

International Musical Multiculturalism:

A perspective from the Mediterranean Musical Dialogue in Jerusalem

Paper presented to the conference *Many Musics* at the General Assembly of the IMC

Montevideo, October 13-19, 2003

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Musical trans-cultural processes do not exclusively pertain to modernity. But it is certain that technological development (electronic preservation and reproduction, mass media, fast and accessible transportation means, etc.), as well as the numerous cases of territorial abandonment (migration due to economic reasons, the forced displacement of peoples due to ethnic, religious or political conflicts, etc.) that are characteristic of the 20th Century (and apparently of the early 21st as well), have brought about basic disruptions in musical culture across the world. The perception on the nature itself of the “music” concept, its forms of dissemination and consumption, as well as the limits between musical styles and ranges, have been overwhelmed to a non measurable extent. The purpose of this brief presentation is to introduce a few reflections on the implications of such processes in the area of musical policy. As an example, I will analyze a specific musical event in which I have been personally involved for the past eight years in Israel.

Every vertiginous process of technological development and territorial abandonment has created, or rather forced, the need to redesign cultural policies and musical educational systems. In general, when such redesign is undertaken by state agencies or non governmental international organizations, it assumes a protectionist attitude vis-à-vis what are usually called “globalizing” processes. In other words, these supposedly globalizing processes give rise to the need for preserving local musical cultures considered to be indigenous or authentic from a collapse threatening cultural diversity and local identities. Cultural diversity and group identity are perceived as key issues within the order of human society. These essentialist approaches are not only anachronistic but lack a well-founded and developed theoretical perspective on the extremely complex nature of such supposedly globalizing processes.

Recent anthropologic and sociologic studies on globalization suggest a more sophisticated approach to this phenomenon and even provide for a criticism of the globalization concept itself. There is a need for musical institutions at national and international level, or rather for decision-makers and influential people, to face such criticism. Such theoretical concepts as resistance, trans-national identity, imaginary communities, and cultural imagination, provide at the same time for a more sober and a less sinister and threatening scenario for the future of musical life across the world.

Let us now comment on a few observations on the specific case of Israel. Due to its social nature and historical background, musical culture in the State of Israel results from a complex and endless negotiation between different notions of what it authentic. This negotiation is the consequence of the continuous immigration waves from the most diverse places in the world, which integrate the country’s Jewish population. At the same time, this process involves a dialectic relationship between the Western romantic view of state-nation adopted by the founders of the Zionist movement and the actual geographical location of the Jewish state in the Middle East. This dialectic tension brings a dominant and colonizing Jewish majority face to face with subjugated Arabic, Palestinian, Druze and Bedouin minorities. Thus, the musical life of this country has become an ongoing experiment where various essentialist approaches to Jewish-Israeli culture are faced to an ethnic-religious-national conflict that involves globalizing processes as well.

One of the consequences of this negotiation in the field of music in Israel is the latent state of the “East and West” issue, which since the 20’s has been the object of debate between Jewish music educators, composers and journalists in Palestine. Most of them aspired, to one extent or the other, to turn the new Israeli culture into a *sui generis* synthesis of such opposed approaches. It is evident that this debate reflects the essentialist and stereotyped concepts on the primary qualities of “Western” and “Eastern” music that prevailed at that time.

In the course of time, these essentialist views of Israeli music have gradually disappeared and given way to alternative approaches. It is not possible within the framework of this brief contribution to detail this process which is extremely interesting in itself. I will only make reference to two crucial points in such process. First, the integration of the Israeli Jewish population has changed to the point of becoming a multi-ethnic patchwork that remains an exception throughout the world. This patchwork is rather different to the Israeli society prior to 1948, which was characterized by a clearly dominant Eastern European group. Second, the Arabic-Israeli conflict developed into several directions, some of which are opposed, and had significant cultural consequences. It shifted from an ethnic conflict within the context of a territory ruled by foreign powers (the Ottoman and British Empires) to a conflict between national entities and, more recently, to a conflict of religious nature as well. The annexation of Palestinian territories following the 1967 war gave rise to a daily and intensive contact between the Israeli Jewish and Arabic populations, the cultural consequences of which are rarely discussed as they are outshone by the political and military conflict. At the same time, the *de facto* recognition of the State of Israel by several Arab countries and the conclusion of peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan modified the Israeli attitude towards the culture of neighbouring countries.

As an example, it would be sufficient to mention the radical change of attitude that took place in Israel in the 90’s vis-à-vis the famous Egyptian singer Um Kulthum. She was the favourite singer of Israel’s worst enemy, the late Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and she represented, both personally and through her repertoire, the essence of the modern Egyptian-Arabic national and anti-Israeli identity, based at the same time on the great urban musical tradition of Egypt. Despite the anti-Israeli background of this song star, by the mid 90’s (after the Oslo agreements were signed) the music and image of Um Kulthum emerged as a brilliant meteor in the Israeli musical and intellectual environment. The Israeli press published discussions on the art quality of her work, on her voice power, on the universal meaning of her messages. Israeli singers from families of Arabic origin started performing Um Kulthum’s repertoire in the most prestigious and crowded theatres in the country. It is worthwhile to mention the singer of “eastern pop” pieces Zehava Ben, who successfully performed the repertoire of Um Kulthum even in the Palestinian Gaza Strip. Of course, this case may have various critical interpretations, such as the colonialist appropriation by a wealthy Western society seeking for “exotic” novelties. But at the same time it cannot be denied that this renaissance of Um Kulthum in Israel implied an honest aesthetic appreciation of a different music that obviously results from the intensive globalization of the Israeli people, as well as from the implicit confidence in a new age in Arab-Israeli relations. Whichever the interpretation may be, listening to the voice of the Egyptian artist in the Israeli official radiobroadcaster was certainly a major musical event.

Among the musical events that took place in Israel as a result of the above described complex processes, I wish to mention one where I personally played a major role. I am not doing it as a personal recollection but as a sort of reflection addressed to the distinguished participants in this *ManyMusics* forum. I am referring to the Mediterranean Musical Dialogue (MMD), a framework created by the Mediterranean Cultural Forum in Israel in the early 90’s and founded by *Mishkenot Sha'ananim*, which is one of the most prestigious cultural institutions based in Jerusalem.

The MMD, which was designed as non-barrier musical exchange, is based on a series of meetings of international top rank musicians from the Mediterranean basin and neighbouring

areas, and their Israeli colleagues from every ethnic and religious origin. Since its creation in 1995, and under my musical conduction, the MMD has welcome musicians from Morocco, Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan and India.

Musicians meet once a week under an internship system that creates a daily coexistence without any barrier. During day hours, foreign invited masters, together with Israeli masters, conduct workshops on their various musical traditions or instrumental techniques (for example, techniques on the whole family of violin-related instruments). These workshops are attended by young musicians from all over the country who have the opportunity to share several days with some of the best musicians of their respective fields of interest. In the afternoon and evening hours, all the musicians gather to rehearse and experiment on original music or develop innovative arrangements of traditional works.

From a more theoretical viewpoint, this dialogue is based on the premise that most Mediterranean musical cultures, particularly urban traditions, share compatible aesthetic and cultural principles. This compatibility gives rise to the possibility of a musical dialogue without any verbal intermediation. Likewise, the daily exchange provides for an intensive social framework where national and international cooperation is established, which will continue after the MMD is over.

The MMD results from various social streams that flow into one specific event that should, of course, be assessed according to its limitations. These streams flowing into the MMD include the collapse of the paradigm of a unified Israeli culture of European origin decorated with some “eastern nuances”. We may add the open attitude of Israeli musicians, particularly those from families with roots in Islamic countries (Arab, Turkish, and Persian) towards their musical inner identity, that is, to seek for their family musical roots that were marginalized from public attention during the golden age of the paradigm of a monolithic Israeli culture. One symptom of such inner search is the recent public interest about professional Jewish musicians of Arabic origin who migrated to Israel in the 50’s, especially the Jewish musicians from Iraq. And we could obviously add to both streams the opening to the surrounding Arab culture, which we have already mentioned in connection to Um Kulthum. Likewise, the presence of Israeli musicians of Palestinian origin in music academies and conservatories in Israel created an exchange environment that had been almost non-existent until the last decade of the 20th century. The international success of the “Bustan Abraham” Israeli-Jewish-Arabic group of world music (“The Garden of Abraham, established in 1990) is an example of the outcome of such contacts.

The evaluation of the effects of the eight MMD seasons allows for noting that this platform of musical activity has brought about three consequences. The first one is the opening of the Israeli musical world to various traditions in the Mediterranean basin on which, until the 90’s, they only had second hand knowledge. As a result of this process, some Israeli young people decided to follow their careers with those masters they met at the MMD, especially from Greece and Turkey, two countries with music that has a strong impact on Israeli audiences. The second consequence is the creation of new musical groups including Israeli artists from various styles who met for the first time at the MMD. Finally, the third consequence is the knowledge on Israeli music acquired by musicians from the most diverse origins. Many of these MMD guests were extremely surprised about the musical richness and diversity of their Israeli colleagues. Therefore, language and opinion barriers were bypassed by a musical experience without intermediaries. For the invited artists, the MMD modified the stereotypes on the “israeliness”, which implies a change that makes possible to improve regional cultural relations. In a world area that has been so strongly devastated by the Other’s rejection, the MMED is only a tiny light ray with the potential capacity of enlightening those who bear the political future of the Middle East on their shoulders.

Translated by Francisco Susena