Laya Harbater Silber

Yiddish Art Songs By Israeli-Born Composers: A New Stylistic Interpretation[1]

Israelis who compose Yiddish art music do not do so in order to pay tribute to a lost culture, nor to perpetuate the memory of the dying Yiddish folksong tradition. They rather compose it in order to generate a vibrant, contemporary interpretation of the Yiddish language, unburdened by the long history of the Jewish Diaspora. This paper examines how this relatively new and possibly short-lived phenomenon emerged in Israel in the late 1960s, as a consequence of underlying political, social and aesthetic factors. It will further provide examples from works by three highly individual, Israeli-born composers, who composed Yiddish music since the 1980s. A brief historical introduction to the Yiddish language, as well as to its literature and music, is first drawn, in order to clarify the various conflicting aesthetic attitudes that eventually led to the emergence of the Yiddish Art Song in Israel.

The Yiddish language developed more than a millennium ago on the banks of the Rhine and Moselle rivers,[2] where the Jewish communities began to mix German dialects of the local population, Hebrew words and expression, and other vernacular elements imported from their previous locations. When these communities subsequently migrated to Eastern Europe, they were further exposed to the influence of Slavic languages, as well as to new Jewish idioms derived from biblical and rabbinic sources. The Yiddish language thus became the spoken Jewish dialect, while the Hebrew language (“loshon kodesh,” or "the holy tongue") was primarily confined to prayers and religious writings.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, Yiddish literature was essentially popular, as its biblical, religious and ethical themes were mainly intended for the Jewish populace.[3] Following the advent of the “Haskala”

---

[1] The preparation and publication of this work was generously supported by The Memorial Foundation For Jewish Culture.

[2] Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (Chicago, 1980) , p. 1–2.

[3] Leo Wiener, *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1972), p. 72.

Movement (Jewish Enlightenment), which advocated a higher degree of Jewish integration into gentile society, German Jewry turned away from any form of Yiddish literature. In Eastern Europe, however, the “maskilim” ('enlightened' Jews), despite their disapproval of Yiddish, did continue to write in that language in order to disseminate their ideas. In so doing, they set the ground, paradoxically, for modern Yiddish literature.[4] After the rise of the Zionist movement toward the end of the nineteenth century, Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe was even further discouraged, since the Hebrew language was promoted as one of the emblems of revived Jewish nationalism.[5] Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922), who is generally credited as the father of modern-day Hebrew, was among the founders of the “Tehiyat Israel” society in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century, which was based on the principles of working the land and reviving the Hebrew language. His followers introduced the teaching of Hebrew into the schools, published Hebrew periodicals, and eventually established Hebrew as both the spoken and written language in Israel.[6]

Yiddish literature, nonetheless, continued to flourish in Eastern Europe. The prominent Yiddish writers, such as Mendele, Peretz and Sholom Aleichem were not “anti-Hebrew” (they also wrote in Hebrew), but underscored the importance of the perpetuation and dissemination of Yiddish culture as well. Thus the battle line was drawn between those who sought to deepen their involvement with Yiddish, and those who wished to suppress it. It was precisely at this junction that the historical awareness of the long tradition of the Jewish folksong emerged in Eastern Europe. Joel Engel (1868-1927), the known composer and critic, began a systematic collection of such songs. He was also instrumental in founding 'The Society for Jewish Music' (1908), whose goal was to collect and transcribe Yiddish folk songs and encourage Jewish composers to write art music based on Jewish sources. Among the active members of this society were Jewish composers who, under the tutelage of Rimsky-Korsakov at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, explored their own Jewish ethnic culture (e.g., Michael Gniessen, Lazar Saminsky, Moses Milner and Joseph Achron). The Society ultimately collected tens of thousands of Yiddish folk songs, which were stored in the Jewish Research Institute of Vilna (YIVO). Some of its composers wrote highly creative arrangements of the folk melodies they collected, while others composed original art songs based on Jewish themes. Vocal and instrumental compositions were printed and distributed abroad in thousands of copies. A concert ensemble of singers and instrumentalists performed these compositions in the major cities in Russia, Germany and Austria, thus providing widespread exposure to the new Jewish repertoire.[7]

---

[4] Ibid., pp. 74, 148. Wiener further states, with respect to S. Ettinger (one of the first modern Yiddish poets), that “by acknowledging the people’s right to be instructed by means of an intelligible language, he at the same time opened up avenues for the formation of a popular literature based on an intimate acquaintance with the mental life of the people.” pp. 137-138.

[5] Asher Ginsberg (known as “Ahad Ha’am,” 1856-1927), for example, was one of the leading Zionist leaders who depreciated Yiddish as a “jargon” or “borrowed language” for everyday needs (*Hashiloah* 1910: 163).

[6] Yaacov Churgin, “Eliezer Ben-Yehuda,” *Sifriyat Rishonim* 4/1 (1942), 10-11.

The effort to advance Yiddish culture — literary, musical, and otherwise — in Eastern Europe ended, of course, with the Holocaust. Survivors who emigrated to Western Europe and America generally tried to fit it into their adopted countries, yet only in Palestine was it possible, at least theoretically, for Jews to set the cultural tone of the society in which they lived. However, since the Zionist agenda was actively opposed to the idea of continuing the pre-war Yiddish renaissance in Eastern Europe, the Yiddish language and its wealth of culture – including the music intrinsic to it – receded from Israeli public view after the establishment of the State of Israel. The discouragement of Yiddish, based on ideological rejection, took various forms, ranging from blatant to more subtle manifestations. One egregious example was a 'decree' by the head of the Public Committee of Film and Show Reviews (December 1950) that forbad the public performance of Yiddish theater. In addition, for many years no governmental funds were allocated for a Yiddish daily newspaper, although they were granted to publications in other immigrant languages.[8] To be sure, Yiddish culture that was deemed 'adaptable' to the new Israeli environment was translated into Hebrew and remained as such in the public domain, but whenever it was at odds with the surroundings and not readily transplanted, it largely disappeared from view. Such was the case of the Yiddish theater, which remained popular notwithstanding the edict described above, precisely because it was now translated into and performed in Hebrew. Likewise, the songs of the European immigrants were largely ignored, unless their texts, now in Hebrew translation, were adaptable to the new country. The immigrant Yiddish artists, who might have been expected to resist these developments, generally accepted them, as an unfortunate, but appropriate, 'rite of absorption' into the new state. [9]

---

[7] Avraham Soltes, "The Hebrew Folk Song Society of Petersburg: The Historical Development," *The Historic Contribution of Russian Jewry to Jewish Music: National Music Jewish Council* (1967), 22-24.

The situation began to change in the late 1960s and 1970s, when Israel became highly receptive to cultural trends abroad and, consequently, to legitimize ethnic pride and expression. For example Jewish and non-Jewish European immigrants in the USA (who since the turn of the century had been measured by the degree of their “Americanization”) turned during these decades to "a new ethnicity on the basis of the doctrine of cultural pluralism and in response to black America’s emphatic insistence on group pride, and particularly, its reflection in expressive culture.”[10] A similar process took place in Israel, as the hostility of the State’s early years gradually gave way to a more tolerant attitude and, even more significantly, to the legitimization of ethnic expressions, including the hitherto dismissed, "old-world" Yiddish. [11] Several underlying factors account for this new development. First, the second-generation Israelis of Middle-Eastern and North-African origins began to take a critical stance toward the ethnocentric attitude of the Israeli establishment and demanded greater cultural pluralism.[12] Second, the exposure to testimonies at the Eichmann trial in 1961 and, even to a greater extent, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, brought about an increasing awareness among Israelis of their own vulnerability. Third, the decline of labor Zionism and the rise of a right-wing, nationalistic government in the late 1970s (led by Menahem Begin's Likud party) was accompanied by a more traditionally oriented national culture.[13] These factors had a far-reaching consequence on the Israeli favorable reception of multi-cultural manifestations, which were either imported from abroad or were fermenting from within the country.

---

[8] Joshua Fishman and David Fishman, “Yiddish in Israel: A Case-Study of Efforts to Revise a Monocentric Language Policy,” *Advances in the Study of Society Multilingualism* (1974), 56.

[9] Joachim Stutchewsky (1891-1982) immigrated from the Ukraine to Palestine in 1938 and continued to compose and arrange Yiddish songs, but these were published only in 1973 alongside their Hebrew translations.

[10] Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs* (Urbana, 1982), p. 28.

[11] It is worth noting that during the 1970s Israel’s Ministry of Education established the Centre for Integration of the Oriental (Sephardic) Jewish Heritage in Culture and Education, which in turn led to the emergence of commercialized musical performances, particularly the Israeli Song Festivals. These featured both Sephardic and Ashkenazic-Chassidic genres. For further discussion, see Erik Cohen and Amnon Shiloah, “Major Trends in Change in Jewish Oriental Ethnic Music in Israel,” *Popular Music* 5 (1985), 205, 216; Esther Warkov, “Revitalization of Iraqi-Jewish Instrumental Traditions in Israel: The Persistent Centrality of an Outsider Tradition,” *Asian Music* 17/ 2 (1986), 25–32.

The years 1965-1973 were marked by a wave of immigration by composers of Yiddish music. One of the most influential is Daniel Galai (1945-), who immigrated from Argentina. Instrumental in the establishment of the political movement, "Dor Hemshech," he continues to compose Yiddish and Klezmer music as part of his struggle to promote Yiddish culture in modern Israel. Others immigrated from the Soviet Union and continued to compose Yiddish music, though their compositions are heard mostly in small circles of Yiddish enthusiasts. Among them are Joseph Dorfman (1940-), who immigrated in 1973 and subsequently composed three Yiddish song cycles; Leibu Levin (1914-1983), who immigrated in 1972 and published volumes of his art songs in 1977 and 1980; and Sarah Feigin (1928-), who immigrated in 1972 and continues to compose artistic arrangements to Yiddish songs for the Israeli singer, Hadassah Ben Haim.

While new immigrants were importing Yiddish music, veteran Israelis were generating it from within. Indeed, the turning point in the reception of Yiddish songs in Israel was marked by the successful production of Dov Selzer's *Megille Lieder* (*Scroll Songs*) in 1968. Set to Yiddish poems by Itzik

---

[12] Guy Haskell, "The Development of an Israeli Anthropological Approach to Immigration and Ethnicity: 1948-80," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 2 (1989), 23.

[13] Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): pp. 23, 192; Edwin Seroussi, "Politics, Ethnic Identity, and Music in Israel: The Case of the Moroccan Bakkashot," *Asian Music* 17/2 (1986), 39–41.

Manger (1901-1969), a known Yiddish poet, dramatist and novelist, it depicts the Purim story as viewed through the eyes of Jewish tailors in a Polish “shtetl” (small town in Europe). Selzer composed, in his own words, “original songs written in the folk spirit,” intending to create a “non-stop singing — almost like an opera.” [14] *Megille Lieder* had approximately 600 performances in Israel and many more abroad. His second major Yiddish work, *Chumesh Lieder* (*Pentateuch Songs*), also based on Manger's poems, was composed in 1971 and had a highly favorable reception as well.[15]

This was but the prelude to a new perspective in the development of Yiddish music in Israel. In the early 1970s, it underwent, in Bruno Nettl's words, a process of "syncretism," namely, a fusion of elements from diverse cultural sources.[16] Nettl further noted that hybrid styles develop most readily when “musical similarities between non-western and western cultures can be identified, when the musics are compatible and, most important, when they share central traits.” Largely ignored in Israel until then, Yiddish music thus found itself in a new and unfamiliar milieu of Middle Eastern sounds: it was written by Israeli composers (whose native tongue is Hebrew rather than Yiddish) and within a new musical landscape, which fused musical traits common to both European Yiddish music and Middle Eastern music. As Eitan Steinberg (an Israeli composer) has noted, the mere fact that Israeli musicians create in an atmosphere that affords a degree of emotional distance from the old-world Yiddish environment, makes it much easier for them (as compared, for example, with their American counterparts) to free themselves from the harmonies and modes of the old-school Yiddish song and thereby produce newer and fresher works.[17]

---

[14] Personal interview with the composer, Aug. 25, 1994.

[15] Manger’s *Chumesh Lieder*, written in 1935, recreates patriarchal figures as contemporary Jews with the thoughts and failings of Jews living in Eastern European villages.

[16] Bruno Nettl, “Some Aspects of the History of World Music in the Twentieth Century: Questions, Problems and Concepts,” *Ethnomusicology* 22 (1978), 133.

[17] Personal interview with the composer, June 4, 1997. The composer explained that, in his view, American Jews are more attached to Yiddish than in Israel, where Hebrew has taken its place.

The pioneer of the Israeli Yiddish art song is Ami Maayani, who stunned the Israel Broadcasting Authority in 1973 when he employed Yiddish texts in a work it commissioned. His *Yiddish Song Cycle* won the first prize in a competition commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Israel and was highly praised by both critics and public.[18] His choice of Yiddish was all the more startling in light of his utter unfamiliarity with the language, yet consistent with his general approach to music and language. Profoundly influenced by Karlheinz Stockhausen and the Darmstadt school, he summarized his approach as follows: "Musical thought and verbal thought move on separate unrelated planes; consequently, in a vocal work, music and text should proceed each on its own independent course."[19] Unconstrained by the Yiddish texts, Maayani created a new trend of Israeli Yiddish composition, employing what has become known as "East Mediterranean" techniques, heretofore foreign to Yiddish music. He used such contemporary techniques as melodic ornamentation, heterophonic textures, microtonal effects, and tetrachordal structures, as well as ostinato and pedal point figures to emulate the drone accompaniment of Arabic music.[20] His two Yiddish song cycles (1973, 1975) set the paradigm for new art songs by the subsequent generation of Israeli composers.

Three younger, representative composers are Eitan Steinberg (1955–), Sarah Shoham (1946–), and Menachem Wiesenberg (1950–). They are all native Israelis who studied at the Rubin Academy of Music in Israel and whose parents immigrated from Europe. Steinberg's approach to Yiddish art music is similar to Maayani's, since the importance of the Yiddish text, in his view, lies in its sounds rather than semantics. Shoham's approach, by comparison, is not entirely "literal;" namely, she is guided by her associative impressions of the Yiddish language, particularly by this language as "a polyphonic language of multiple meanings." Wiesenberg's arrangements are the most sensitive to the textual meaning, but not laden with the pathos so often associated with Yiddish. This is achieved by contrapuntal techniques which avoid the harmonic progressions commonly associated with the arrangements of Yiddish songs.

---

[18] For a discussion of Maayani's song cycle no. 1, see Harbater Silber, "Maayani and the Yiddish Art Song," *Musica Judaica* 8/1 (1985-86), 75-86.

[19] Ami Maayani, quoted in Zvi Keren, *Contemporary Israeli Music* (Tel Aviv, 1980), p. 97.

[20] Zvi Keren, *Contemporary Israeli Music,* p. 19.

The analysis below illustrates the distinct approaches of these three composers.

Steinberg's *Songs of Love and Site* (1985) is a cycle of six art songs for voice, tambourine and viola. They were composed under the influence of Luciano Berio, whom he met during the latter's visit to Israel. Berio's use of folkloristic techniques and unique approach to languages in his *Folk Songs for Voice and Orchestra* (1964) is well known. What particularly prompted Steinberg's interest in these songs was their multi-lingual setting, the interaction between the voice and the orchestra, and the particular attention to the viola and percussion instruments.[21] Similarly to Berio, Steinberg first recorded texts in various languages and then selected one poem in each language (Yiddish, Spanish, Classic Arabic, Russian, Italian and Hebrew) on the basis of its familiar environmental sound, although its *parole* was not necessarily understood.[22] The songs are also performed continually (*attacca)* as in Berio's cycle.

Steinberg's song cycle opens with the Yiddish song *The Sun's Route,* set to Joseph Papiernikov's text (originally titled "I Build My Castles in the Air").[23] Similarly to the remainder of the songs in the cycle, it reflects a quest for an elusive object or a distant place, or, in Steinberg's own words, a "perspective of an individual's life journey." He further explains that the songs were organized from the most "abstract" expression of longing, namely Yiddish, to the most concrete and specific articulation, namely Hebrew. He underscores, nonetheless, that the Yiddish song was the easiest for him to compose, also because Israel provides “a particularly hospitable environment in which to put abstract music to Yiddish.”[24] Steinberg’s songs, however, are quite 'concrete', and recall, in fact, Berio’s folksongs in rhythmic freedom and frequent glissando usages. Their 'abstraction' probably reflects his own estrangement from the scales, motives and rhythms of the Yiddish song tradition. Since Yiddish is clearly a foreign language to the Israeli-born Steinberg, he uses the text as an object, disregarding its meaning.

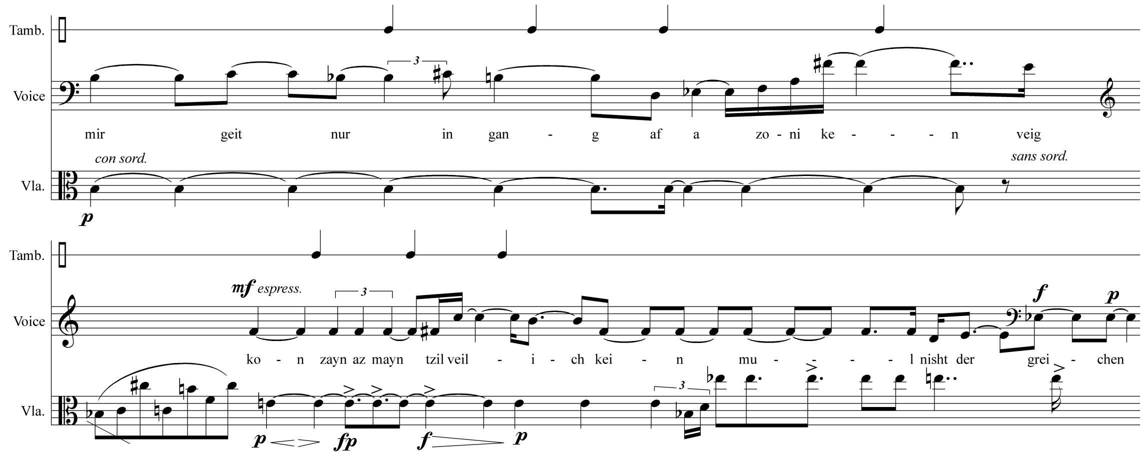
---

[21] This interaction of vocalists with instrumentalists is most pronounced in Berio's Coro (1975–1976) and Sinfonia (1968–1969). See David Osmond-Smith, *Berio* (New York, 1991), p. 80.

[22] When he selected the texts, Steinberg was not aware of the fact that the Yiddish and Spanish texts had previously been set to music.

[23] Papiernikov was born in Warsaw in 1897 and emigrated to Palestine in 1924.

Steinberg sets his songs within a westernized structural context, but at the same time employs Middle Eastern techniques. One of the most salient features is the drone, which marks the entrance of the viola in *The Sun’s Route* (example 1). It is introduced in unison with the voice and, as the melody proceeds in seconds, it creates a microtonal effect, typical of Middle Eastern sonority. However, the subsequent heterophonic relation between the drone and the voice is actually an inauthentic usage of Middle Eastern drone.


Tamb.
Voice
mir geit nur in gan - g af a zo - ni ke - - - - n veig
con sord.
sans sord.
Vla.
p
3
Tamb.
mf espress.
f
p
Voice
ko - n zayn az mayn tzil veil - i - ch kei - n mu - - - - l nisht der grei - chen
Vla.
p
fp
f
p
3

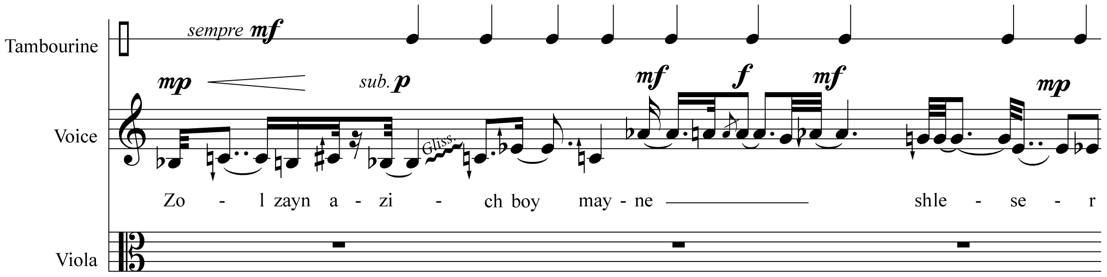
Example 1: Steinberg, *The Sun’s Route* (1985)

The song is through-composed, without any perceptible tonal center, although E^{b} , E natural, B^{b} and B natural appear to constitute the gravitational notes (Example 1, viola).[25] These intervals of a perfect fourth and a diminished fourth form the basis of many Near Eastern melodies as well as Jewish folk tunes. In addition, the song introduces glissandi from lower to higher pitches and intonations of sighs or sobs, which are characteristic of Jewish folk melodies[26], but are transformed here into a contemporary western context (see Example 2).

---

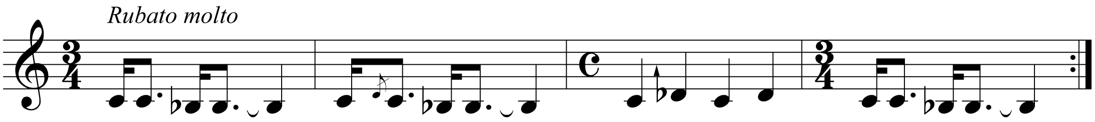
[24] Personal interview with the composer, June 4, 1997.

[25] These examples are from the original published version.



Example 2: Steinberg, *The Sun's Route* (1985)

The song's ornamental expressions and imprecise intervals, via syncopated rhythms and microtones, are also commonly associated with Arabic music. Steinberg, however, asserts that they are derived from the Songs of Seclusion (*Shirei Hitbodedut*) of Chabbad (also known as "the three Bavot"), which the composer learned from his grandfather.[27] Yet here again, Steinberg only uses the basic intervalic content of the *Shirei Hitbodedut,* but is uninfluenced by the context of these melodies (compare examples 2 and 3).



Example 3: Shirei Hitbodedut: Section A

Sarah Shoham, likewise, discovered that the "similarities between the modes of Eastern Europe and the music of the East make Israel a very natural home for Yiddish music."[28] She observes that Yiddish is "a sigh — as if it is going to die and, by its virtue of dying, lives for thousands of years!" Yiddish, in her view, is also "separation — to leave, but always suffer the separation...."[29]

---

[26] "*Old Jewish Folk Music; The Collections and Writings of Moshe Beregovski*," trans. and ed. Mark Slobin (Philadelphia, 1982), p. 80.

[27] This is a *niggun*, a Chassidic melody chanted before the "Tikkun Hatzot" (Midnight Vigil). It is in ABA' form. According to tradition, each part was composed by a different Chassidic rabbi.

In 1995, Shoham composed her first original Yiddish art song, *I Sing as a Bird*, to a poem by the well-known Israeli writer, Pinchas Sadeh (1927–1997). The poem is in Hebrew, except for the closing line in Yiddish, "Ich zing vi a Feigale," whose Hebrew translation serves as the poem's title.[30] Representing the "Israelization of Yiddish," the song's intermingling of Hebrew and Yiddish is similar to the "Americanization of Yiddish," where songs have parallel Yiddish and English texts.[31] Shoham observes that the poem's opening verse — "Small scraps of paper, yellowed envelopes, that's what remains" — reminded her of the scraps of pictures and letters which were the only tangible manifestation of the link between her parents, who escaped Europe before the Holocaust, and the families they left behind.

Shoham's song is composed in an AB form (typical of the Yiddish folksong), in which section A sets the Hebrew texts, and section B exclusively the Yiddish. Significantly, section B contains the motivic nucleus of the entire song. For example, the motive of "Ich Zing" ("I sing") is interpreted by Shoham as "always dying" and is depicted, accordingly, via a sequence of descending seconds, which permeate the song, both motivically and structurally (Example 4).

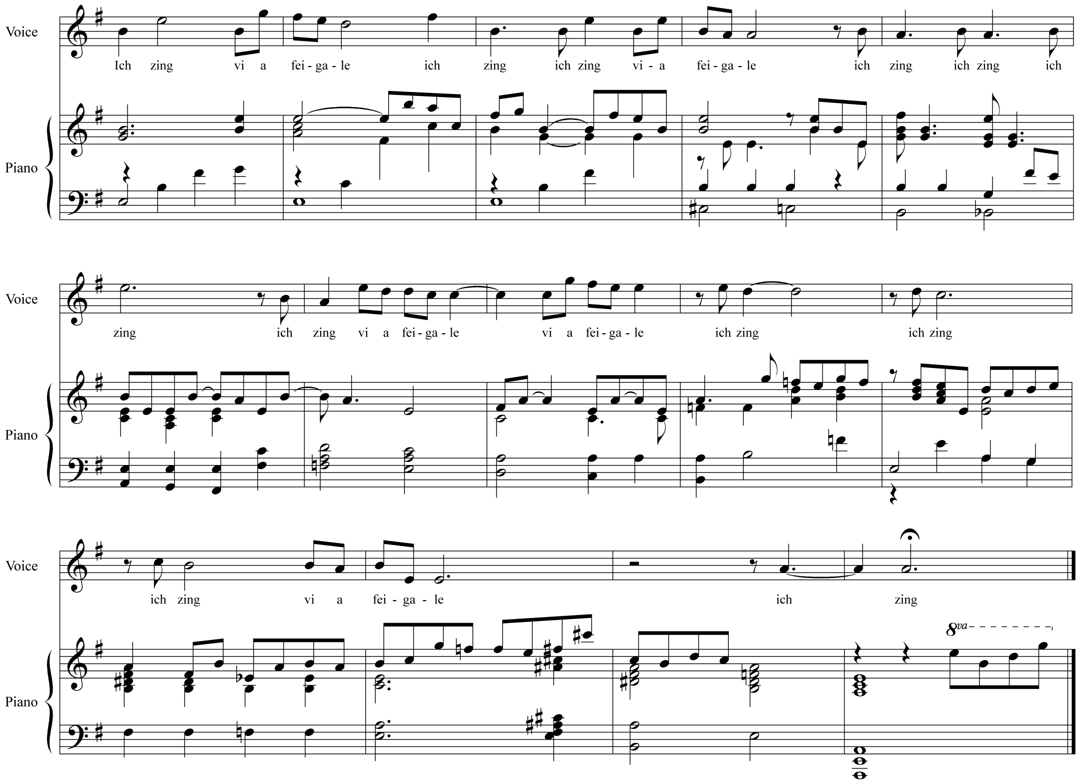
---

[28] Personal interview with the composer. Jan. 29, 1997.

[29] Ibid.

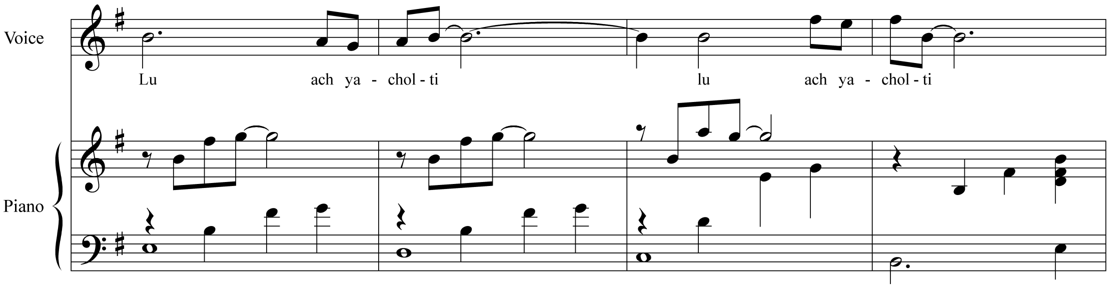
[30] (Translation of Hebrew text): If only I could, if only I could return to the dream I dreamed at daybreak. A young girl, of strange beauty, sings in a background of light. And she was my mother. But in my memory, nothing remained except for the words: (Yiddish text) Ich Zing Vi A Feigale, Ich Zing Vi A Feigale, Ich Zing Vi A Feigale (Hebrew text – omitted in the song) I sing as a bird.

[31] Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs* (Urbana, 1982), p. 199.


Voice
Piano
Ich zing vi a fei - ga - le ich zing ich zing vi - a fei - ga - le ich zing ich zing ich
zing ich zing vi a fei - ga - le vi a fei - ga - le ich zing ich zing
ich zing vi a fei - ga - le ich zing
8va

Example 4: Shoham, *I Sing as a Bird* (1995), mm. 27–40

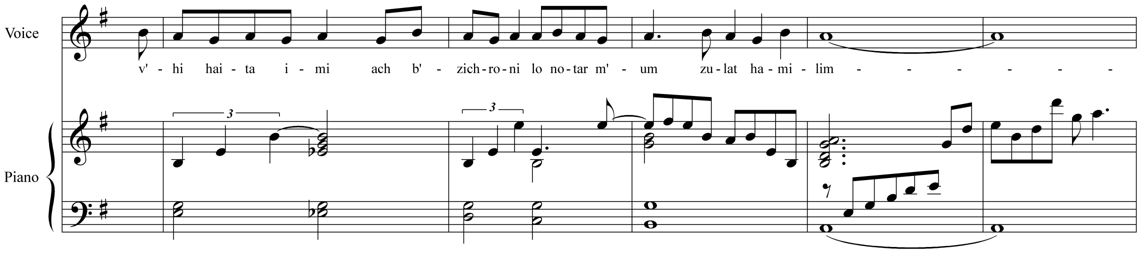
These descending seconds, both diatonic and chromatic, also appear in the bass part of both sections (Examples 4 and 5). Furthermore, the falling seconds also constitute a structural component, since section A, which begins on ‘b’, closes with the falling second, ‘a’.


Voice
Piano
Lu ach ya - chol - ti lu ach ya - chol - ti

Example 5: Shoham, *I Sing as a Bird* (1995), mm. 9–12

The rhythmic treatment of the text adds a significant dimension to Shoham's song. Yiddish is a "mil-el" language, that is, its words are accented on the penultimate syllable, while Hebrew is "mil-ra," accented on the ultimate syllable. By mixing musical accents from the two languages, Shoham obscures what would otherwise be starkly contrasting linguistic sounds. For example, the correct Hebrew pronunciation of "b'zichro**ni**" ["in my memory"] is treated musically as "b'*zi*ch**ro**ni." Shoham's use of triplets, particularly in the transitional section, softens these distinctions of accent. Similarly, in Section B, the anticipated setting of the Yiddish text would be "Ich **Zing**," but is actually composed as "**Ich** Zing." This rhythmic/linguistic distortion, once again, demonstrates Shoham's distance from literal texts and preference for colors and sonorities.

The "wandering tonalities" in Shoham's song (which primarily stem from notes foreign to their accompanying chords) are further associated with Yiddish as "wandering from one temporary home to another," as depicted in the composer's words. In other words, a series of held notes acquire a new harmonic dimension due to constantly changing chords (Example 6). Believing that Yiddish is "a language of intonation with hidden meanings," the diatonic, intonational melody of the song is further enhanced by the chromatic quality of these chords.


Voice
Piano
3
v' - hi hai - ta i - mi ach b' - zich - ro - ni lo no - tar m' - um zu - lat ha - mi - lim - - - - - -

Example 6: Shoham, *I Sing as a Bird* (1995), mm. 22-26

Although Wiesenberg, in contrast to Steinberg and Shoham, has not yet composed "original" art songs in Yiddish, his arrangements are genuine compositions also worthy of inclusion in any study of Israeli Yiddish art music.

Among his most recognized achievements are the arrangements of Yiddish folksongs (1987), recorded by Chava Alberstein, a well-known Israeli singer. Avoiding the conventional harmonies of thirds and sixths of Yiddish folksong accompaniments, he extracts prominent motives from the Yiddish melody and/or mode in order to integrate them into his contrapuntal interplay between the instruments (or, sometimes, children's voices) and the soloist.[32] Some of his salient techniques are imitation, pedal point, melodic doubling, register changes, and percussive effects.

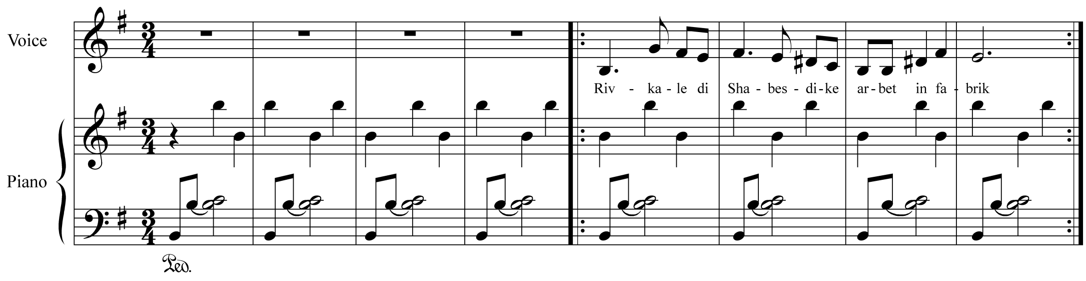
Among Wiesenberg's Yiddish folksong arrangements, the most poignant is *Rifkale di Shabesdike (Rifkale the Sabbath Girl)*, set to a poem by Pesach Kaplan (1870-1943). The text describes the mourning of a young Jewish maiden, Rifkale, over the loss of her beloved from Bialistok, who was kidnapped on the holy Sabbath (along with 5,000 other young Jewish men) by the Nazis in 1941.[33]

The song is set strophically and is accompanied by piano and string quartet. The instruments introduce a pedal point of octaves and minor seconds which not only evokes the girl's crying at the spinning loom, but structurally serve as a basis for variation in each verse. The pulsating pedal point is further enhanced by a subtle use of hemiola rhythm, against the triple mensuration of the vocal part. It also neutralizes any harmonic direction, which may be anticipated by the motion from tonic to subdominant in the vocal line (Example 7).

---

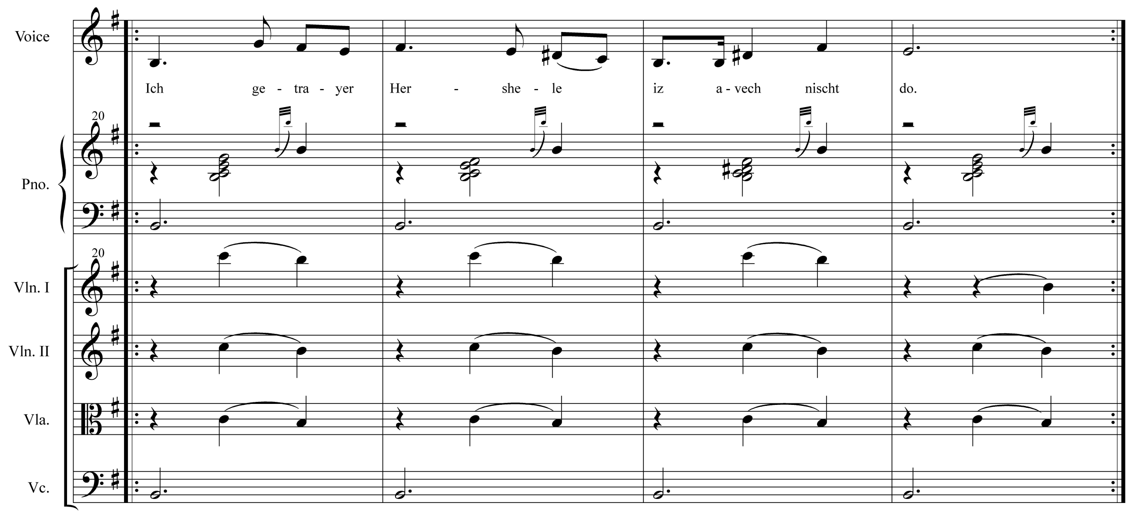
[32] Other artistic arrangers, such as the prominent American composer, Hugo Weisgall, avoid old school Yiddish song harmonies by employing contemporary chromatic techniques, thereby creating an entirely new harmonic framework for the songs. See Bruce Saylor, "The Golden Peacock: Seven Popular Songs from the Yiddish," *Musica Judaica* 3:1 (1980-81): 82.

[33] (English translation:) "Where is my love? Is he alive? Is he in a concentration camp? Oh, how black it is for him and how bitter for me, since that Sabbath.…"


Voice
Piano
Riv - ka - le di
Sha - bes - di - ke
ar - bet in fa - brik
Ped.

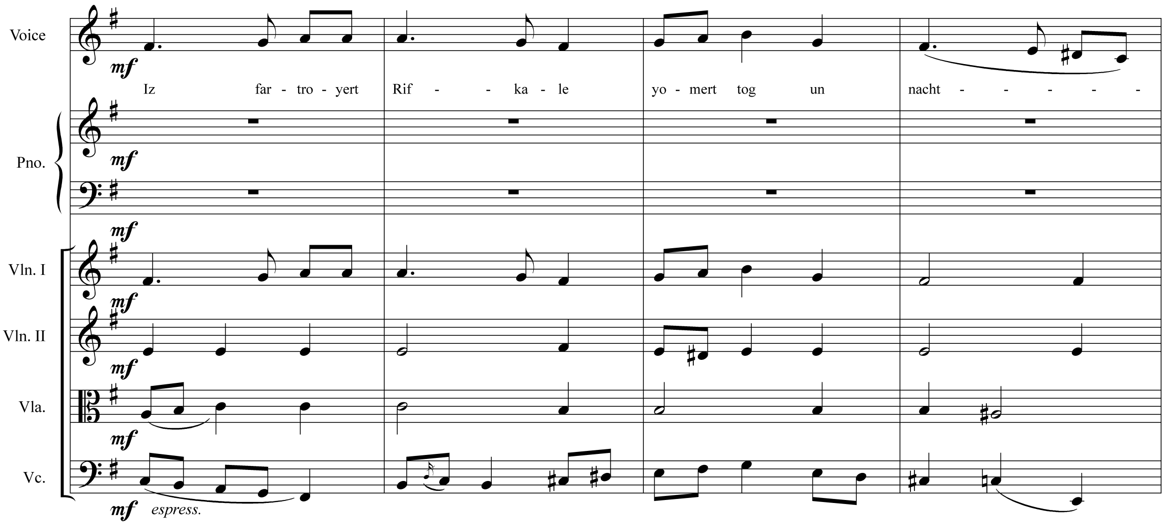
Example 7: Wiesenberg, mm. 1-8

The instrumentation in *Rifkale di Shabesdike* is used as interpretative dimension. The accompaniment of the first verse is a pedal point set for a piano solo (see Example 7). In the second verse, the drone is expanded to the string instruments, whose falling seconds in four different octaves (over the piano's pedal point), create a xylophone-like effect (Example 8).


Voice
Pno.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
20
20
Ich ge - tra - yer
Her - she - le
iz a - vech nischt
do.

Example 8: Wiesenberg, *Rifkale di Shabesdike* (1987), mm. 20–23

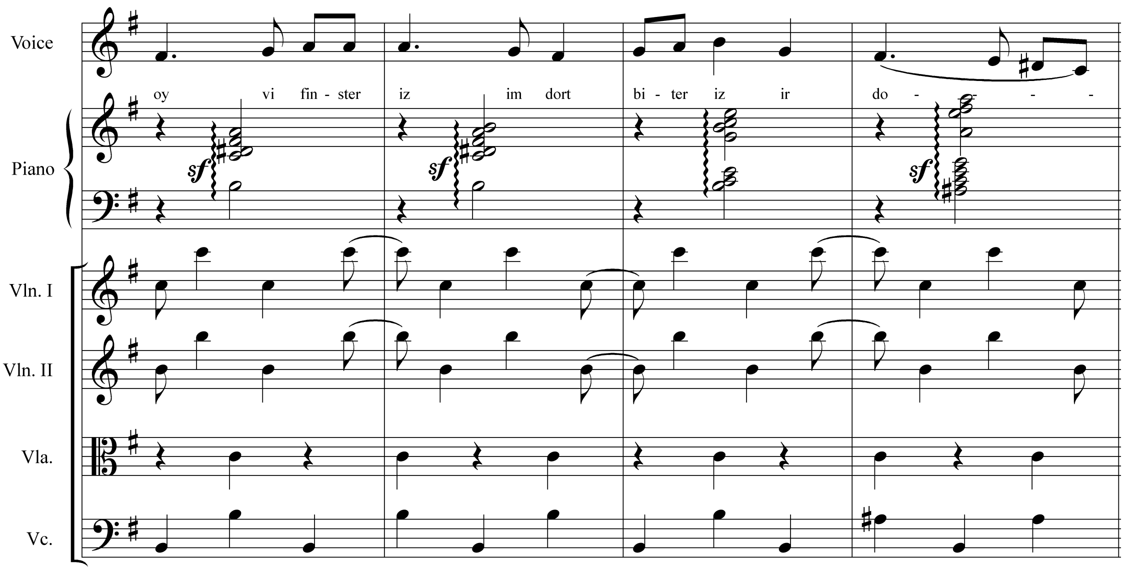
The suggestion of the ceaseless waiting for the lover's return by the percusssive-like ostinatos is disturbed only at the significant dramatic point of "her heart is saddened, pained," where the cello and violins sound like string instruments, expressing the suffering associated with waiting through the lyric descent in the cello and the melodic doubling in the violins (Example 9).


Voice
Iz far - tro - yert Rif - - ka - le yo - mert tog un nacht - - - - - -
Pno.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
mf
espress.

Example 9: Wiesenberg, *Rifkale di Shabesdike (*1987), mm. 24–27

In the third verse of the song, the strings ostinato becomes syncopated until the conclusion, against the arpeggiated chords in the piano, signifying Rifkale's ultimate despair (Example 10). The intense outbursts of *sforzando* chords and their dissonant minor seconds suggest the protagonist's eternal pain and fear.

In the third verse, Wiesenberg also takes musical/textual liberty in placing accented chords on words that do not naturally call for emphasis. In the phrase, "biter iz ir do" (example 10), the expected accent would fall on the word "biter," yet it falls on "iz." This freedom is reminiscent of Shoham's milel/milra interplay and Steinberg's disregard for the meter of his Yiddish texts.



Example 10: Wiesenberg, *Rifkale di Shabesdike* (1987). mm. 45–48

Conclusion

Even after Israelis began taking a greater interest in the cultures of the countries from which their parents and grandparents emigrated, they were generally drawn to the “eastern” cultures of neighboring countries, and not to Yiddish culture which they more closely associated with the diaspora. Nonetheless, a number of native-born Israelis have demonstrated interest in Yiddish composition, and their works are marked by a number of “Israeli” characteristics. Among these are the use at times of accents more appropriate in Hebrew than in Yiddish; the preference for motivic rather than harmonic frameworks; and a particular blend of middle eastern sonorities and traditional Jewish motifs. It is premature, however, to conclude that the seeds of Israeli Yiddish Art Song have taken root. Hopefully, a prolific repertoire of Yiddish songs will emerge through the commission of new works and as a result of the growing interest in the heritage of Jewish music.

References Cited:

1910. Ahad Ha-am. *Hashiloah*, 159-164.

1942. Churgin, Yaccov. “Eliezer Ben-Yehuda,” *Sifriyat Rishonim*, 4(1): 1-31.

1985. Cohen, Erik and Amnon Shiloah. “Major Trends in Change in Jewish Oriental Ethnic Music in Israel,” *Popular Music*, 5:199-223.

1974. Fishman, Joshua A. and Fishman, David E. “Yiddish in Israel: A Case-Study of Efforts to Revise a Monocentric Language Policy,” *Advances in the Study of Society Multilingualism*, The Hague, Mouton & Co., 1-93. .

1985-86. Harbater-Silber, Laya. “Ami Maayani and the Yiddish Art Song,” *Musica Judaica*, 8(1):75-86.

1989. Haskell, Guy H. “The Development of an Israeli Anthropological Approach to Immigration and Ethnicity: 1948-80,” *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review.* Special Issue: Folklore and Ethnography of Israeli Society, University of Pennsylvania., 2 (1-2): 19-26.

1980. Keren, Zvi. *Contemporary Israeli Music.* Tel Aviv: Bar-Ilan University Press.

1983. Maayani, Ami. *Jiddische Lieder*. Tel Aviv: Israel Music Institute.

1972. Mlotek, Eleanor. *Mir Trogen A Gezang!* New York: The Workman’s Circle Education Department.

1978. Nettl, Bruno. “Some Aspects of the History of World Music in the Twentieth Century: Questions, Problems and Concepts,” *Ethnomusicology*, 22 (1): 123-136.

1980-81. Saylor, Bruce. “The Golden Peacock: Seven Popular Songs from the Yiddish,” *Musica Judaica*, 3(1): 82-84.

1986. Seroussi, Edwin. “Politics, Ethnic Identity, and Music in Israel: The Case of the Moroccan Bakkashot,” *Asian Music*, 17(2):32-45.

1982. Slobin, Mark. *Old Jewish Folk Music: The Collections and Writings of Moshe Beregovski.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

1982. Slobin, Mark. *Tenement Songs.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

1967. Soltes, Avraham. “The Hebrew Folk Song Society of Petersburg: The Historical Development,” *The Historic Contribution of Russian Jewry to Jewish Music: National Music Jewish Council*: 22-24.

1985. Steinberg, Eitan. *Songs of Love and Site*. Tel Aviv: Israel Music Institute.

1986. Warkov, Esther. “Revitalization of Iraqi-Jewish Instrumental Traditions in Israel: The Persistent Centrality of an Outsider Tradition,” *Asian Music,* 17(2): 9-32.

1973. Weinreich, Max. *History of the Yiddish Language*. Transl. By Shlomo Noble. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1972. Wiener, Leo. *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century.* New York: Hermon Press.

1995. Zerubavel, Yael. *Recovered Roots.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.