Shir Hodu: Jewish Song from Bombay of the ‘30s

Reviewed by Michael A. Figueroa

The past few decades witnessed a growing interest in the music of the Jewish communities of India. Indeed, the emergence of the close-knit community of Indo-Judaic Studies in the academy at-large more or less coincided with this increased attention to Indian Jewish music. Sara Manasseh, an ethnomusicologist who has been at the forefront of this surge, has collaborated with record producer Julian Futter in the release of a fascinating compact disc, entitled *Shir Hodu: Jewish Song from Bombay of the ‘30s.* The CD features fifteen remastered tracks that were salvaged from a set of 78 rpm records, several of which Futter apparently discovered by chance, according to the press release for the producers’ other collaboration, *Shbahoth: Iraqi-Jewish Song from the 1920‘s* (2009). This was a significant discovery for the field of Jewish music research because, as the booklet mentions, “Until the release of this compilation it had been assumed by researchers that no recordings of Jewish music had been made in pre-independence India” (n.p.). Thus, the explicit purpose of this recording is documentary, and in this the producers have accomplished a feat of exceptional value.

The *double entente* of the title itself—Hebrew for “Song of India” or, in a slightly different pronunciation, “Song of His Glory” (i.e., “Song of Praise”)—implies a compelling collision of national and religious identities and their representation in music. The booklet opens with a brief “Social and Historical Background” section, which provides a useful introduction for listeners who are not acquainted with basic information pertaining to Indian Jewry (this may also serve as a practical summary for those having substantial experience with the material). Historically, the majority of Jews in India lived among three distinct communities: the Bene Israel of Bombay and its environs (present-day Maharashtra), the Baghdadi Jews, who came from mostly Ottoman lands to settle in Bombay but also in the urban centers of Kolkata and Pune, and the Jews of Cochin, from what is now Southern Kerala (some of whom eventually migrated to Bombay, as was the case with the Cochini musicians featured here). In a concise and undeniably lucid manner, Futter and Manasseh describe the important figures, institutions, and earliest origins of each of these groups, and, although the certainty of the more mythic of these accounts has been debated in Indo-Judaic Studies, the stories nonetheless testify to the historical and cultural depth of Indian Jewry as a set of ideas and practices, which have been firmly rooted in India for quite some time.

The most impressive information included here relates to the music and musicians featured on the 78 rpm recordings. Futter and Manasseh ease into the musical discussion with a crash course in Jewish paraliturgy and customs, as well as in the conventions of Hebrew poetics (including the popularity of acrostics in 10th-century Andalusia). Following this are separate biographies, each impressive for its concision, of every performer appearing on the CD. Much of the remaining booklet is occupied by a brief curatorial analysis of each song, with special attention paid to significant aspects, both poetic and historical, of the song texts. Appearing last before the end matter is a section providing background knowledge about the recording industry in pre-independence India, and this suitably features material about the three labels that originally released the tracks on this CD. Altogether, the data presented in the booklet outperforms much full-scale academic writing on Indian Jewish music, in both comprehensiveness and organizational coherence.

Most of the songs included on the CD are paraliturgical hymns, with the exception of two songs from the *Rosh ha-Shanah* liturgy (tracks 9 and 10) and two anthems: “*Hatikvah*” (lit. “Our Hope”), which would eventually become the national anthem of Israel, and Britain’s “God Save the King,” translated into Hebrew as “*El Shemor ha-Melekh*” (both of these are sung consecutively on track 6). As the booklet remarks, “These two recordings indicate the different loyalties and identities to which a person may subscribe—religious, cultural, national—diverse affiliations which may appear conflicting to the outsider” (n.p.). Indeed, a careful listen to this track will reveal the apparent ease with which the singer, Simeon Jacob Khariker, was able to transition between these repertories and identities. The implication of this act, however, is left to the listener’s interpretation.

In my opinion, the most interesting decision in the producers’ track selection was the inclusion of three separate versions of two songs: “*Deror Iqra*” (in three different spellings) and “*Yom Hashabbat.*” Even the most casual listener will uncover a remarkable diversity in musical style between the several versions. Take, as an example, “*Deror Iqra*” (lit. “Proclaim Freedom”; tracks 3, 8, and 14).

Track 3. Simeon Jacob Kharilker, “Deror Ikhra” (excerpt)

Track 8. Abid David, "Deror Yikra" (excerpt)

Track 14. Nathan Solomon Satimkar, "Deror Iqra" (excerpt)

Each is unique in mode/melody, instrumentation, rhythm, and, in Nathan Solomon Satamkar's version (track 14), texture. In fact, the versions presented in tracks 3 and 8 exemplify well the popularity of *contrafacta* in different Indian Jewish musical traditions. The former, according to the booklet, borrows its melody from a "Pentinental hymn" traditionally sung on *Yom Kippur*, and the latter is based on a popular Arabic song, called "*Qadukka-l-Mayyas*" ("Your Swaying Body"). This practice also persisted in Cochini Jewish songs from the 1950s and later, which were often derived from the melodies of Malayalam film songs. The purpose of *contrafacta*—the practice of setting new texts to well-known melodies—is common to several musical contexts. As Katherine Kay Shelemay argues in her study of the Syrian Jewish *pizmon* in Brooklyn, "the borrowing of whole melodies…and their rescue in situations where their original identity is also known...provides a fine example of a compositional device used to sustain memory cross-culturally" (Shelemay 1998:217). In this manner, we observe the capacity of song, in both its usage and in its formal elements, to bring together complicated histories and identities.

What is significant about the different versions of "Deror Iqra" is that they are united by a common text—a text, it should be mentioned, which is common to the whole ecumene of global Jewry. Accordingly, it would be possible to collect countless musical settings of the text in Jewish traditions across the world. Collection in this vein has been integral to Jewish music studies since its modern inception in the early decades of the twentieth century, with the pioneering research of A. Z. Idelsohn. Page after page of his *Hebräisch-orientalischer Melodienschatz* (1914-32) is filled with normalized transcriptions for the comparison of song versions from various Jewish communities. By devoting six of fifteen tracks to the purpose of comparison, the producers demonstrate a connection to Idelsohn's legacy, but there are major differences in the tenor of their respective work. Whereas the purpose of Idelsohn's research was to collect and compare songs at the periphery of global Jewry (located, oddly enough, at its center in Jerusalem), in an attempt to offer a comprehensive account of *all* Jewish music for the "preservation of the pure strain of Jewish music" (Cohon 1986:37), Futter and Manasseh embrace the possibility for comparison in order to demonstrate the level of *difference* accommodated by an open concept of Judaism—or by collective identity more broadly—not only at the level of community (i.e., between the Bene Israel and Baghdadi Jews) but also at the level of the individual. And, for this, the producers are to be commended.

A few small criticisms are also in order. I would prefer to have seen a better representation of the corpus of Zionist songs that Indian Jewish communities developed, since at the time of these recordings (the late 1930s) those songs were arguably as important to the formation of a modern Jewish identity in India as were the ancient customs. After all, by this time modern Israel, though not yet a state, was a mature idea and there were songs and institutions (labor organization *Habonim,* among others) created to amplify the hope for its realization. The inclusion of "*Hatikva*" exemplifies the extent to which some Zionist songs circulated globally, but there were also many Zionist songs composed locally in India. Of course, the extent to which they are now preserved on recorded media is questionable, and this may account for their exclusion here.

In conclusion, Futter and Manasseh have offered the listener a fascinating glimpse of music in the Jewish social life of 1930s Bombay and into the lives of the people who served as its foundation. I highly recommend this recording to specialists in Indo-Judaica, ethnomusicologists of all stripes, and others who are interested in discovering the myriad ways, in which people employ music to mediate complex webs of ethnic, religious, and national identity.

References

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