



Amy Horowitz. *Mediterranean Israeli Music and the Politics of the Aesthetic.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010. xvii + 251 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8143-3465-2.

Reviewed by Robert Fleisher (Northern Illinois University)

Published on H-Judaic (March, 2011)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman

Israel Remixed, One Cassette at a Time

During the period roughly framed by the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the new sounds of “cassette music” (*Musikat ha-ḳasetot*) emerged from the pan-ethnic community of Mizraḥim—a term that has come to include “most non-Ashkenazi ethnic groups in Israel, including Middle Easterners, North Africans, Sephardim, Iranians, and Georgians” (p. 11). Amy Horowitz’s welcome ethnographic study focuses on the big sociopolitical picture that gave rise and responded to *Musikat ha-ḳasetot* and its broader popularization as “Mediterranean Israeli music”—a term coined by its working-class creators, who were determinedly remixing the Israeli soundscape. Her aim is to “to provide a deep account of the historical background and political context of the story without eclipsing the music and music makers who are at its center” (p. ix).

The first chapter is a journalistic introduction to the author’s personal and family history, academic and professional preparation—leading to her engagement with and methodological approach to this subject that has occupied her for more than twenty-five years. Horowitz acknowledges that Mediterranean Israeli music gained popularity and wider acceptance over time, and that it resonated with increased optimism concerning peace and conciliation between Israel and its Arab neighbors. On the other hand, she concludes that it hasn’t re-set the social framework for Mizraḥim, comprising “half the Jewish Israeli population” (p. 50). A political activist by nature and a folklorist by training, Horowitz draws parallels and notes distinctions between the “social asymmetries” contextualizing *Musikat ha-ḳasetot* (also known as *Musikah Mizraḥit*) in Israel and African American music during the civil rights movement in the United States (p. 166). Based on her 1994 University of

Pennsylvania doctoral dissertation, the book presents a multiplicity of voices, stemming in part from additional interviews conducted since 1995. Though a wide range of recent scholarship is reflected in her discussion, few dates or events occurring after the mid-1990s are cited. Horowitz acknowledges that her focus is the “early formation” of the music examined here (p. 4).

Horowitz observes that “Mediterranean Israeli music is a local example of an international revolution in popular musics” during the 1970s, facilitated by the advent (and affordability) of cassette recording and duplication technology (p. 23). Israeli working-class musicians accustomed to performing at multiple small venues (weddings, parties, clubs) in a single evening suddenly gained exposure to a much larger and broader demographic base. *Musikat ha-ḳasetot* may not initially have been heard *on the air*, but it was widely broadcast *in the air*—via vendors on the streets and in such locales as the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station (the site of the author’s first encounter). This grassroots distribution network mitigated the lack of recognition *Musikat ha-ḳasetot* performers lamented on the part of local record companies and radio stations. Meanwhile, another important technological development—synthesizers and their offspring—permitted combinations of almost any (indigenous or exogenous) “virtual” instruments and ensembles with those already at hand, perhaps one reason some detractors described this genre as *Musikah shel tshaḥtshahim* (cheap music).

The desire of Israeli Mediterranean musicians “to create a more inclusive soundtrack” rooted in “reciprocal pan-ethnic appropriations ... against the backdrop of their political struggle for equality” is sharply contrasted with the “European Israeli formations of national music ... based on asymmetric appropria-

tion of Mediterranean sounds” (p. 32). The European Israeli music to which Horowitz refers here is the *ha-Shir ha-Erets Yisre’eli* (The Song of the Land of Israel) popular song canon. (The “Eastern Mediterranean” style associated with Israeli art music composers of earlier generations is not mentioned). It took some time for the new *Musikah Mizrahit* to find its place in the soundscape of Israel, the governmental and cultural institutions of which were long ago established, and remain dominated, by those of Ashkenazi ancestry. Along the way, this new music was described by a variety of epithets mirroring the multicultural origins of its ethnic and class identities, including *Musikat ha-tahanah ha-merkazit* (Central Bus Station music) and *Musikah shehorah* (Black music), among others.

Musikat ha-kasetot blended pan-ethnic components reflecting the full spectrum of Israel’s Mizrahi community and its multicultural influences. The voice is the center of this music, which features lyrics in a variety of languages, including Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Greek, and Yiddish, all “rubbing shoulders” with Hebrew. Songs were newly composed or new treatments of existing tunes (including those from the canonic *ha-Shir ha-Erets Yisre’eli* repertoire), including translations of lyrics and *contrafacta*—pre-existing songs with new Hebrew lyrics substituting for those originally heard in other languages. Treating subject matter ranging from the personal and spiritual to topical and national issues, *Musikat ha-kasetot* also mixed in Western rock with Greek, Turkish, Spanish, and other idioms (p. 61). The multiplicity of languages, styles, and ethnic identities in the music corresponds to those comprising its demographic base, and manifested in the “politics of the aesthetic” surrounding this musical repertoire.

Well-drawn profiles of several representative musicians comprise the book’s core. Avihu Medina, a “performer, composer, and organizer,” is a subject of discussion as well as an interpreter and historian of the genre. Discussion of Medina frames that of several others, notably Dağlon (Yosef Levy), who “exemplifies the traversing of musical styles” emanating from the “enormous muddle” (Medina’s term) of multicultural “migrations from disparate homelands” (p. 63). The Yemenite male vocalist Zohar Argov, who “embodied the struggle to forge a contemporary Yemenite-Mizrahi-Israeli identity” (p. 100), is the focus of two chapters—the first examining his telescoped rise and fall, via multiple imprisonments related to both drugs and rape. Horowitz then chronicles Ar-

gov’s posthumous elevation to “legendary character, mythic figure, and tragic hero,” following his suicide in prison at the age of 32 (p. 105). Zehava Ben is a female vocalist of Moroccan ancestry, exposed in her youth to a pan-ethnic spectrum of music, including the songs of famed Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum (1907-75). By the 1990s (she was born in 1968), Ben was performing and recording much of the music identified with Kulthum. Even given the considerable stylistic “boundary-crossing” associated with *Musikat ha-kasetot*, Ben’s widely acclaimed performances and recordings of this repertoire (in Arabic) represented something new. As Horowitz puts it: “Mediterranean Israeli music relocated the other in the self, them in us” (p. 154).

Much of the book is clear and engaging in its descriptions, interpretations, and analyses. For example, Horowitz notes that Israel’s nationalistic popular song repertoire, originating “in the 1880s in the diaspora and then developed further in Palestine, was a composite of Eastern European folk music, mainly non-Jewish, reupholstered with new romantic nationalistic Hebrew lyrics” (p. 3). At other times, the language can be more poetic than transparent, notably in such formulations as “dueling nativities and appropriate appropriations,” “dialogical imaginaries,” “rhizomatic mappings,” “multiple indigeneities,” “inherited binaries,” and “exilic soundscapes.” One sentence reads: “Thus a historic-geographic imaginary foreordains and legitimates a real social asymmetry” (p. 152). Another: “Mizrahi performances create a tension among rhizomatic multiple coexisting inheritances, polarized identity-based territorial claims to ownership, and genealogical subversion when homage and ascription flow across enemy lines” (p. 31).

Discussing individual songs, Horowitz characterizes vocal styles and identifies some of the acoustic and electronic instruments, which helps to convey the nature and extent of contributing influences. Many of the detailed descriptions of such musical elements as melody, harmony, rhythm, or form, however, are problematic. The discussion of *Keturna masala* (pp. 141-142) begins well, noting evident contrasts between sections alternately emphasizing the respective (“Eastern” or “Arabic” vs. “standard rock”) performance styles of the female and male vocalists. However, a section with unchanging lyrics is identified as the song’s “verse,” while one with changing lyrics is called the “refrain.” Contrasting phrase lengths are mistaken for changes between simple (4/4) and compound (6/4) meter, while alter-

nating tonal centers (keys) further highlighting the song's inherent contrasts receive no mention. In *Hanaleh hitbalbelah*, "Greek guitar" (p. 245) presumably refers to the *bouzouki*, which appears (elsewhere) as "bazouki" (pp. 1, 161) and "bazouka" (p. 3). "Minor" poorly describes the familiar mode (scale) underlying this song's melody (and others here)—usually termed "Freygish" or "Ahava raba" in reference to Jewish music. Elements of rhythm and pitch are opaquely conflated in the statement: "The bass, instead of being 'square' (like a 4/4 hora dance), uses an augmented second in two places" (p. 202). A bass line can be heard supporting mid-register chords in a number of these songs (including *Baladah le-Haver*), which is presumably what is meant by "bass chords" (pp. 210, 248).

More than forty illustrations (including many LP, cassette, and CD covers) enhance the volume, as does the author's related commentary. While the compact disc containing over an hour of music is of still greater value, the reader is largely left to connect the narrative to these recordings and to the related CD liner notes and song lyrics. (Much redundant commentary on individual songs is also found in these multiple locations.) Only some of the many songs cited throughout appear either on the CD (nineteen selections) or

in the song lyrics (twelve songs), so linking the first mention of those titles directly to these important resources would aid the reader significantly. It would also help to adjoin these two core appendices, currently separated by four indices of a more general nature (works cited, select discography, videography, and index).

Mediterranean Israeli Music and the Politics of the Aesthetic appears following a decade or so of abundant scholarship concerning all things "Mediterranean," including popular music in Israel. Horowitz expands on her own previous scholarship while also citing the work of others who have chronicled the evolution and grappled with the definition of Israeli music. Her discussion relates most closely to that of Edwin Seroussi and Motti Regev in *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (2004), who examine *musiqā mizraḥit* within diachronically and synchronically broader contexts. Horowitz's significant contribution to this discourse should be of lasting value to students and scholars of Jewish and Israeli society and culture. This is a substantive and worthwhile study of a diverse and multifaceted musical genre, which emerged from and continues to reflect the complex historical, sociopolitical, and multicultural contexts of a particular moment in time and place.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Robert Fleisher. Review of Horowitz, Amy, *Mediterranean Israeli Music and the Politics of the Aesthetic*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30475>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.