

C.V.7.2. Israeli Popular Music

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In the early period of Israeli statehood, the means for the support of musical performance, composition, dissemination and education were in the mostly in the hands of governmental agencies and thus controlled by the dominant political and cultural elites. This control by the establishment gradually weakened, particularly following the decentralization of the mass media since the early 1980s. Popular music, a characteristic modern urban phenomenon, and its hallmark, the appeal to heterogenic populations, cosmopolitanism, industrial production and mass distribution in an open market, became then the main mode of music making and consumption in Israel as it did at a global level.

From the 1920ies up to the present

Popular music defined along these lines first appeared in Israel with the growth of large cities (Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, Haifa, Jerusalem) propelled by the immigration of professional musicians from Poland, Germany and the former Austro-Hungarian Empire in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These musicians developed in Israel new musical venues similar to those of the European cities, such as musical theaters and cabarets where contemporary European songs sung to new Hebrew texts were mixed with new compositions by local composers in genres such as the tango and the fox-trot. The popular music industry in Israel was launched in the mid-1930s when the first commercial record company was founded and a radio station opened in Palestine under the British Mandate that included Hebrew broadcasts.

Up to the 1970s, popular music was dominated by tight state-controlled cultural policies and mass media. The genre *Shirei Eretz Israel* functioned as folk music but in fact was also produced and distributed as popular music. Among the main agents of popular musical creativity, besides the musical theatre and the cabarets of the large cities, were the Israel Defense Forces entertaining troupes (*lehaqot tzvayiot*) active since the late 1940s. These ensembles consisted of ten to fifteen young soldier singers/comedians coached by civilian artists who combined “native” elements with international popular styles, e.g. swing jazz. The arrangements were based on group singing with short solos accompanied by accordion and Arabic tambourine. Their songs attained wide popularity through long-plays and radio broadcasts. By the 1970s the distinction between military and civilian artists was blurred and IDF artists became popular stars.

The late 1960s and early 1970s also finds duos or trios accompanied by acoustic who performed intimate songs called *pizmonim* or *shirei meshorerim* ("songs of the poets). *Pizmonim* stressed individual, urban experiences rather than collective, agricultural

topics. Their repertoire was expanded with Hebrew versions of French chansons and Greek songs. Despite the “mobilized” character of popular music in this period, international trends were present. Singers recorded and performed accompanied by “jazz” ensembles in diverse styles, e.g. Latin American-tinged songs. The “light music” orchestra of the Israel Radio contributed to this trend.

As a reaction to growing foreign influences, the Israeli Song Festival was established by the Israel Radio starting on Independence Day of 1960. The festival, designed after European song festivals as the San Remo Festival, included original solo songs accompanied by orchestral arrangements. Its goal was to encourage an “Israeli” style of popular music, but it faded away after 1970 when its original goal became obsolete.

The aesthetics Anglo-American pop/rock dominated Israeli popular music since the late 1960s. Hebrew pop/rock comprises versions of all Western pop genres as rock, disco, rap, Middle-of-the-Road, etc. Hebrew pop exhibits the mechanisms of the Western music industry: stars, hits parade, top-twenty, early releases of singles and concert tours. Many Hebrew pop songs are in the Europop style. Israeli artists won the Eurovision Song Contest three times. Other musicians sought alternative venues, e.g. Hebrew songs in bossa nova rhythms or Hebrew blues. Studios with state-of-the-art equipment boosted the quantity and quality of commercial recordings. These trends became even clearer when economic liberalization and the tilt towards Anglo-American culture were emphasized.

The first successful rock group in Israel was ‘The Churchills’, formed in 1967 by guitarists Haim Romano and Yitzhak Klepter joined by singer Arik Einstein. The rock album ‘Shablul’ (1970) by Arik Einstein and Shalom Hanoach is considered by many critics as the landmark album launching Israeli rock followed in 1976 by ‘Sof Onat Hatapuzim’ (‘The End of the Orange Season’) by the short-lived ‘Tammuz’ ensemble that presented the harshest rock sound of any group yet. Other styles of rock included Svikia Pick, characterized by his glam-style outfits, and ‘Kaveret’ (formed in 1972), a ensemble of seven of the most distinguished young stars of the IDF ensembles that is still considered as one of the peak achievements in Israel rock history. Songs from their albums such as ‘Sippurei Poogy’ (‘Poogy’s Tales’, 1973) are still broadcasted on the Israeli radio today.

Bridging the parallel developments of Israeli rock and the continuation of the Land of Israel tradition was a group of musicians who sought to create an Israeli style that would incorporate elements of a “progressive” rock sound. These artists include Yehudit Kravitz, Yoni Rechter, Shlomo Gronich, and Matti Caspi. While adopting elements from the lyrical ballad style of the SLI repertoire, their sound mixed traditional instruments—flute and recorder, darbuka, and acoustical guitar—with electric guitars and synthesizers. The songs by these artists were often complex rhythmically and harmonically in comparison with the average pop song. Among other minor styles of rock one can mention David Broza’s flamenco-tinged music that was very popular in the late 1980s.

An abrupt departure from the conservative rock styles of the 1980s occurred with the appearance of Aviv Geffen around 1990. Appearing on stage in drag and heavy makeup, proudly evading the IDF draft, and singing about drugs, sex and alienation in a Punk Rock style Geffen seemed to challenged traditional “Israeliness” that was still present in previous rock styles. Geffen was not alone, however, other alternative (and less

alternative) rock artists had a major impact on the local scene, such as Berry Sakharof (Israel's Bruce Springsteen) and Rami Fortis, and groups such as 'Efo Hayed?' ('Where is the Child?'), 'Mashina', 'Ziknei Tzfat' ('Elders of Safed'), 'Monika Sex' and the "ethnic-tinged" 'Ethnix' and 'Tea-Packs' (see also below). Still most solo singers active from the 1980s to the present mix rock and pop elements with SLI, such as are Rita, Shlomo Artzi, Achinoam Nini (internationally known as 'Noa'), Ivri lider, Dana Berger, members of the Banai clan (Ehud, Meir, Evyatar), Dana International (the winner of the 1998 Eurovision song contest), Sharon Haziz, Mika Karni, David D'or, and many more. Since 2003, the local version of 'Pop Idol' called 'Kochav nolad' ('A star is born') has generated many of the pop music stars.

Musica mizrahit: Israeli Oriental Music

Besides, or opposing, Hebrew pop-rock is musica mizrahit, Israeli "Oriental" or "Mediterranean" popular music. Its genesis can be found in the 1960s rise of Greek popular songs in Hebrew that combined with musical elements and instruments of "ethnic" (i.e. Oriental) Jewish traditions, particularly Yemenite. The democratization of the recording industry since the introduction of the cassette in 1972 had a revolutionary effect because it allowed this widespread mizrahi style to move up from the fringes of the music industry. Despite its original marginal status, musica mizrahit produced some of the major Israeli stars ever in terms of sales and lasting appeal to wide audiences since the 1980s.

Mizrahi Jews have made considerable inroads into mainstream Israeli society since the 1990s. This process was marked by the erosion of the Eastern-European Zionist paradigm of modern Hebrew Israeliness, the appearance of new 'others' on the scene (the massive immigration from the former Soviet Union in 1990/2) that re-positioned mizrahim as 'veteran' Israelis, and a demographic blur between mizrahi and other Jews caused by increasing intermarriage. With the Israeli Jewish society atomized along divides deeper than the strictly ethnic one (especially by political and religious ones), exposed to processes of globalization and adopting multiculturalism as a policy at institutional levels, the position of musiqa mizrahit has shifted dramatically towards the mainstream of Israeli popular music.

This shift was heralded by the alternative labels used for musiqa mizrahit by producers, practitioners, the mass media and the public since the mid-1980s, especially musiqa yisraelit yam tikhonit ("Israeli Mediterranean music"). The 'popization' of musiqa mizrahit created two tendencies. Successful pop crossovers became models to follow at the cost of watering down the soundscape and sense of identity that musiqa mizrahit had been associated with. On the other hand, there are uncompromising musicians refusing to change the sounds and spirit of musiqa mizrahit, reproducing the early 1980's sound and bound to a persistent, although not insidious, marginality.

Classic traits of musiqa mizrahit have evolved. Older instrumentation (bouzouki, qanun, 'ud, electric guitars) has given place to a more synthesized sound. Traditional performance venues (e.g. nightclubs in southern Tel Aviv, weddings or haflot, private parties dedicated to singing, dancing, drinking and eating) have been substituted by

mainstream concert halls. Its distinctive production system, once dominated by small labels closely linked to the performers and removed from mainstream Western popular music production. Its distribution moved away from stores around bus stations to music megastores and the Internet while its early, heroic ‘cassette period’ (hence its old label *musiqat qasetot*) is no more than a nostalgic recollection.

Once circumscribed to specific radio broadcasts (*Libi ba-mizrah*, ‘My heart is in the East,’ ‘*Agan ha-yam ha-tikhon*, ‘Mediterranean basin’ or *Me’orav yam-tikhoni*, ‘Mediterranean mix,’), *musiqat mizrahit* can be heard and seen today in mainstream radio and TV stations in and outside Israel. Finally, *musiqat mizrahit* performers used to rely on live performances while today the share of recordings, radio and TV performances in the economic equation has increased dramatically. Yet, direct and informal relation to live audiences is still an integral part of the performing style, especially as *musiqat mizrahit* is conspicuously used for dancing.

Musiqat mizrahit can be read against the various and pervasive metamorphoses of the “Oriental” trope in Israeli music since the beginnings of Zionism. It can also be linked to the role of Jewish musicians, producers and impresarios in the popular music industry of Arabic countries during the colonial period (first half of 20th century). These colonial styles showed processes of hybridization heralding characteristics of *musiqat mizrahit*. Singer Joe Amar (1930-2009), for example, was well established in Morocco before immigrating to Israel in 1957 to become an inspiration to some strands of *musiqat mizrahit*.

Another antecedent is the presence of *mizrahi* performers, especially female Yemenite Jewish singers in Palestine (Bracha Zefira, Hana Aharoni, Esther Gamlielit, Ahuva Tzadok), who were deeply embedded in the pre-state urban musical tapestry. They set the stage for subterranean connections between mainstream Israeli songs and *musiqat mizrahit*. Commercial records of hybridized traditional Yemenite Jewish songs recorded by minor labels in Tel Aviv-Jaffa in the early 1950s provide an additional example of pre-*musiqat mizrahit* phenomena. Later on, other singers of Yemenite origin such as Ahuva Ozeri and the young Ofra Haza became leading figures.

Musiqat mizrahit incorporated these precedents and various traditions under its wings, among which five predominate: Hebrew covers of Greek songs, religious Yemenite and Moroccan songs, European ballads in the San Remo Festival style, *Shirei dika’on* (lit. ‘Gloominess songs’) and most emblematically *Shirei erez yisrael*. *Musiqat mizrahit* also has its own subcultures, such as the Kurdish one. Besides, a religious scene developed as notable singers of *musiqat mizrahit* became *ba’alei teshuvah* (“returnees in repentance”), i.e. observant orthodox Jews.

The Greek wave underlying the mainstream of *musiqat mizrahit* can be traced back to singer Aris San. A seventeen-year old non-Jew who frequented Israel after 1956 appearing in clubs in the port city of Haifa, San’s distinctive bouzouki playing style that became a signature sound of *musiqat mizrahit* electric guitar players. The San Remo sound entered via crooners such as Nissim Sarusi who performed in the nightclub scene of Ramla, east of Tel Aviv. *Shirei dika’on*, a trend associated with singers such as Ofer Levy and Avi Biter, are mostly covers of Turkish arabesk songs whose intonation transmit a deep sense of sadness and despair. Finally, the singing of Israeli songs was part of the exposure of and acceptance by *mizrahim* to the strong socializing agencies of Israel, such as the school system, the youth movements, the Army and the State-run

radio. Of no less importance was the growing presence in Israel of Anglo-American pop-rock in the late 1960s, from which mizraḥi musicians drew their amplified sound and the perception of musiqa mizraḥit as popular rather than traditional music.

The pioneer bands of musiqa mizraḥit were Lehaqat tzlilei ha-kerem ('Sounds of the vineyard band', named after Kerem ha-teymanim, the 'Yemenite vineyard' neighborhood in southern Tel Aviv), with by guitarist Moshe Ben Mush and singer Yossef Levi (a.k.a. Daklon); and Lehaqat tzlilei ha-'ud ('Sounds of the 'ud band'), with by guitarist Yehuda Keisar and singer Rami Danoch. These pioneer ensembles experimented on the basis of the secular and religious musical repertoires that they commanded (Greek, Yemenite, Moroccan, and Israeli). They consolidated the eclectic sound of musiqa mizraḥit using Eastern and Western musical instruments, and adding to their songs muwwalim (passages without fixed beat).

The domestication of musiqa mizraḥit included other processes. For example, the Oriental Song Festival was established in 1970 by the Folklore Department of the Israeli Radio (Kol Israel) to promote the mizraḥi voice in the electronic mass media while attempting to upgrade the "low quality" of its commercial productions. One can also focus on the sound of musiqa mizraḥit by noticing that mainstream Arab music (in its Egyptian, Moroccan, Syrian-Lebanese or Iraqi forms) was not within its boundaries. The mid-1990s interest on the Egyptian song repertoire associated with the diva Umm Kulthoum as performed by musiqa mizraḥit stars such as Zehava Ben, was never conceptualized as musiqa mizraḥit but rather as "world" or "ethnic" music. This phenomenon could be interpreted as a residual of the de-Arabization process of the Jews from Arab countries that was embedded in the cultural project of Zionism.

The trajectory of musiqa mizraḥit from marginality to mainstream is personified by Zohar Argov (néé Urkavi, 1955-1987), its most representative performer by virtue of his popularity (especially after his untimely death), the shared opinions of critics and his omnipresence in the Israeli soundscape. Argov's career was short, meteoric and eventful, lasting seven years (ca. 1980-1987). Growing up in an impoverished neighborhood south of Tel Aviv, Argov was the first of a family of ten children with a dysfunctional father. As a child, he sang at a Yemenite synagogue. Due to the precarious economic situation of his family, he left home at the age of thirteen. Argov's rise to stardom started the released of his first cassette, Elinor, in 1980. In 1982, Argov won the first prize in the Oriental Song Festival that exposed him to a national audience. The winning song, 'Ha-peraḥ be-ganni' ('The flower in my garden' by Avihu Medina), was lavishly arranged in pop/rock style. Argov was nicknamed Ha-melekh ('The King'), reflecting his status among audiences and critics. His suicide while waiting for a trial on drug related offences further intensified his status as a victim of the system. Portrayed as a tragic hero, who expressed in his songs and life the feelings of a large, discriminated sector of the Israeli society, Argov's death catapulted him to national consciousness as no other mizraḥi or popular artist ever did.

Retrospectively, the trajectory of Ofra Haza (1957-2000) shows affinities with Argov's but its eventual international spinning demonstrated how the path of artists can be altered by career management. While her humble beginnings as a young Yemenite singer in southern Tel Aviv would have predicted a career as a musiqa mizraḥit singer, she succeeded in becoming one of the distinguished female singers of Israeli pop and eventually the most successful Israeli pop artist on a global scale. Only after she

established herself as a mainstream pop singer, she reached for her own family traditions in albums such as *Shirei Teyman* (Songs of Yemen 1984) and *Yemenite Love* (1988). Lavish electro-dance arrangements of Yemenite Jewish songs, such as in *Desert Wind* (1989), were among the earliest successful examples of “ethno disco” in the multinational arena.

On the creative side of *musiqa mizrahit*, one must mention Avihu Medina, the most influential composer of the genre. His dossier includes canonic songs, such as ‘*Shabehi Yerushalaiym*’ (‘Praise Jerusalem’, after Psalms 147:12-13) and ‘*Al tashlikheni le-‘et ziqnah*’ (‘Do not abandon me when I am aged’).

By the early 1990s, the sharp divide between *musiqa mizrahit* and Israeli pop-rock started wearing away. Diverse forms of Israeli ‘ethnic’ rock and world music, e.g. the Greek style of Yehuda Polikar were agents in this process. The band ‘Ethnix’ experimented with materials akin to *musiqa mizrahit* in its 1991 album *Masala* in which the band collaborated with the rising *mizrahit* female star, Zehava Ben, opening a new era of collaborations between rock musicians and *musiqa mizrahit* artists. In 1996, Ethnix started a series of collaborations with then unknown singer of *musiqa mizrahit*, Eyal Golan that became a phenomenal success in the late 1990’s. The most successful rock band with a *mizrahit* orientation was Tea-Packs, who used Eastern techniques such as singing and playing in unison for extended sections of a song, heterophony, vocal and instrumental improvisations in fluctuating rhythm, plugging in quotations of traditional Moroccan songs, and the use of microtones and Arabic rhythmic patterns.

A new generation of *musiqa mizrahit* artists who rose from the late 1990s, moved further away from the “classic” *mizrahi* style into mainstream pop style that differed however from rock-crossovers. Sarit Hadad (b. 1978) exemplifies this trend. From a young and aspiring *musiqa mizrahit* singer who performs Hebrew covers of Turkish songs, she became a phenomenally popular performer. Her songs such as ‘*Ani lo Cinderella*’ (‘I am not Cinderella’) and ‘*Hayiti be-gan 'eden*’ (‘I was in paradise’) made her a top pop singer. Having recorded twenty albums (five of which reached the no. 1 in the charts) and represented Israel in the Eurovision contest, nothing distinguished her from other Israeli pop stars except for her pronounced guttural delivery of Hebrew texts. Another example is Amir Benayun (b. 1975). His 1999 debut album *Raq at* (‘Only You’), sold 40000 copies. Another dramatic step in his career seldom heard of in *musiqa mizrahit* occurred when Gidi Gov, a legendary figure of Israeli pop-rock, recorded in 2005 an album of songs (music and lyrics) by Benayun. While receiving a prestigious prize in 2005, he announced the donation of the money to the needy, underlying the solidarity of *mizrahi* artists with the lower classes.

Musiqa mizrahit joined the mainstream pop charts, major prime time talk shows, and even the ultimate establishment’s festival of Israeli folk and popular music in Arad. Indices of this reception at the outset of the 21st century are the major role of *mizrahi* performers in *Kokhav nolad* (‘A Star is Born’), the Israel version of ‘Pop Idol’ (from 2003 on), their assiduous choice as representatives of Israel to the Eurovision contest and their presence in public rituals of the Israeli state. The success of Ninet Tayeb, a young Israeli of Tunisian ancestry, in the first edition of ‘*Kokhav nolad*’ is indicative of the erosion of previous perceptions of *musiqa mizrahit* as a site of resistance to Ashkenazi hegemony. The winning song, ‘*Yam shel dma’ot*’ (‘Sea of Tears’), is an icon of the *mizrahi* repertoire ever since it was performed by Zohar Argov. The song is in

fact a mainstream Israeli ballad composed a decade prior to Argov's recording by artists associated with mainstream Israeli music.

If *musiqā mizrahī* is the authentic and subversive expression of *mizrahiyut* against its marginalization and inferiority within Israeli society then the success and 'crossover' of musicians could be interpreted as its incorporation into Israeli national rock/pop. With *musiqā mizrahī* performers placed at center stage of Israeli popular music and canonized as all-Israeli, and with rock and pop musicians influenced by it (and some moving on into the performance of *piyutim*, religious poetry), the impetus underlining *musiqā mizrahī* has achieved its self declared goal of affecting the sound of Israeli popular music.

Diversification and Globalization

Finally, the diversification and globalization of the Israeli soundscape in the past two decades has exposed local artists to diverse forms of new music. Israeli psychedelic trance artists gained international recognition, such as Alien Project, Astral Projection, and Infected Mushroom, while Offer Nissim is an acclaimed house music producer. Israel has also developed Hebrew rap and hip hop with artists such as Hadag Nahash, Subliminal, and Sagol 59, and an underground metal scene with bands such as Orphaned Land and Melechesh that are well known in the international scene.

Israeli "world music" has also prospered in the past three decades developing its own language on the basis of the musical capitals of the diverse ethnic Jewish immigrant communities as well as of the local Palestinian Arab population. Even though the Israeli makers of "world music" tend to distance themselves from "pop music," in fact the boundaries between the two realms of music-making are rather porous. Israeli multi-ethnic ensembles of world music such as Bustan Abraham and the East-West Ensemble attained wide international success in the late 1980s and 1990s. More recent groups such as the Idan Reichel Project and Balkan Beat Box received even wider international acclaim in the 2000s. Other styles of Israeli world music are more locally-oriented, such as the Iraqi-tinged music by Yair Dalal.

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