

Towards a Sociology of Israeli Music

By Judah Matras

Abstract:

Interest in Israel inevitably notes the religious, ethnic, and geo-cultural origin heterogeneity of its population, and discussion of music in Israel must note the plurality of musics performed and heard there. In this paper I consider what a *sociology* of Israeli musics should encompass and indicate some questions and hypotheses of a sociology of Israeli musics. Connected with the Zionist project in Palestine and Israel, birth of Israel as an independent state, large-scale immigration, and accompanying nationalist ideology, discussion of musics in Israel has interrogated both their integrative functions and their roles in expression of religious, cultural, and ethnic identities.

Although diversity of musics has long been recognized there, it is by no means unique to Israel. Alongside their own distinctions between “art” or “classical” and popular musics, most Western societies are today, in effect, immigrant societies with large sectors of their populations of non-indigenous birth or parentage, sometimes retaining minority languages, and preserving musics associated with linguistic, religious, ethnic, or geo-cultural origins alongside gender, age, regional, and social class divisions. In this paper, I adopt the strategy advanced by Peter J. Martin in his recent book, *Music and the sociological gaze. Art worlds and cultural production* (2006) for pursuing the sociology of musics in Israel by study of a) their “art worlds,” i.e. the social organization of their production and reception, in the sense of Becker (1982) and Finnegan (1989) and b) their functions and “affordance,” in the sense of DeNora (2000, 2003), Frith (1996a, 1996b), Small (1998), and Hennion (1997, 2001). I draw mostly upon published descriptions, data, and analyses, but I also introduce new *Labour Force Survey* data to examine characteristics of Israelis reporting “musician” as their main occupation. I draw primarily, though not exclusively, upon the classification of popular musics suggested by Regev and Serrousi in their book, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (2004).

An abbreviated list of musics routinely performed and heard in Israel includes:

- A. **Western Art Music** (“**WAM.**”)
- B. **Zionist-Project- “Mobilized”** Hebrew Popular and “Folk” Music, including, especially, “**Songs of the Land of Israel**” (**SLI**)
- C.. **Popular Musics of Jewish Immigrant Groups**, in Original Languages or in Hebrew Translation.
- D. **Post-“Mobilized”** (Hebrew-Language) **Israeli Rock**
- E. **Hebrew Middle Eastern** or “**Mediterranean**” Rock (= “**Musiqā Mizrahit**”)
- F. **Other Non-WAM Musics** (all categories, including jazz, blues, and Arab, Christian, Jewish sacred and secular musics)

In the paper I present data to describe and analyze aspects of the “music worlds,” the social organization of production and reception, of the contemporary musics of Israel and to analyze their functions and ‘affordance’ features. I show that **WAM**, because of its history, prestige, and popularity among high-status European immigrants and their embourgeoisied offspring in Israel, and **SLI**, because of its Zionist symbols and folksong-like qualities, were both privileged musics, institutionally promoted and subsidized in earlier decades, even as others were discouraged. Recent “commodification” and marketing of musics, has led to much more variegated performance in private events, bars, cafes, and ratings-driven radio and TV; to distribution of recordings on locally-produced cassettes, records, and CDs; and to emergence of **Israeli (Hebrew) Rock** and **Musiqā Mizrahit** as the dominant musics in Israel. A prominent literary critic, Nissim Calderon (2009), views **Israeli Hebrew Rock** as the new Israeli cultural and political idiom, replacing literature and poetry. “Decanonization” of previously-“mobilized” **SLI** and enhanced scope for Rock and other non-WAM musics, have liberated the thought, identities, and expression of older and younger generations alike (Regev, 1995).

Finally I cite two parallel examples: **In Israel** some have viewed a) visual arts and b) certain academic disciplines --history, political science, sociology, archaeology, and others-- as having been co-opted or “mobilized” in earlier decades by the Zionist rhetoric and priorities and only recently “liberated,” with painters or academics now pursuing “post-Zionist” art or studies free of such constraints (Chinsky, 1993; Manor, 2005, Segev,

2002). **Outside Israel**, especially in certain societies of Central and Eastern Europe, musics perceived not fully consistent with the ideologies and directions of the regimes, and especially US- or UK-style Rock musics, had been tabooed and sometimes severely penalized, while other musics had been “mobilized” in their support. Legitimation of Rock has frequently been associated with “liberation” of these societies (Ramet, 1994)