

EXEMPLIFICATION AND THE LIMITS OF "CORRECTNESS"

The Implicit Methodology of Idelsohn's *Thesaurus*

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To repeat once more that Idelsohn occupies the position of a great pioneer in the systematic study of Jewish music would constitute a statement about which history has already given its verdict. Indeed, in the perspective of time his honored place remains unchallenged and it is fair to assume that this state of affairs will continue. It is likewise no indulgence to state that Idelsohn's work has hardly an equal in musicological and ethnomusicological studies insofar as magnitude, scope and intent are concerned. Diligence and intelligence, scholarship, and erudition combined with vision and hope to produce a monumental corpus. No apprehensions with regard to detail of one sort or another can destroy the impact of the work of a man committed, as Idelsohn was, to the unveiling of his ancestral musical roots. It is, therefore, out of respect and reverence that the following pages emerge, and the attempted enlarged vistas exploit and enjoy the shoulders of a giant.

Having said that much, let us circumscribe our island in that ocean of endeavor and limit ourselves to a methodological inquiry concerning some assumptions which lie at the foundation of Idelsohn's work. Foundations, as a rule, contain speculations, to assure the support of entire structures, and their re-examination is more central than may be suspected. Assumptions are part and parcel of research and deserve to be made explicit. Idelsohn is one of the few musicologists who is no disappointment on this score either.

Idelsohn tells us that his major aim is to "expose" the "original" music – the Hebrew elements – in simple Jewish folk tunes.¹ Doubting that such ceased to exist since the destruction of the Temple, he set out to prove, first, their existence and second, their historical unfolding.

Clearly, Idelsohn believes in the uniqueness of cultures. Nature and society seem to account, as far as he is concerned, for the differences in cultural expression: different climates mould different societies and societies differ¹ in social and structural organizations which affect their choices and forms of

1 א"צ אידלסון, חולדות הנגינה העברית... כך א, ברלין, תרפ"ד. See preface pp. ix-xii. Statements to this effect may be found in all the introductions to the many volumes of his *Thesaurus* (see n. 8).

expression.² The latter, however, are not easily changed once a culture has reached a state of fruition even if the underlying factors undergo transformations.³ Neither geographical change nor “foreign” influences can reshape the basic spiritual mould of nations.

Here we have in a nutshell a theory about cultural formation and a formulation of a hypothesis concerning cultural resistance to change. The former accounts for Idelsohn’s cultural map and the latter sets the stage for his investigations. Accordingly, original Jewish music belongs in the Eastern Semitic orbit, which can be characterized by shared elements, and its uniqueness can be established against these as background. Indeed, characterizations require discriminations which, in turn, call for processes of refinement.

More explicitly: the “clear air” of the East sharpened the auditory ability to discriminate between minute intervallic differences. This discriminatory ability led to the emphasis on the “quality” of tones rather than on their combinations, and explains the large number of scales as well.⁴ In similar fashion, tremoli turns and the like are related to a topography at once hilly and voluptuous.⁵ In short, the “power” of Eastern music resides in the discrimination among hues and not colors, in tempered flexibility, in license checked by tradition.

Jewish music should be identified against these, for it, too, is characterized by restriction amplified, by exhausting the possibilities contained in limited musical “motion” in a “a motive or two.” “Contraction” rather than “expansion” explains its power to survive.⁶ Hebrew music, moreover, is steadfast, because it stems from a tradition which looks at nature and God’s creation from the perspective of unity and oneness. Not so that of other nations; foregoing eternity they emphasize the perpetuity of development.⁷

Whether Idelsohn’s theories or hypotheses are tight enough does not affect the soundness of their procedural implications whereby: (1) groups of resemblances are sought on the basis of questions asked reducing the overall number of disparate items while increasing the number of properties shared; and (2) shared properties are exemplified within circumscribed boundaries of pliability. Thus, conscious or not, Idelsohn is guided by methodological considerations from the outset and his *Thesaurus* serves as its testimony.⁸

2 See Introduction in *ibid.*, pp. 2-6.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

7 *Ibid.*

8 A. Z. Idelsohn, *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*, 10 vols (Berlin, 1925-1932; German ed. Leipzig, 1914-1932).

It follows from the above that the musical examples must contain properties associated with the kind of music which they exemplify. The specifications of the examples, however, need not uniquely specify the kind of music they exemplify. How are we then to know with assuredness, on the basis of the examples, whether that thing we call Jewish music does in fact exist? (This last question should not be confused with the question of *what is* Jewish music.) Idelsohn's answer, like most ingenious answers, is rather simple: Jewish music exists because the properties of which it is the associate exist. The conditions, in turn, under which the properties exist are those in which it can be asserted that something else exists which *does not* possess these properties. In other words, something stresses the "quality" of tones because something doesn't; something emphasizes minute intervallic differences because something else does not, and so on. In short, that which something is a musical example of is always a "kind" of music. Let us not forget that Idelsohn was out to prove that Jewish music *does* exist.

Idelsohn's indirect explication is both logical and sound and it is no coincidence, therefore, that it became a major model for subsequent ethnomusicological research. As obvious as it may seem to non-methodologists, it is by no means so for those concerned with epistemological rigor. It is most interesting, indeed, how markedly similar Idelsohn's reasoning is to Wolterstroff's philosophical discussion of "works and kinds" in his recent illuminating book.⁹ From Wolterstroff's discussion we learn among many other valuable points, that (1) there is a difference between a property being essential within a kind and its being of that kind, and that (2) there are kinds – which he calls "norm-kinds" – for which it is possible to have properly formed and improperly formed examples. However, it is impossible for something to be a properly formed example of a norm kind, without containing the property which is normative to it.¹⁰ Thus, in music – which is a norm kind (for it may have properly formed as well as improperly formed examples), for an example to qualify as "correct" it must contain the property normative to it. What does this, in fact, mean?

Discussing "what it is to compose," Wolterstroff tells us that "in selecting a set of properties required for correctness, the composer composes a work – that one, namely, which has exactly those properties (plus any others presupposed by them) as normative within it. And any particular sound-sequence occurrence which is correct by reference to that particular set of requirements for correctness will be a correct occurrence of the work composed."¹¹ Composing, then, whether by an individual or by a group (as may be the case with folk music), means to

9 See Nicholas Wolterstroff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: At The Clarendon Press, 1980), pt. 2, sec. IV, pp. 45-58.

10 See *ibid.*, pp. 54-57.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

bring about a work which has the properties *selected* as normative within it. Composing is invariably related to criteria of correctness of occurrence.

Idelsohn, as we have seen earlier, did in fact believe that those properties, which Wolterstroff calls “normative,” represent on the one hand the end result of a process of selection, and serve on the other as a base for further amplifications. Obviously, he was not only talking about two different points in time, but also about two distinct types of change, the one diachronic the other synchronic. Whatever else Jewish music may represent, the fact of “composing” it is invariably related to processes of selection, either of the kind which brought about the properties normative within it, or of the kind which operate within the limits of “correctness” set by these properties. Furthermore, the properties have a double function: they serve as criteria for criticism with regard to correctness and as guidelines for performances. Performances, to round it up, contain both adjustments and feedbacks.

Naturally, it is possible to exemplify the properties believed to be normative within a given music with greater or lesser exactitude. The judgement of “correctness” in oral traditions, for Idelsohn as for others, is vested in those acknowledged as “knowing,” “Knowers,” however, mostly *differ* amongst themselves about the criteria of correctness, while everything falling outside a certain rather limited range of possibilities they *agree* to be wrong. In other words, they have criteria of *incorrectness*. Idelsohn is right in recognising the compatibility of such criteria with what he himself believed to represent “restrictions amplified” or “license checked by tradition.” We shall allow ourselves to claim, at least hypothetically, that it is likewise more compatible with synchronic processes, rather than with diachronic ones. Furthermore, the difference between criteria of correctness and incorrectness, we believe, may yet turn out to be one of the major factors differentiating between written and oral traditions. Despite institutions of all sorts which tend to enforce, reinforce and preserve practices, oral traditions seem to have built in “latitudes for sameness” which written traditions do not recognise.

Interestingly enough, such latitudes, or what may be termed pushing the limits of correctness, seem to characterise primarily that part of Idelsohn’s corpus which represents the regions in which the Jews continued to reside – as he supposed – uninterruptedly since the exile. The musical examples, moreover, are likewise the ones which supposedly preserve the oldest specimens of the tradition.¹² The chain of oral transmission is powerful indeed when uninterrupted!

12 See the first three volumes of Idelsohn’s *Thesaurus*, which contain the Yemenite, Babylonian and Persian repertoires as well as the Syrian material in Volume IV and the Moroccan in Volume V. See also Idelsohn’s statements in this connection in the Introductions to Volume I, pp. 2-3; II:5; III:38; IV:4; and V:1.

This point becomes even more evident if we compare the above with the relative fragility of the European, especially the western European, repertoire. Despite their shorter histories and despite the fact that a goodly part of the repertoire was written down it was not capable of resisting strong influences. A continuous history of migration and transplantation does, after all, with very few exceptions, create the kind of conditions which are more conducive to change, i.e. situations which more readily allow for the inroads of foreign influences.¹³

We shall forego the temptation to draw parallels between Idelsohn's conceptions and some conceptions which come from modern theoretical linguistics, especially those concerning diachronic and synchronic "changes." Given the fact, however, that Idelsohn himself tells us that Jewish music, in addition to all else, derives from a perspective of "unity and oneness," emphasizing "eternity," as it were, rather than the perpetuity of development, it is fair to assume that he viewed his "ingathered" tunes from the various exiles primarily as exemplifications of properties shared. Were we to establish therefore, a chronological development on the basis of these we might go wrong, or at least face great difficulties. In fact, this is the reason why Idelsohn himself presented his materials in the context of separate histories with regard to regions and communities. Modern linguistics has taught us that it is virtually impossible to draw a sharp distinction between diachronic 'change' and synchronic 'variation', especially "from the microscopic as distinct from the macroscopic point of view!"¹⁴ However, like the linguists, who take a variety of utterances (instance of *parole*) as evidence for the construction of the underlying common structure (a common *langue*), so may we construct a theoretical model of Jewish music if we regard the latter as a "set of interrelated systems." Such a model, in turn, may throw new light on the individual items of the corpus.

A word of clarification about what we mean by a theoretical model is in place. We have seen earlier that according to Idelsohn the specifications of the examples

13 See vols VI-IX of the *Thesaurus*, especially vols VI-VII. Continuity of residence on the one hand and isolation on the other are key variables, as far as Idelsohn is concerned, for the perpetuation of culture. See II:5 and I:2-3. These have become classic postulates in ethnomusicological studies. From Cecil Sharp's famous study of English folk songs we have learned, however, that migration does not always interrupt the continuity of culture, provided that the migrant group remains isolated in its new habitat. See Cecil Sharp, ed., *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (London: Maud Karpelès, 1932), 2 vols. The situation is somewhat more complicated than either Idelsohn or Sharp assumed. We have tried to show that the cross-tabulation of three variables like isolation, migration and favorability of intergroup attitudes (migrant group and host population) – gives rise to a large number of behavioral possibilities. See Ruth Katz, "The Reliability of Oral Transmission: The Case of Samaritan Music," *Yuval* 3 (1974): 109-135.

14 See John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 50.

need not uniquely specify the kind of music they exemplify. It is fair to assume, therefore, that he was not simply in search of something which shares the same structure or pattern of relationship with all of the examples. In general, Idelsohn realised that identity of structure is not good enough, for it may be compatible with the widest variety of contents. As a matter of fact, the possibilities of constructing such models are endless. This is the reason why structures of identity, philosophers tell us, serve in most cases only as plausible hypotheses rather than proofs. At any rate, it is not "proof" which Idelsohn was after; he was after a method which *describes* the music in such a way as to yield insight into his original field of interest. This is, in fact, what theoretical models are all about. A theoretical model, we are told, "must belong to a more 'familiar' realm than the system to which it is applied ...but it need not belong to a realm of common experience. It may be as recondite as we please, provided we know how to use it. A promising model is one with implications rich enough to suggest novel hypotheses and speculations in the primary field of investigation."¹⁵ It is this, we claim, which Idelsohn was primarily after and therein rests his major breakthrough.

Let us elaborate on this last point for the sake of clarification. From an expert on such matters we learn that the conditions for the use of a theoretical model are as follows:

- a. We have an original field of investigation in which some facts and regularities have been established (in any form, ranging from disconnected items and crude generalisations to precise laws, possibly organised by a relatively well articulated theory).
- b. A need is felt to explain or understand the given facts and regularities applying either to the original domain or in order to extend the original corpus of knowledge, connecting it with hitherto disparate bodies of knowledge – leading to further scientific mastery of the original domain.
- c. We describe some entities (mechanisms, systems, structures) belonging to a relatively unproblematic, more familiar, or better-organised secondary domain...in whatever detail which seems to prove profitable.
- d. Explicit or implicit rules of correlation are available for translating statements about the secondary field into corresponding statements about the original field.
- e. Inferences from the assumptions made in the secondary field are translated by means of the rules of correlation and then independently checked against known or predicted data in the primary domain.¹⁶

All of the above applies to Idelsohn's work. Using facts and regularities which pertain primarily to texts, functions, and the "signs" of cantillation, Idelsohn added the domain of music. In this new "original domain" he tried to establish

15 See Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 233.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

regularities through more familiar and better organized "secondary domains" – scales, modes, tonalities, Steiger, systems of intonation, etc., subdivided into predominant characteristics – which proved "profitable" when translated back into the original domain, or extended in a way so as to connect with "hitherto disparate bodies of knowledge."¹⁷ All attempts are made to move from crude generalizations in the direction of greater "precision," to the point of being able to distinguish between tunes which are "different" and tunes which are only "variants";¹⁸ to the point of being able to establish the preference of scale as "racial peculiarity" rather than as the result of "social conditions."¹⁹ Those familiar with computer applications to stylistic analyses will recognise the hidden elements of quantification in the above qualifications. Indeed, had Idelsohn conducted his research in the age of the computer he would have made ample use of it. As it is, the bulk of the material is not just well described, but described in such a way as to yield new insights and give rise to hypotheses which can be verified or falsified using Idelsohn's own data. That Idelsohn was aware of all this can be surmised from his own description of what he tried to do:

For the first time in the editing of folk song, a collection presents the songs classified according to musical characteristics and so arranged as to make these characteristics apparent. Strangely enough all song collectors to the present, have made the texts the basis of classification of the tunes. Such procedure, unmusical and unscientific as it must be, can lead us to no analysis and precise characterization of the song of a people.²⁰

Indeed, Idelsohn was not only a great scholar and an indefatigable collector, but also a sound methodologist. That some of his transcripts, or certain details are debatable does not detract from this basic truth.

17 Idelsohn's interest in the various *maqām* traditions, or the musical tradition of the early church, in connection with Jewish music, are cases in point.

18 See Idelsohn's statement to this effect in the *Thesaurus*, IX: viii.

19 *Ibid.*, VIII: xviii.

20 *Ibid.*, IX: viii.

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