

“Israeli” Moments in Foreign Music

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Herzl Shmueli’s book on Israeli songs opens with the definition of its repertoire: melodies – a meaningful and significant section of the entire repertoire (that is, not the entire repertoire) composed in Israel – that are “Israeli” due to several features, that provide them a special sound, distinct from both European and East-European-Jewish melodies and from Oriental ones.

Shmueli’s choice of 800 songs for his corpus focused on those that sounded to him *intuitively* as “Israeli”, striving to bring into consciousness the features that caused them to sound Israeli. My current project follows a similar methodology, selecting for study various musical excerpts that intuitively have an “Israeli sound” for me, but with one profound twist: the pieces I study are not Israeli at all. Usually, it should go without saying that the foreign Israeli-sounding excerpts do not express Israeliness nor are they influenced by Israeli music. Some pieces may have influenced Israeli music directly, but usually they must be understood as sharing with Israeli music sources of influence, participation in global trends or perhaps aesthetic aims. What makes the sources of influence I shall present today peculiar is that paradoxically, their counterparts within Israeli music express self-identity.

Although I perform also a consciously search for pieces with musical features ascribed to Israeli music, it is my intuition that eventually decides whether the piece really sounds “Israeli”. The shortcomings of intuitive methodology are obvious – if

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your intuitions are different than mine, how can I persuade you? - but it has also advantages. My selection is eventually “cleaner” than that by Shmueli, as it consists solely of passages that stroke me unexpectedly: “wow, that sounds Israeli”.

The kind of “Israeliness” I search for is similar to that Shmueli wished to find, albeit I shall concentrate on art music. Our model will be the naïve branch of the Mediterranean school in Israeli music, partly overlapping with Hirshberg's category of “Popular Nationalism”. Menachem Avidom's *Symphonie Populaire* is a paradigmatic work of this genre. Example 1 brings two passages from it.

Example 1 AUDIO 1 + 2: Paradigmatic “Israeliness” in Israeli concert music, based on the naïve branch of the Israeli Mediterranean school: Menachem Avidom,

Symphonie Populaire

2nd movement (Pastoral)

The musical score shows two staves of music. The top staff includes Oboe, Gong, Tam-Tam, and Piccoli piatti. The bottom staff includes Violino I, Violino II, Viole, Violoncello, and Contrabbass. The tempo is Adagio at 60 BPM. Dynamics include espress. e sostenuto, sempre p, and pizz. The score features various rhythmic patterns and harmonic structures typical of the Mediterranean school.

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3rd movement (Scherzo – Hora)

The musical score shows a section of the 3rd movement of Vaughan Williams's 'The Wasps' overture. The instrumentation includes Flute, Oboe, Clarinetto in si, Fagotto, Corni in fa, Trombe in si, and Trombone. The tempo is Allegro giocoso. The score indicates that the Flute and Oboe parts are doubled by strings. The music consists of six staves of musical notation.

Our first international example comes from Vaughan Williams's overture to the incidental music for Aristophanes's play *The Wasps*.

Example 2 AUDIO 3: Typical “Israeliness” in Vaughan Williams, overture to *The Wasps*

The musical score shows a section of the overture to 'The Wasps'. It features two solo voices (labeled 'Solo') and a harmonic basso continuo line. The music is in Dorian mode, characterized by its modal melody and harmonic progression. The vocal parts are primarily in soprano and alto voices, with some bass support from the continuo.

Several questions arise when noticing “Israeliness” in an English example. First, there is a need to understand the musical features of the excerpt. Most conspicuous is its use of the Dorian mode. Modal composition is a famous trait of the Israeli Mediterranean

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school, but its relations to modal composition in 20th-century Western art music has never been examined thoroughly.

Then we have to consider whether any Dorian excerpt would sound reminiscent of Israeli music. I find it to work to a limited degree, but not to the same extent as *the Wasps* passage. The famous lion melody from *Le Carnaval des Animaux* is not that “Israeli”.

Example 3 Audio 4: Dorian passage with less “Israeli” flavor: Saint Saens, Marche Royale du Lions from *Le Carnaval des Animaux*



So what makes *the Wasps* excerpt more “Israeli”? Perhaps the combination of simple rhythms, a mostly stepwise melody and some specific idioms. The accompaniment is at least partially dissonant, but Israeli concert Mediterranean music is no less indebted to a mild modernism. The combination of a folk-like Dorian melody and a truly harsh accompaniment takes place in Example 4 from Stravinsky's the Rite of Spring

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Example 4 Audio 5: Dorian “Israeli” phrase with harsher accompaniment: Stravinsky, *Le Sacre du Printemps*



A second working question is whether the Vaughan Williams, Stravinsky in some works and the Mediterranean school in Israeli music are interchangeable products of a single larger musical style, perhaps neo-Classicism. But attention: neo-Classicism is manifold, and only portions of it intersect with Israeli music. The general knowledge of neo-Classical procedures is rather poor, but it is definitely not the case that the entire output of Vaughan Williams, for example, sounds “Israeli”. In the *Wasps* overture, the passage immediately preceding the Israeli one sounds like that:

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Example 5, Audio 6: A non-“Israeli” passage from Vaughan Williams, *The Wasps*

A musical score page from Vaughan Williams' "The Wasps". It features four staves: C1.I (top), Fg.I (second), VI.I (third), and VI.II (bottom). The key signature is one sharp. The first two staves begin with "Solo" and "p.scherzando" dynamics. The third staff starts with "p.scherzando". The fourth staff begins with "p". Measure 60 is marked at the bottom. The score includes various dynamics such as "simile" and "p". The page number "B. & H 8836" is at the bottom right.

This passage has a mood fairly close to the next, Israeli, one, but it is not reminiscent of Israeli music. The pentatonic segment typical of the British Isles and the implied augmented triads detach the excerpt from core Israeliness

A third working question: Since the passage in the *Wasps* does not aim to express "Israeliness", what does it express. According to Tovey, the *Wasps* overture combines English folklorism and pastorale with Archaic depiction of ancient Athens. Any of these apparently distinct stylistic frameworks can serve as a point of reference for Israeli music, which, Like Zionist culture in general, claimed both to return to rural life and to recover the Biblical golden age. Rural titles abound in Israeli music, as for example Mark Lavry's Five Country Dances and Haim Alexander's The Reapers from Six Israeli Dances. Along with the pastoral tradition, agricultural references also point at yet another global context, demonstrated in Example 6 (Audio 7 and 8) [“Israeli” sound in a Social Realist work: Myaskovsky Symphony no. 12 (audio only, 2 excerpts)].

We heard two excerpts from Myaskovsky's 12th symphony, the Kolkhoz symphony, a paradigmatic representative of Soviet Social Realistic music. The movements have agricultural titles, not currently available for me.

Soviet Social Realism has a negative reputation. After all, the totalitarian Soviet regime advocated a kind of music that expresses serenity and optimism ruling out

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depiction of the enormous suffer it caused. In the political domain, any similarities between the previous government of the old left in Israel and the Soviet regime are far outweighed by the differences, but in the musical domain affinity is indeed present both in the actual works and in their reluctance to be explicitly emotional. More specifically, Soviet social realism is an important context for understanding certain Israeli works with political connotations such as Yehezkel Braun's *Praise Song for the Workers' League*. Marina Frolova Walker ridiculed Myaskovsky's Kolkhoz symphony as the ultimate worthless product of Soviet music. In its own terms, however, this work is an extremely well crafted masterpiece. I can reflect on my own positive estimation of the work as potentially biased by my ideological support of the Zionist ideas associated with works it reminds me of, but Frolova Walker's negative estimation might also be biased by her resistance to the extra-musical context.

Along with moral issues, there is another problem with connecting Israeli music with Soviet Social Realism. If Israeli music is related to a tradition from Russia, what remains of its task in expressing our local identity? Does it remain Mediterranean after all? Well, some non-Israeli Mediterranean music sounds very similar.

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EXAMPLE 7, AUDIO 9: “Israelism” in a Mediterranean non-Israeli work

Nikos Skalkottas, “Kretikos” from *Five Greek Dances*

The musical score consists of two staves of music. The top staff starts with a dynamic of *p* (pianissimo). The bottom staff follows with a dynamic of *p*. Measures 2 through 4 show rhythmic patterns with eighth and sixteenth notes. Measures 5 through 7 continue this pattern. Measures 8 through 9 show more complex rhythms. Measure 10 begins with a dynamic of *mf* (mezzo-forte). Measures 11 through 12 show further rhythmic variations. Measures 13 through 14 conclude the section. The score is divided into sections labeled 1. and 2.

Again, before generalizing about a pan-Mediterranean style, keep in mind that the dances surrounding Kretikos (the piece we heard) are not that “Israeli.” Foreign “Israelist” excerpts that do express nationalism of other nations come from a wide range of cultures only loosely related to our location, from Bartókian Hungarisms to the work of the Armenian-American composer Alan Hovhaness.

So what makes Kretikos sound Israeli? Along with the natural minor, it has some typical syncopatic rhythms, reminiscent of horas. Avidom’s realization we heard of a symphonic scherzo as a Hora is emblematic. Example 8 shows the archetypic hora in Israeli music,

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EXAMPLE 8 AUDIO 10: Paradigmatic Hora: Hora Nirkoda, Marc Lavry

A musical score for 'Hora Nirkoda' by Marc Lavry. The score consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in G major and the bottom staff is in C major. The music is written in a rhythmic style with various note values and rests. Below the staves, there are lyrics in Hebrew, which are also written in musical notation. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 1, 2, and 3 visible.

Example 9 shows exactly the same rhythm and contour.

9. EXAMPLE 9 AUDIO 11: Hora rhythm with the same contour in Sibelius, Violin Concerto

A musical score for Sibelius' Violin Concerto. The score shows a single violin part. The violin is playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 1, 2, and 3 visible.

Is this an Israeli moment in Sibelius? Analytically, the parallelism with an Israeli icon is exact, but the ear lets doubts remain more than in previous examples. This doubt points at an important lesson: whereas in the comparison of literary texts intuitive decisions are unacceptable, in comparison of musical excerpts less conscious inputs are central.

Rhythm and contour alone can invoke “Israeliness” in the more modern excerpt in Example 10.

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EXAMPLE 10 AUDIO 12: “Israeli” rhythm and contour in a more “modern” work:

Jindrich Feld, *Quintetto Capriccioso* (1994–95), 1. mvt., fast part

The musical score consists of five staves of music. The first staff begins with a dynamic of *f*, followed by *p*. The second staff starts with *mp*, followed by *f* and *p*. The third staff starts with *p*, followed by *f* and *p*. The fourth staff starts with *f*, followed by *mp*, *p*, and *c*. The fifth staff starts with *mf*, followed by *p*, and ends with *mf*. The tempo is indicated as *Allegro giocoso (J = 120 - 126)*.

In all the examples we heard, the composers' acquaintance with Israeli music was out of question. When Jewish composers are involved, the case might be different. Large portions of Milhaud's *Sacred Service* for Sabbath eve, sung in Sephardically pronounced Hebrew, sound very close to Seter Sabbath Cantata.

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EXAMPLE 11 AUDIO 13: Affinity to Israeli music in Jewish non-Israeli music: *Milhaud*,

“Adon Olam” from *Service Sacre pour la Samedi*

East-European Jewish idioms are remote from the Israeli ones, which were created in opposition to them. In the music of Bloch, for example, even in *Suite Modale* few passages only sound related to Israeli music.

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10. EXAMPLE 12 AUDIO 14: Faint affinity to Israeli music in Jewish non-Israeli music: Bloch, *Suite Modale*, 2nd mvt.



Usage of Yemenite tunes is of course different. When Joseph Achron, a clear representative of east-European diaspora, works on the tune of *Esh'ala Elohai*, the raw material remains influential throughout the violinistic virtuosic passages, in a manner rather similar to treatments by Lavry.

- EXAMPLE 13 AUDIO 15: Jewish non-Israeli treatment of Yemenite melodies: Achron, from Violin Concerto no. 1 op. 60 2nd mvt. Improvisation on Yemenite themes [*Esh'ala Elohai*]



My abstract promised also a glimpse into popular music. Time limits prevent it, but you may youtube the Nick Kershaw song in the last example. The Israelite

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associations it raises are not merely analogous to those found in concert music, but rather embody the very same characteristics.

Example 14. “Israelism” in a British Rock song: Nick Kerhaw, *The Riddle* (1985)



I have raised today many questions but few answers. Global contexts strongly challenge the uniqueness of Israeli music as expressing our national identity, but concluding that Israeli music is a total fiction is no less absurd. My final table [See Appendix] attempts to compare attributes ascribed to Israeli music with other related lists, but I must leave it without discussion.

Scholars like Dahlhaus emphasize the decisive task of context in creating an atmosphere of national music that lack of uniqueness of any combination of actual musical features. On the one hand, the very existence of quasi-Israeli moments in music that has no relation to Israeliness proves that what can be perceived as expressing our national renewed *Volksgeist* might eventually be drawn from other, basically European, traditions. On the other hand, the very possibility to identify as quasi-Israelist very specific moments totally out of context might indicate that the content of the music itself should nevertheless stand at the core of our investigation.

We have encountered today many "isms": Folklorism, Archaism, Neo-Classicism, Social Realism, Nationalism expressing other nations; one might add Gebrauchmusik. The precise intersection of such extra-musical stylistic frameworks with intra-musical styles still requires enormous further research.

17. Comparison of technical devices in: Max Brod, *Israel's Music* (1951), pp. 57–58; Avner Bahat, Treatment of Jewish Oriental Folk Melodies in Israeli Art Music (M. A. Thesis); Carl Dahlhaus, *19th Century Music* p. 306 (“Technical devices of folklorism or exoticism regardless of milieu being depicted”); Ralph Locke, *Exoticism in Western Music* (2009), pp. 51–54

	Brod	Bahat	Dahlhaus	Locke
texture		Unisono	bass drones, pedal points	bare textures
		Pre-harmonic polyphony		
melody		mostly stepwise motion		
		ceaseless variations [Schoenbergian developing variations??]	Paraphrase	
			small melodic range	
			Ornamentation of central tones	quirk ornaments
		neglect of the aug. 2nd		

	Brod	Bahat	Dahlhaus	Locke
scales	Return to the ancient modes		Dorian sixth or Mixolydian seventh	Aeolian, modes and harmonies that were considered non-normative in the era and place where the work was composed
			pentatonicism	pentatonic
			raised second and augmented fourth	
	neutralization of boundaries between major and minor [Hindemith?]			Breaking down the distinction between Major and minor
			non-functional chromatic colorations	intense chromaticism, chromatic alterations, complex & inherently undefined chords

	Brod	Bahat	Dahlhaus	Locke
harmony		avoidance of triadic chords		
rhythm	irregular beat			
rhythm	obstinate repetition	repetition of melodic segments	ostinatos	Distinctive repeated rhythmic or melodic pattern; static harmonies
rhythm, timbre		Changing parameters of the original melody while preserving notes		
rhythm, timbre		instrumental recitative [*contradicts my "Israeliness"]		instrumental lines that are the presumed equivalent for melismas; chanting
timbre	oboe and clarinet, tambourine			