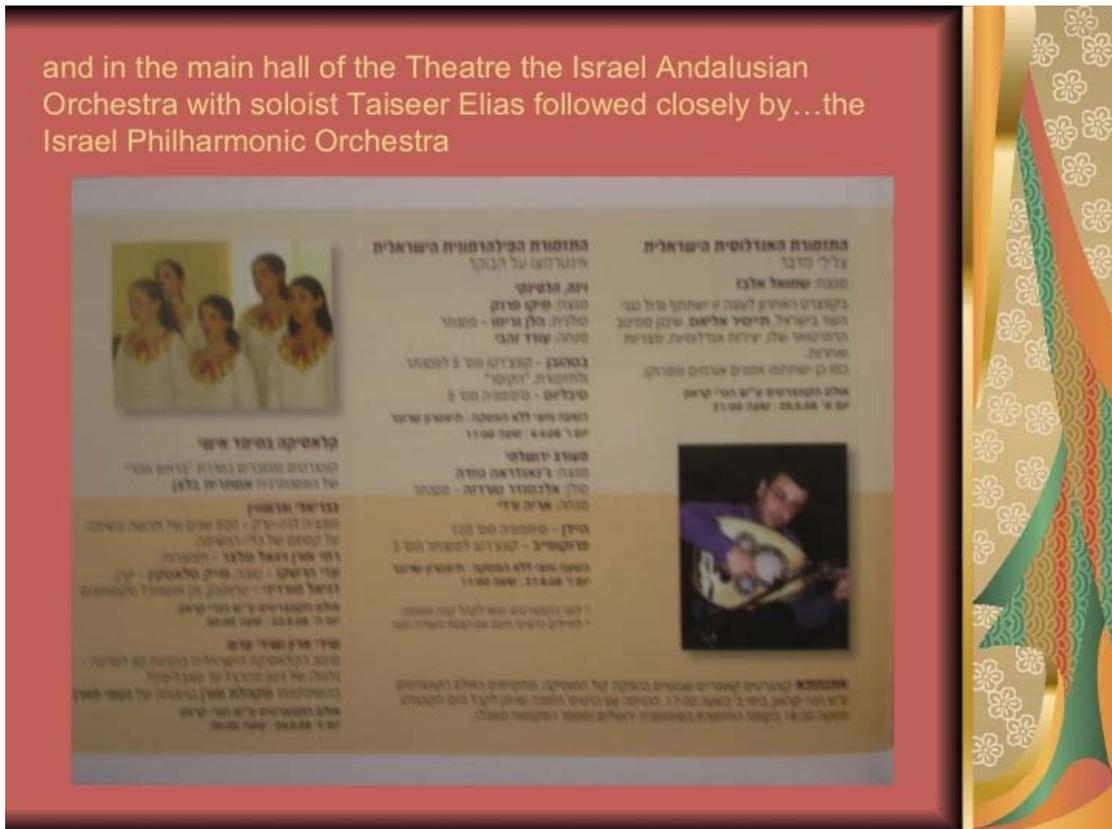
No other event signifies this renaissance more than the establishment of the Israel Andalusian Orchestra (IAO). Already the object of academic research,<sup>27</sup> I will only refer here to one issue related to the IAO in support of the hypothesis that I am trying to substantiate. Music's deep connection to social identities and to the emotions that codify such collective identities has been distinctively intensified by globalization and Israel is no exception to this trend. The IAO emerged as a response to globalization, mixing the trope of Western anxiety over the disappearance of discrete musical "traditions" with a reaction to the specifics of Moroccan Jewish identity and its rearticulation in the Israeli nation-state.

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph "Jo" Amar arrived from Morocco in 1956, recorded "Shilgiyah" ["Snow White"], one of Shemer's Hebrew covers of French chansons, in the early 1960s. In this case, French culture, a colonial force, mediated between the Israeli Francophile Shemer (one has to remember that France was Israel's main supporter at the time) and the Moroccan Amar arriving from a French Protectorate. The astounding live performances of "Jerusalem of Gold" by Zohar Argov are still remembered as great examples of *mizrahi* deconstruction of "core" Israeli culture. Another song by Shemer, "Ha-kol patuah," (1992) turned into a great hit through the "Mediterranean-style" performance of *mizrahi* singer Ofer Levy (in a duo with Leah Lupatin).

<sup>27</sup> Meirav Aharon-Gutman, "Le rav-tarbutiyut kama at notenet? Ha-tizmoret ha-andalusit ha-yisra'elit beyn ha-"state" la-"statement", [To multi-culturalism, how much do you give? The Israel Andalusian Orchestra between the State and the Statement], unpublished paper, 2006. I am grateful to the author for sharing this paper with me.

and in the main hall of the Theatre the Israel Andalusian Orchestra with soloist Taiseer Elias followed closely by...the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra



To understand the phenomenon of the IAO in its proper context, one has to consider the new status that young Moroccan Israeli Jews attained in the national political echelons since the 1980s. By climbing up the ranks of local councils, mastering the function of the state-supported field of culture, internalizing modern Western concepts of aesthetic value, and manipulating scholarly authority, these relentlessly ambitious individuals of the second-generation Moroccan Israelis turned the IAO into the project of their lives. In their rhetoric (which capitalized on the establishment's own multi-cultural rhetoric), the IAO was entitled a status equal to the venerable Israel Philharmonic Orchestra as an act of vindication by the Jewish nation-state towards the denial of Moroccan Jewish culture during the massive period of immigration (1950s). The strategy for attaining this goal was to put the IAO's hands deep into the state budget pockets, threatening governmental employees and parliamentary committees with suing them at the Supreme Court on the basis of cultural discrimination. Put differently, Moroccan Andalusian music in its Jewish/Hebrew variant was, in the views of the IAO managers and benefactors, a legitimate component of the Israeli cultural core ("Beethoven is ethnic too," was a favorite trope in their discourse) and financial support from the state was the social embodiment of that aspiration. That many of the IAO musicians were in fact

immigrants from the former Soviet Union added a further poignant (and very Israeli) twist to these claims of authenticity.

Paradoxically, the IAO eventually capitalized on its international marketing potential as a sub-style of Israeli “world music” by stressing its Moroccanness rather than its Israeliness. Finally, when the wells of Andalusian Moroccan music were exhausted and audiences (as well as state-funding agencies) became impatient, the IAO diversified its repertoire playing almost any music emerging under the “Mediterranean” (real or imagined) skies.

The end of this meteoric Israeli musical experiment almost recalls a Greek tragedy. On 2006, the IAO was granted the Israel Prize, the highest distinction accorded by the state, for its “contribution to society and culture” in a questionable decision heavily tainted by “affirmative action.” In 2008, after a long strike, the IAO was disbanded after the musicians (remember, many of them Russian Jews) accused the managerial ranks (Moroccan Jews) of mismanagement and paying them “miserable salaries.” A musical inversion of the “classic” Israeli social pyramid came to an end.

- **Rereading the Canon of Israeli Rock**

Recently, a growing phenomenon has spread in the Israeli rock scene: the release of albums that pay homage to canonical productions of the past. “I remember the first time I heard Ehud Banai on the radio,” recalls Uzi Preuss, the repertoire director of the Hebrew department at the NMC record company. “For a young guy who was connected mostly to foreign music, this was something amazing: an Israeli record that sounded just as good as U2. As though that gap between England and Israel, which always seemed so huge to us, was no longer relevant. That is good music and this is good music.” Musician David Peretz remembers the release of the album “Ehud Banai and the Refugees” in 1989 as a key event in his life. “I was in the eleventh grade and that was maybe the first time I felt that Israeli music spoke to me, not to my old aunts,” he says. “To understand this feeling you have to remember what there was here in the mid-1980s. [Pop vocal quartet] ‘Ha-kol Over Habibi’ was the most popular group. It was such a desert. The feeling was, what is this weird place? And all of a sudden something came along that could correspond with what was happening

abroad. This was a huge shift in consciousness. As though something had ended and something new had begun.”

Marking the twentieth anniversary of the launch of “Ehud Banai and the Refugees,” the music media produced a new re-reading of Banai’s original (and by now canonical) album. Banai’s album brought Israeli rock close to English and American models with respect to sound aesthetics and production processes. The same occurred with the thirtieth anniversary of Rami Fortis’ album “Plonter,” which was “a one-off alien from outer space in the skies of Israel.”<sup>28</sup> Shalom Hanokh’s “Hatuna levana” (“White Wedding”) of 1981 was given the same homage in its twenty-fifth anniversary with the release of “Ha-derakhim ha-yedu’ot” (“The known roads”), a re-elaboration of the original album by an assortment of artists from the most diverse backgrounds in the pop-rock scene each of whom convened to re-read one of the songs.

Re-reading the past of Israeli rock can be broadly interpreted as nostalgia, a lack of faith in the art of the present, part of the canonization process or the writing of history, financial opportunism by record labels or their joining global trend of music (re)production, or a combination of several or all of these motives. Thus, the advocates of Israeli rock, supposedly the “authentic” rebel voice of contemporary Israeliness, joins the ranks of other disparate registers of music production in Israel, such as *shirei Eretz Yisrael* or Moroccan Andalusian music, in their journey to claim a share of the Israeli culture core.<sup>29</sup>

- **Alger**

Opposite the mainstream of the self-celebratory rock just mentioned, other sites of memory do not take as point of reference albums consecrated by critics and record companies. The Israeli rock scene produced in later years engaging and subversive works that received less attention from the mass media while challenging the core of

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<sup>28</sup> All the quotes in this section of the paper are from Ben Shalev’s article, “Soundtracks of their lives,” *Haaretz Online*, February 20, 2008, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/955999.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/955999.html)

<sup>29</sup> The intersections of rock with the field of national culture and the legitimacy of rock in the performance of national uniqueness in Israel are discussed by Motti Regev, “Ethno-National Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism Made From Within,” *Cultural Sociology* 1/3 (2007): 317-341.

Israeliness by punching deep into its widely shared values. In the early 1990s, Aviv Gedg and Gabriel Balahsan from Moshav Talmei Eliyahu in southern Israel established Alger, a band which may be not so familiar to most readers outside, or even inside Israel. As this is one of the most interesting groups ever to emerge in the Israeli rock scene, I choose it as the last brief etude of this article.

In the earliest stages of its career, Alger was not played in the radio due to the contents of some of their songs' lyrics. Support came from the grassroots, from a small hardcore group of faithful followers that led Hed Artzi, Israel's monopolistic recording company to sign a contract with Alger. In December 1995 Alger's first album "Ne'emanut u-tshuqah" ("Loyalty and Passion") was issued by Hed Artzi but failed to succeed commercially. After the release, members of the band went through a severe personal crisis that included temporary *teshuvah* (an embrace of Orthodox Judaism) and voluntary retreat to a hospital for the mentally ill. Eight years later, the second and final CD, "Meno'im kadimah," ("Engines Forward") was released by the Barbi records label and distributed by Hed Artzi. On this CD, the band was sporadically accompanied by an acoustic classic string quartet while the voice of a synagogue cantor makes a cameo appearance. This second album was a success and a concert tour followed in which the band was backed by additional musicians.<sup>30</sup> These appearances were done under the name of the Andralamusit Orchestra, a take on the Israel Andalusian Orchestra coupled with "andralamusia," an ancient Hebrew word of Greek origin ("chaos", "mess," from *androloimosso*, victims of an epidemic.) In 2006, the group disbanded at the peak of its success.

Praised by critics as the most authentic Israeli rock ever, "Meno'im kadimah" is a CD plagued with the most diverse echoes of the musical memories of young Israelis born in the periphery of the peripheries, from families of North African immigrants of religious background. The painful loss of identity seems to be the central topic of the whole opus. "Perhaps I lost all my senses/feelings ['teḥushah'] / I think that I fly but actually I am on the floor," are some of the typical lines of this album. Alger dodged the aforementioned domestication that most Israeli rock went through since the late 1980s. It shattered its consensual approach and dominant trends with lyrics such as

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<sup>30</sup> Ihab Nimer, violin and 'ud, Uri Miles, winds and percussion, Shmuel Rozner, santur and a classical string quartet.

“On the ruins of Jerusalem, on the spoils of Tel Aviv, on the remnants of Talmei Eliyahu.” Nothing is more far removed from the Israeli cultural core than these painful cries.

Alger also engaged in an earnest musical and poetical dialogue with “tradition” by incorporating into “Meno'im kadimah” various “ethnic” sounds and influences from the Sephardic liturgy in a clear autobiographical frame. A soul-penetrating encounter with the past is another of the unifying threads linking all the songs of this album: life in the southern Israeli periphery, with its poverty and difficulties, “the desire to run away” (in “Bells of the Century”), and an ambivalent relationship to Jewish religious practice. Layer after layer of the contemporary Israeli musical experience resurfaces in this CD in psychedelic and dreamlike sound images: the kindergarten and its *morah le-zimrah* (“singing teacher”), the synagogue, the canonical Israel song festival of the 1960s, the *mizrahi haflah* (“party”), as well as intertextual echoes of Shlomo Bar’s cry for the loss of innocence after immigration to Israel and nostalgia for his imagined Moroccan village of childhood in the song “Etzlenu bi-kfar Todra” (“With Us in the Village of Todra”).<sup>31</sup>

“Meno'im kadimah” contains many links to ideas and quotations from religious texts. It engages in a complex dialogue with religion, one of love and hate, of admiration and disapproval, “stuck forever with the book of prayers and in the book of curses,” “my life turns upside down, pure, impure, pure, impure” (“Moon in the Sign of Cancer”, a tantalizing recollection of the Priestly sacrifices included in the Yom Kippur liturgy as traditionally performed by North African Jews). The uncompromising music is unambiguous and strong, having qualities of gospel and liturgical hymns (for example the song “Kitsch”). Although the album could be defined as *mizrahi* rock, the *mizrahi* component is found only between the lines, in the general atmosphere of the album rather than in specific musical details. “We use clichés,” said Gedg in an interview, “but we instill in them new contents.” One song says: “The songs predicted themselves, they foretold what will happen, they left blood in the sea.” Ethnicity is not the only issue addressed in this album. Social disenchantment and the loss of faith in the possibility of an Israeli-Jewish cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Shlomo Bar (b. 1943) is the founder and musical director of *Habrera ha-tiveet* (Natural Gathering), a pioneer Israeli band that mixed various “ethnic” musical colors into a unique tapestry.

core that can also allow for the enlightened Western ideal of “pursuit of happiness” are transmitted throughout the CD. “One day,” one of the saddest Hebrew rock songs ever, permeates depression, pressure and insanity, “the hopes of today are the failures of tomorrow.”

## **Conclusion**

This paper opened with a caustic critique of staged celebrations of nationhood based on unimportant numbers such as sixty and ended on quite a depressing note. Yet, on a more positive note, what can one learn from the assessment of music in “Israel at Sixty” that Israeli politicians induced us to formulate?

First, we notice that for the first time in the history of the State of Israel there is an entire generation born into a musical experience that is almost exclusively and authentically local Israeli. It is a polyphonic generation whose soundscape fluctuates between very personal and localized experiences determined by socio-economic status, ethnic background and degree of religious observance, all of which are negotiated with a default enculturation into a Jewish national culture (what we called in this paper “the core”) that, as we have shown, is in itself porous.

As a postmodern cultural field in which established identity boundaries are rearticulated, Israeli musicians and listeners indulge in nostalgia as an emotional anchor to the diverse individualized pasts. We have seen how music made in Israel in the twenty-first century engages in various modes of dialogue with its past. The crucial change of direction that occurred in all registers of music in Israel at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s has now become a primary source of contemplation, as the recent homage to and reinterpretations of canonical rock albums showed. At the end of the 1980s, twenty-something Israeli natives who are now middle aged heard new and challenging local music from Ehud Banai, Yehuda Poliker and Rami Fortis – a soundtrack that was a total Israeli experience, removed from conventional ideologies and certainly from the diasporic experiences of their parents. These were sounds created by second-generation Holocaust survivors (Yehuda Poliker and his partner Yaakov Gilad), by new immigrants from the Soviet Union (The Friends of Natasha),

about individuals, Jews and Palestinians, at the margins of the Israeli society (whom Banai saw best of all). It was a rebellion against established practices in a new musical discourse. Even though they drew their sounds largely from American and British rock resources, they succeeded in touching the deep concerns of the post-Yom Kippur War Israeli experience and illuminated repressed corners that until then Israeli musicians had refrained from touching, such as the occupation of the Palestinian territories and its human consequences.

Then came another even younger generation, one comprised of those born in the 1980s and even more removed from the core, yet which paradoxically leans more towards its past, towards the cultures of its grandparents. The return to *piyyut*, the impressive expertise of young musicians in Arabic, Turkish or Persian music who are conversant in both pop-rock and “world” music, the revival of *shirah be-tzibbur* among youngsters, all these are symptoms of this new shift. Art music by young Israeli composers freed from the shackles of modernism that haunted previous generations looks inwards for inspiration in Jewish memories, in the by now “classical” Israeli repertoire of Hebrew songs from diverse periods, or in the Arabic music from the surroundings (usually mediated by professional Arabic teachers or performers who were educated in Israeli music schools). These sources are not maneuvered according to Orientalistic, Mediterranean or Zionist agendas but rather by the particular sensibilities and experiences of each composer.

Second, the basic tenet of nationalism, i.e. the necessity of constituting a core repertoire of works that represent the inner soul of the nation, remains part of the general discourse about music in Israel. At the same time, we noticed that the contents of this core repertoire were never clear-cut despite the claims of some analysts. What intensified in the course of time, however, is the volume of conflict about the nature of the core and the number of contenders who see themselves in a legitimate position to intervene in its composition. The rock band Alger has shown also that a kind of desperation about the possibility that such a core can even exist infiltrated sections of the Israeli youth’s soul. Therefore, scholarship needs to revise some rigid concepts of classic Hebrewness and Israeliness that have dominated the academic discourse about Israeli culture, music included.

Third, a diversification of musical competence rose in Israel reaching a peak in recent years. While the field of art music developed a highly sophisticated training system and venues of performance since the pre-state period, other genres remained parochial. Today Israel has a thriving scene of high-quality Arabic music, jazz (see for example the phenomenal success of the Third World Quartet), hip hop, rap, techno, world music, and rock, each backed by high-level training institutions, proper performance venues, top-notch studios, media and production experts, knowledgeable audiences and international exposure. The ethos that strives for the highest levels of performance and international excellence is no longer the privilege of Israeli Western art music; it has spread to most other genres of music production.

Finally, almost all genres of contemporary music in Israel address in one way or another dissonances of Israeli life, the internal tensions and anxieties, the seemingly endless political and military friction, the omnipresent national, social and cultural conflict with Palestinians and the Arab world and the haunting memories of the past (foremost the Holocaust and the trauma of immigration) that have never vanished. I do not imply of course that these concerns were totally absent in the music of past periods. But they were not as intensively concrete as they are in the music of the last generation.

Never before was there so much good and varied music created in Israel as there is today. By saying this, I am not endorsing any propaganda campaign of “Israel at Sixty” but just describing a vibrant, diversified and conflicted music scene of which I, as an academic researcher and teacher, am only one more agent.