

## Sephardi Mizrahi Studies

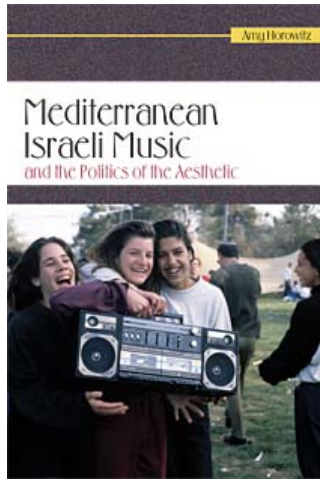
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# Original Review: Mediterranean Israeli Music and the Politics of the Aesthetic

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Amy Horowitz. [Mediterranean Israeli Music and the Politics of the Aesthetic](#). Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010. 251 pages.



Reviewed by Samuel R. Thomas (Graduate Center of the City University of New York)

This book is a welcome addition to the growing literature in English on music in Sephardi and Mizrahi communities in Israel. Amy Horowitz sheds light on a popular musical genre, focusing on key artists involved in its development and the role that their music played in negotiating a complex and volatile terrain for identity politics in Israel during the 1970s and 1980s. Horowitz systematically charts the seemingly unruly nature of Mediterranean Israeli music – also known as *Musika Mizrahit* – by providing important historical, sociological, and ethnic context and by exploring many of the streams of influence that discombobulate listeners seeking to define the parameters of the genre. But rather than looking at Mediterranean Israeli music as being based on a collection of asymmetrical, perhaps haphazard appropriations, Horowitz advances and successfully supports the thesis that the musical genre was developed by artists with the express intent of drawing together “appropriate appropriations” (30). In so doing, these artists contributed to advancing a pan-ethnic identity in Israel – of a Sephardi, Mizrahi, Oriental nature – that could stand in contradistinction to a hegemonic Ashkenazi ethnicity. Horowitz’s study adds a welcome statement about the integral role of notions of inheritance and appropriation on identity formation. These notions are all too often employed in the service of political ideologies. She challenges this binary structure and the ideologies that accompany it, instead offering a strong example of how the recognition of a continuum between inheritance and appropriation is actually more germane for appreciating the role of musical expression in the formation of identity. With this book, Horowitz adds a resonant voice to the scholarly discourse about Mizrahi identity.

This book is based upon the author’s ethnographic study of the rising popularity of a pan-ethnic music in Israel’s Mizrahi communities over a two-decade period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. She begins by foregrounding the nature of the dialogic process – and music as an important vehicle – for “disputing territories.” This clever turn of phrase, borrowed from the popular political discourse about the ongoing regional political conflict, is used to conjure an awareness of the process of negotiating cultural boundaries. In the second chapter, Horowitz does a superb job of wading through the messy landscape of Jewish ethnicity in Israel, describing the roots of the participants in the emergent pan-ethnic Mizrahi community. These two contextual chapters are crucial in laying the groundwork for appreciating Mediterranean Israeli music, its rise in popularity, and its central role in the ongoing dialogue about Israel’s national identity.

In chapter three we are invited into the dialogic process. Horowitz, in titling this chapter “The Mediterranean Israeli Music Phenomenon” challenges the informed reader to think differently. Rather than rely upon the more conventional appellation *Musika Mizrahit* (Eastern Music) to describe the musical genre, she imposes a new psycho-geographic framework on the reader with the use of “Mediterranean Israeli Music.” Doing so forces the reader to be more cognizant of North African, Turkish, Greek, and Balkan streams of influence in the pan-ethnic community’s music.

Similarly, Mediterranean Israeli Music has ample Western elements that are partially, if not almost exclusively, examples of appropriations resulting from contact with Ashkenazim in Israel. *Ha-Shir ha-Eres Yisra’eli* (Songs of the Land of Israel) are

typically from the second- and even third-generation Ashkenazi pioneers of the State of Israel. As Horowitz points out repeatedly, these songs served as important fodder for musicians and provided them with a plethora of material to draw upon – texts, melodies, song forms – that could help ground their music in the new Mediterranean. This may be an inconvenient fact for anyone who wishes to claim that Mediterranean Israeli Music is exclusively Oriental, Mizrahi, and fundamentally foreign. After so many generations in the Eastern Mediterranean, Horowitz's inclusion of the Ashkenazi streams of influence as part of the *Mediterranean* is important. Of course, Mediterranean displaces the Iraqi and Kurdish contingencies for whom the appellation *Mizrahit* (Eastern) was more inclusive. Nevertheless, by relying upon Mediterranean, Horowitz is able to put the reader's mind at some ease. When tasked with juxtaposing the myriad streams of influence that coalesce in the genre, it is a better description of the streams of influence than *Musika Mizrahit*. Additionally, for the English reader, *Mediterranean Israeli Music* is more easily understood since the title needs no translation. Finally, and perhaps most important, is that Horowitz's primary informant, Avihu Medina, substantiates this in his own typology for how to hear and differentiate the music's sub-genres (59-62). In any case, Horowitz was successful at encouraging a new paradigm of thought about this popular Israeli musical genre.

At the conclusion of this chapter, we are introduced to a number of artists who were active in the genre, as well as the political ramifications of their musical and performative choices. Through both the appropriation and incorporation of Western elements into their music, as well as a reliance upon and confidence in their Mediterranean aesthetic, the work of these artists is presented as successful at encouraging an Israeli nativity to emerge within the Sephardi-Mizrahi pan-ethnicity. Ironically, despite the presence of Western elements, most of these artists remained unsuccessful at traversing the ethnic boundary line and gained little acceptance for their music in the Israeli popular mainstream.

The stories of these artists are contrasted in the following chapters by the stories of Zohar Argov and Zehava Ben. Both Argov and Ben, neither of whom has ever been treated in such depth in any other English publication, are portrayed as grounded in and embracing of their role as key musical architects of a Sephardi-Mizrahi pan-ethnicity. In each case, a knowledge of and reliance upon approaches to vocal aesthetics from coalition communities of the Mediterranean was instrumental in how the artists transcended their own specific ethnic background in service of the pan-ethnic group. Argov's Yemenite aesthetic is unquestionable, but his was "a style that did not insist on itself" (98). He could appropriate appropriately from other Jewish styles.

In a second chapter on Argov, Horowitz shows how his star rises highest after his death through a posthumous process of consecration. She points out that his death "brought Mizrahi and Ashkenazi interlocutors together to create a shared national icon" (105). Returning to emphasizing the dialogic process, Horowitz's examination of Argov's consecration as a national hero shows the power of narratives in negotiating identity. In this case, it is Argov's death that serves as an impetus for a new conversation about Israeli national identity.

Horowitz's chapter on Zehava Ben is notable for two reasons: it pushes the reader forward a decade, providing a markedly different context for the music, and it shows an artist embracing her cultural roots with an intention to mediate cultural differences. Ben "transgresses boundaries" (129) – accepted political borders between Arabs and Jews – through her mastery of Mizrahi Jewish and Arab aesthetics. She was very active in the 1990s, in the middle of a harrowing time in region's history when the promise of the peace process almost became a reality. Horowitz opines "that is the hope aesthetics offers politics: not solutions or resolutions or dissolutions, but this space of reformations" (147). To understand Ben's power, one needs to look no further than an Arab *suq* (market) in the West Bank. There one could find recordings of Ben sold alongside Arab artists. A popular recording featured her performing songs by cherished Egyptian vocal icon Umm Kulthum. Anyone who can cover Umm Khultum and sell in any Arab marketplace is remarkable. Perhaps even more telling is the fact that an Israeli artist appeared in a *suq* at all. Horowitz once again sees the power of Mediterranean Israeli Music – and particularly its architects' proper appropriation and transmission of aesthetics – as being its ability to contribute to a dialogic process to reform Israeli national identity.

This book comes with an audio CD, beginning with a medley of excerpts of Hebrew liturgical singing and Umm Khulthum's "Inta Umri," the well-known piece which Zehava Ben covered, gaining notoriety in the Arab world. Subsequent tracks fill out this compilation CD with important pieces by some of the genre's most influential artists, including many artists featured in the text. Horowitz does an excellent job on the accompanying liner notes. They are substantial and quite insightful. Horowitz

offers additionally important analytical pointers in another section of the book reserved for translations of song lyrics. Unfortunately, the song lyrics section does not include all the songs on the audio CD and confusingly includes a few that are not on the CD. Furthermore, interpolated between the song lyrics and liner notes – which for the most part are complementary – are the bibliography, videography, and discography sections. The organization of this supplemental material tends to disrupt the reader and hinder the effectiveness of her analyses. Nonetheless, the song lyrics and liner notes are very valuable, and the audio CD is put together well.

Throughout the book, Horowitz never loses site of the importance of the dialogic process – and song as a vehicle in this process – in formulating the pan-ethnic Mizrahi identity in Israel. With a clear development of her thesis, she shows that Mediterranean Israeli Music has been integral to the development of Israel's national identity as well. Her privileging of aesthetics as the component of musical expression that best facilitates engaging with the fluid and hybrid nature of formulating identity on the spectrum between inheritance and appropriation is fresh and exciting.

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