



JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES XI. MUSIC (1)

JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES OF IRAN

xi. Music

This entry is divided to two sections:

- (1) *A general survey on Persian Jewish music.*
- (2) *Specific topics on the Jewish contribution to Persian music.*

(1) A General Survey on Persian Jewish Music

This section is divided into four sub-sections: introduction, religious music, para-liturgical music, and secular Persian Jewish music.

Introduction. It is no simple task to define Persian Jewish music. First, no thorough and comprehensive research on the subject has yet been conducted. Second, Persian Jewish music cannot be entirely detached from other existing types of Persian music (see bibliog.). There are several extant works on music in Persian from the pre-modern era, most notably those of Şafi-al-Din Ormavi (d. 1294), *Qoṭb-al-Din Širāzi* (d. 1310), and ‘Abd-al-Qāder Marāġi (d. 1435). These works, however, do not shed sufficient light on the performative aspects of Persian music and its historical development. Jewish musical development



is even harder to understand, since, as far as is known, no such corpus of information exists for it prior to that of Avraham Zvi Idelsohn (see Bibliography).

Persian Jewish manuscripts yield a fair amount of religious, semi-religious, and secular poems in Hebrew and Persian, which were sung by Jews in and out of synagogues. These poems indicate the place of respect that was accorded to this type of literature in the community's cultural life. The canon of Hebrew songs and poems and their accompanying *tafsirim* (interpretations) were readily accessible to the majority of Persian Jews, and it would have been difficult to find a Jewish home in which there was no *dastak* (handy and portable note-book) containing the community's best-loved songs and poems in Judeo-Persian (Persian written in Hebrew script) and in Hebrew. The *dastak* would also have included the finest Persian poetry, written by famous classical Persian poets such as 'Omar Kayyām (Khayyam), Sa'di, and Hafez (Netzer, 1973, pp. 64-66; idem, 1982, pp. 5-19). Many Jewish shopkeepers and peddlers kept *dastaks* in their coat pockets, in case they should find themselves in the company of a few fellow Jews, or for singing for their own pleasure when they happened to be alone and far from home. The question that poses itself is, what was the nature of these songs and melodies, and what was their musical structure? This article does not presume to provide a definitive answer to the question, but rather attempts to explore the issue by considering some of the known relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish Persian music.

We have no reliable information on the way in which non-Jewish and Jewish Persian music influenced each other in ancient times. As far as is known, Persian music itself absorbed musical elements from such ancient cultures as those of India, Mesopotamia, and Greece. Moreover, Persia functioned, to a certain extent, as a bridge for musical interaction between the regions and cultures to its east and west. It may be assumed that the two musical cultures in question, the Persian and the Jewish Persian, existed independently of each other in the distant past. This type of musical independence also characterized various non-Jewish tribes and ethnic groups in such regions of Persia as Khorasan, Gilān, and Fārs. The term "Persian music" itself serves as a blanket term for a variety of traditions.

Jews were dispersed throughout Persia, and it may be assumed that they were subject to various influences. Yet, to a certain degree, their music retained its unique character. This was due to two main factors: (1) Jewish music had greater durability because it was primarily religious music; (2) the social and



cultural isolation of the Jews prevented the penetration of external influences to a certain extent. Despite these factors, it is difficult to imagine that Persian music would not penetrate into the musical experience of Persian Jews during their long sojourn in the land. This is particularly true in the light of the Iranian Jews' complete linguistic assimilation and their extensive acculturation in many other areas. It may indeed be said that Persian Jewry is more fully adapted to Persian culture than any other religious minority present in the country today with the exception of the Zoroastrians. Armenians and Assyrians, for example, not only retained their language and a good portion of their cultural heritage, but also maintained their own music, both religious and secular. In the field of poetry, however, Persian Jewry took the format and framework of Persian poetry and filled them with Jewish content (Netzer, 1973, *Introd.*, pp. 9-71; Moreen, 1996; *idem*, 2000; Yeroushalmi, 2002).

One scholar who was aware of the relationship between Persian music and Jewish Persian music, and who believed that the former influenced the latter, was Avraham Zvi Idelsohn. On the other hand, Laurence Loeb, who spent some time in Shiraz and surrounding areas (1967-68), thought that Jewish music influenced the music of Fārs, but he did not produce any convincing evidence to substantiate his statement (Loeb, 1972, p. 11). Idelsohn seems to have been the first musicologist to deal extensively with recording, analyzing, and preserving Persian Jewish synagogue music. His monumental work on Persian Jewish sacred music was produced in Palestine, mainly in Jerusalem, between 1918 and 1920. Idelsohn recorded, in the crude conditions available at that time, 134 pieces of liturgical music and collected them under the titles Sabbath and Holidays; Sliḥot (penitential prayers/hymns recited on days of fast or trouble, and especially during the month of Elul and the first days of Tishri, until the Day of Atonement); High Holy Days; Lamentations (as songs and poems sung at the synagogue); and Zmirot (songs and hymns classified as semi-religious). These works were recorded as sung by Jews from Tehran, Hamadān, Kāšān (Kashan), Isfahan, and Shiraz. Idelsohn believed that Persian Jewish liturgical music was similar in quality and form to that of the Yemenite Jews, and that it was characterized by a spirit of gloom, sorrow, pain, and grief, "particularly in the formulation of the Sliḥot and the lamentations" (Idelsohn, 1923, p. 20). The influence of Shi'ite religious melodies on Jewish Persian music remains to be studied (cf. Caron, pp. 430-40). The Persian Jewish musical tradition may be divided into three categories: (1) religious (liturgical) music, (2) para-liturgical music, and (3) secular music.



Religious music. Religious music, also referred to as synagogue music, includes Torah reading, *haftarot* (chapters from the Prophets read in the synagogue after the portion from the Torah), prayers, and all other kinds of liturgical readings that take place within the synagogue and have no instrumental accompaniment. This kind of music is usually monophonic, and to a lesser degree, responsorial. The musical readings may be performed by a *hazzan* (cantor), a *šaliyaḥ-šibur* (abbr: Shas, “community leader in religious affairs”), a rabbi or an adult Jew with a pleasant voice and knowledge of the prayer service, but never by a professional singer who supports himself as a *moṭreb*. Practitioners of this profession, who entertained the public at weddings and other rites of passage celebrations, were considered as having a low social status by both Muslims and Jews, and their occupation as a demeaning one.

Synagogue melodies were preserved from external influence to a greater degree than the other types of musical traditions mentioned above. It appears, however, that even this citadel could be breached occasionally, whether via the mass media or by means of scholars and rabbis from Palestine who visited Persia, or Persian Jews who studied for the rabbinate outside the country of their birth. For example, Rabbi David Shofet (b. 1939 in Kāšān) of the Abrišami Synagogue in Tehran taught boys Sephardic melodies for the reading of sacred texts, and liturgical and para-liturgical poems.

The melody accompanying the Torah reading and the prayers (ritual reading) is Persian in character and structure, and a connection may be discerned between it and the melodies (Pers. *guša*) of one of the modes (Pers. *dastgāhs*) of Persian classical music. Despite the existence of a relationship between the two musical traditions, the Persian Jewish ritual melody is not identical with Persian classical music. The technique of yodeling (*čahčah* or *taḥrir*) is forbidden in ritual reading. Some well-known melodies of the Persian modes, such as the Baḳtiāri *guša* of the mode [Homāyun](#), or the Ġamangiz *guša* of the Dašti mode, have not been heard in Jewish-Persian ritual songs.

Based on recordings that the present author had made of some Jewish residents of Isfahan and other cities in Iran in the two decades after 1973, ritual readings are performed within the tetrachord scale. Within this range there are usually three or four tones, including quarter-tones (*sori* and *koron*). These melodies may be assigned to Persian musical modes, primarily Dašti, Abu-‘Aṭā, Afšāri, Bayāt-e Tork, Šur, Bayāt-e Ešfahān, Homāyun, Segāh, and Čahārgāh. However, cantors and other Torah readers are not, for the most part, familiar with these modes. It should be emphasized that transcribing the



melodic reading of worshipers into musical notation is not easy, since it is almost impossible to anticipate its order and sequence, even within the framework of a specific, defined scale. Moreover, the cantor, when repeating the verses, reads them in an order and succession of different intervals, and also may move from a modal framework of one scale to another scale, all without being aware of these changes. The congregation does not react to these “deviations,” since it is concerned only with the correct chanting of the verses by a reader, but the changes cannot be drastic and qualitative. For example, the cantor is forbidden to use the yodeling (*čahčah*) technique, he cannot span an entire octave or more, and he cannot incorporate known melodies from the broad spectrum of those melodies (*gušas*) or *tašnifs* known to the general public.

Tempo and meter are difficult to analyze in studies of this type of vocal music. It is hard for the researcher to monitor the frequency of changes in tempo and meter in prayers and the melodic chanting of Torah verses. Even poems and songs classified as liturgical (which by their nature are supposed to be rhythmical and metrical) are prone to changes in meter and tempo. A melody is usually syllabic, that is, each written syllable is meant to correspond to a sound, but toward the end of each line the reader or the cantor breaks into an improvised passage of several notes sung to one syllable of text (*melisma*) whose purpose is usually to return the tone to the *finalis*. An insistence on retaining the *finalis* makes it somewhat easier to assign the melody correctly to a scale that corresponds to one of the Persian classical musical modes (*dastgāhs*). It should be also noted that their positioning and their character are generally dependent upon the subjective mood of the cantor.

Para-liturgical music. This type of music includes songs and poems sung on Sabbath and holidays outside of the synagogue or, infrequently, in the synagogue, usually in Hebrew, and occasionally accompanied by an interpretation (*tafsir*). This type of song was more likely than liturgical music to have been influenced by Persian classical music. In several Judeo-Persian manuscripts, preserved in the collection at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the names of the Persian *dastgāhs* are written above the Hebrew songs and poems and their *tafsirim*, indicating that they were sung to these melodies. In everyday practice, however, not everyone was strict about adhering to the melodies, and not everyone was familiar with the entire *dastgāh* system, since such familiarity required musical skill and training. It is likely that a poem meant to be sung to a specific tune was sung to a different



one, or that during the course of the singing changes would be made to the melody. Usually more attention was paid to the pleasantness of the singer's voice than to the melodic rules. Sometimes a Hebrew poem would have a melody different from that of its Persian *tafsir* (see the notations of the melodies recorded in Isfahan and in Israel between 1973 and 1983 in Netzer, 1984, pp. 174-81).

The verses of the songs and poems included in this type follow metrical conventions and were probably intended to be sung with meter and tempo, but there is no consistent adherence to these prosodic-musical elements. Here, as with religious music, the tones do not deviate from a tetrachord range; quarter-tones and improvised melismatic ornamentation are incorporated into the singing.

In para-liturgical music free use may be made of familiar secular melodies from Persian classical music, and they may have instrumental accompaniment, usually the *tombak* (chalice drum) and the *daf(f)* with or without chimes. In this way para-liturgical music differs significantly from religious music. Such permissiveness does not, however, apply to songs and poems sung in mourning situations, or those which are in the style of lamentations, *slihot*, supplications, etc.

Secular music. Persian Jewish secular songs are in Persian and are intended for non-religious events, but they are also sometimes used for events with some connection to religious practice, such as circumcision ceremonies, or to occasions possessing some religious content, such as the well-known wedding song (see Netzer, 1984, p. 178, song no. 17; idem, 1996, pp. 107-14; Soroudi, 1982, pp. 204-64; Houman Sarshar, pp. 237-59). These songs are similar in character and quality to local and regional Persian songs called *tarānahā-ye maḥalli*. The melodies of this type of Persian Jewish music are Persian in their scale structure, but a listener sensitive to Persian music can discern the unique Jewish character of at least some of them, particularly in the case of the aforementioned wedding song.

Secular songs are not meant to be sung at the synagogue, but rather at home, on Sabbath and holidays within the context of joyous events. The most important and central oeuvre sung throughout the year, on Sabbath and holidays, at weddings, circumcisions, and other events is that of Šāhin, the great Jewish poet of the 14th century. Iranian Jewry is not lacking in works of poetry of its own in Persian, authored by such Jewish poets as 'Emrāni,



Benyāmin ben Mišā'il Kāšāni, called [Aminā](#), and Simān-Ṭov Melammed, and others.

There are secular songs common to all, or nearly all, of the Persian communities, such as the wedding song mentioned above. There are also songs specific to certain communities and unknown to others, such as the [Kākšuri](#) song, sung in the Jewish dialect of Isfahan and unique to the Jewish community of that city (Netzer, 1982, pp. 180-203).

Of the three types of Persian Jewish music, it is the secular which is the most likely to disappear, for three main reasons: first, unlike religious music, secular music lacks staying power; second, a very large number of secular songs and melodies sung on radio and television serve as alternatives to the specifically Jewish secular songs and are taking their place; and third, Iranian Jews, particularly the younger generation, associate these songs with ghetto life, and they have a similar attitude toward the Jewish dialects that they speak. Many Jewish families, particularly the more affluent, prefer to hire Persian singers for their weddings and to listen to modern and classical Persian music, and regard the playing of Jewish music as somewhat *infra dig* and detrimental to their social standing.

For a music sample, see [Yom le'yom](#).

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