

DIASPORAS AND GLOBAL MUSICAL NETWORKS: JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, still present in our lives as I carve these lines, dictates not only daily routines but also scholarly concerns. Thus, global musical networks, the subject of this essay, should be a pertinent concern for musicologists today more than ever before. If we needed a tangible proof of human interdependence at a global level, then this boundless health crisis showed the full extent to which human civilization is hyper-connected. However, one should not turn the idea of connectivity into an exclusively modern phenomenon. Humans interacted with each other from the dawn of evolution. What changed in our times is simply the intensity of such interdependence generated by new transportation and information flow technologies.

Music is not immune to such transformative processes. Therefore, human connectivity is also an essential ingredient of a global vision of history and of music history in particular. Music studies are relatively latecomers to the idea of global history as a conceptual framework of research but not in practice, as I shall comment on a moment. The establishment of a Study Group at ICTM dedicated to a global history of music is a response to a new paradigm in the “economy of historical knowledge,” namely, how we speak and write about music history.¹ Yet, many members of ICTM have been addressing music history from global perspectives ever since its establishment in 1947 without profiling what they did by this name. Brief remarks on global history in general precede the main concept discussed in this paper, diaspora and its pertinence to global music history.

Keywords

Diaspora culture, Musical networks, Interdependencies, Jewish perspectives, Global vision

The “global turn” in historical studies was patent already in the 1990s, following the rapid expansion of the Internet, the (apparent) end of the Cold War, and a sense of loosening of national paradigms in favor of global systems of governance, such as international courts of law or climate change initiatives. Yet, this conceptual framework refers more to academic discourses rather than to work “on the ground” because the concept of a “universal” or “world” history could be traced back at least to the 18th century. These old “universal histories,” written in Western Europe, positioned Western Europe as the central force driving human civilization forward. In contrast, contemporary global history emerged from post-colonial sensitivities that stressed asymmetrical power relations between center and peripheries, North and South, white people, and all others, not only in history but also in historiography. Global history in its new guise is, from this perspective, a much-needed corrective to the dominant historical narratives written in the European metropolis that downgraded the non-Western subject to a secondary, passive role.

¹ The author teaches at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This article is based on a keynote address read at the 1st Symposium of the International Council of Traditional Music (ICTM) Study Group on Global History of Music held at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music, People’s Republic of China, May 12, 2021. The author wrote ‘I thank the organizing committee of the Symposium, especially my most esteemed colleague Prof. Razia Sultanova, and our hosts at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music in the People’s Republic of China for extending this invitation to me’.

Similarly, the History of Music was by default the history of certain genres of Western European music associated with the aristocratic elites and the Church. It was dictated by a Hegelian concept of progress and, since the 19th century, it hailed a chain of “great composers” as the main agents of perpetual stylistic transformation. To a readership interested in music scholarship, I do not need to detail any further this Eurocentric concept of music history still prevailing in the curricula of many music schools across the globe.² Curricula, of course, is not the exclusive realm in which Eurocentrism reigns but only the forefront of systemic biases.³

As an aftermath to the “global turn” in History, recent music scholarship has challenged the Eurocentric concept of music history and its historiographical products by bringing the music of non-European Others and global perspectives into the narrative on music interactions across time and space. Two products of this new paradigm of music history studies are *The Cambridge History of World Music* (Bohlman, 2016) and *Studies on a global history of music*, a product of the 2012 Balzan Prize in musicology project entitled *Towards a global history of music* and directed by Professor Reinhard Strohm (Strohm, 2018). A discussion of the nuanced difference between the titles of these works, “history of world music” versus “global history of music” is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that the semantics of these titles conceal different strategies for addressing the diachronic development of the music of all humanity.

However, as hinted earlier, a global approach to music is certainly not a newcomer to musicology. In his introductory remarks to *Towards a global history of music*, Martin Stokes discusses four sub-disciplines of or approaches to music research that have attempted to tackle the evolution of music from a global or at least cross-cultural perspective:

1) Comparative musicology saw music history in terms of the inexorable “ascent of the west,” making it complicit with the racial crimes of colonialism. Yet, it had a universalist vision, especially in its psychological emphasis on the shared foundations of human musical cognition.

2) Ethnomusicology, reacting to comparative musicology, favored synchronic and functionalist modes of explanation within specific cultures from around the globe rather than historical ones. Therefore, ethnomusicology has failed to recognize the necessarily *historical* nature of the ethnographic inquiry. If some music cultures have no history, argues Stokes, then some may have something to gain from having one.

3) Post-colonial theory in musicology, an outgrowth of the New Musicology of the 1990s, denied the possibility of historical knowledge that is separable from the contexts of global power relations. Consequently, according to this school of thought, history cannot be extracted from its inherent “orientalism.” Therefore, one of its main goals was to recuperate the historical agency of the non-West.

4) Globalization posited many “end of history” scenarios, therefore suggesting that the compression of time and space characteristic of late capitalism generated a series of cross-cultural alignments at the sub-cultural, inter-cultural, and supra-cultural levels. Approaches to music history ranged from totalizing to fragmentizing ones, i.e., from those erasing constraints of time and place to those stressing those concerns.

Considering this continuous engagement of music scholarship from its very beginnings with a global vision of music history one may ask following Stokes, “how we might think *historically* across music cultures, as well as globally” (Stokes, 2018).

² In very recent years, this subject has been at the center of heated polemics in musicological circles and beyond, especially in the USA. From the vast critical literature that this reckoning over Eurocentrism in academic music studies has generated, I would recommend the essay by Levitz (2018) as an introduction.

³ Levitz (2018: 46) is careful to warn that “the current focus on curriculum may be, in part, a diversion that allows academic musicologists to evade the job market crisis, class and racial inequality in higher education, the erosion of their profession, and labor injustices.”

Diaspora can be a very productive concept for global music history, and I shall address it here from a global micro-historical perspective. Within the “global turn” in history, the term “global microhistory” has recently gained currency. “Rich in promise, it unites the historiographical interest in microhistory that emerged in the 1980s with the global history paradigm that came to prominence in the 1990s. Is this proposed marriage a matter of giving microhistory a new lease on life by making it take the “global turn” that it had neglected? Or is it a question of giving an epistemological second wind to a global history that is struggling to clarify its boundaries, objectives, and methods?” (Bertrand and Calafat, 2018). As one learns from this quote, there is a crisis of identity in relation to what global history really means at the epicenter of historical research.

What global micro-history brings into the equation is a “connected history” that engages “objects specific to global history—diasporas, circulations, contact situations—but endeavors to capture them ‘at ground level,’ with the tools of microanalysis and a concern to replace an explanatory approach with an interpretative method better able to capture the motives of all the actors involved.” Global micro-history emphasizes scenes and sites of intensive interaction, especially early modern or “first” globalization” ones, “global lives” i.e., the biographies of cultural intermediaries, brokers, or go-betweens, and “the plural and conflicting fabric of localities within overarching political entities (i.e. empires)” (Bertrand and Calafat, 2018: 7).

Jews as musicians fulfill most of these criteria making them ideal subjects of global micro-histories of music. What turned Jews into such subjects is their living in a perpetual diasporic condition. In his critique of the use of the concept of diaspora in music studies, Mark Slobin (2012) pointed out that this term “is heavily contextual.” It can mean a blessing or a threat, an ideal or a curse. The term refuses standardization and ethnomusicological studies have used and abused while “spiraling out of control.” He warned us particularly of the over-metaphorical applications of the term that detach it from the actual bodies of the displaced individuals. He concluded that diaspora is most effective as an explanatory tool when applied to “the existence of an identified population that feels that it is away from its homeland, however imagined, however distant in time and space,” and more subtly, that “it involves more than demographics ... some sort of consciousness of separation, a gap, a disjuncture must be present” (Slobin, 2012). This “diasporic condition” as defined by Slobin is systematically associated with the Jewish people although by no means is unique to them, as shown for example, by Timothy Rommen about the Caribbean diasporas, the result of displacements generated by violent colonial forces (Rommen, 2016).

However, diasporas run deep into the past. Even the biblical Israelites, the ancestors of the post-biblical Jews, were forced out of their geographical center in the Land of Canaan, later on the Land of Israel/Palestine, most notably eastwards toward Mesopotamia (Babylon) due to the exile imposed by the Assyrians in the late 7th century BCE. The musical longing of the Israelites in their Babylonian captivity for the songs of the land of their ancestors is voiced in Psalm 137 (“By the rivers of Babylon,” verse 4: “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”). The post-exilic reconstruction in the Land of Israel and the rebuilding of the Second Temple of Jerusalem (ca. 516 BCE–70 ACE) did not obliterate the diaspora. Musically speaking, the diaspora reached the homeland sonically, as the elaborate choral and orchestral pageantry of the Temple probably drew its inspiration from Mesopotamian models (Smith, 2011: 110–116). Even during this restorative era, not all Israelites chose to return “home.” They continue to dwell from the delta of the Nile and Western Anatolia to the shores of the Euphrates and the Tigris and Persia, well beyond the limited territories their brethren controlled around Jerusalem.

The destruction of the Israelite spiritual center, the Temple of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, was the event that ended any hope of Israelite territorial autonomy. The rather remarkable number of Jews who remained and flourished in the Eastern Roman province of Palestine, later on within the Byzantine Empire, renounced restorative aspirations. During this period, the consolidation of rabbinical Judaism was based on the theological assumption that diaspora was a permanent existential

fate for Jews until divine redemption would redeem them and facilitate the return to their land as a sovereign people.

The triumphal rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire and the rise of Islam in the early 7th century CE divided the Jews into two main diasporas, namely, an Arabic-speaking and a Greek and later on Latin-speaking ones. Under the Abode of Islam and Christendom, Judaism flourished through the medieval and modern periods. Jews maintained an allegiance to their homeland expressed, for example, in their daily prayers while, at the same time, embedding themselves in the cultures of the societies in which they dwelled. As historian David N. Myers has summed it up, Jews could “adapt to new environments without losing a distinctive sense of cultural self” (Myers, 2017: xxiii). While a return to the homeland remained, until the early 20th century, an unattainable hope (and for many an undesirable aspiration), Jews maintained extensive networks of communication along continents for two millennia. Their intense mobility, by desire or by force, turned them into agents of musical globalization.

In considering how and why the movements of Jews in their shifting diasporas are relevant to our discussion, one should notice that music-making became a significant occupation for diasporic Jews for an array of reasons that vary in time and place. This aspect of the Jewish diaspora is important when considering Jewish musicians as active agents of globalization processes in the distant and not-so-distant past. The proportionately large number of Jews nourished this agency in the music field in their host societies. The image of Jews as prodigiously gifted musicians compared to their counterparts in the surrounding population is a well-known *topos*. It derives from diverse social processes, such as the low status of musicians in Muslim societies (that left music-making in the hands of religious and ethnic minorities in their midst) or music-making becoming one of the few open venues for social mobility (as it occurred in Europe since the mid-19th century; see, Loeffler, 2010).⁴ This musical specialization led to the creation of Jewish musical networks across vast geographical areas.

Jewish musical connectivity along distances is documented from the medieval to the modern period. There is no more productive space to exemplify the connectivity of the Jewish diaspora in terms of the circulation of musical capitals than the Mediterranean and its Sephardic (Spanish and Portuguese-speaking) and Musta'arab (Arabic-speaking) Jewish network of settlements. Mediterranean is used figuratively, for it reaches as far east as Baghdad and as far north as Amsterdam, London, and Hamburg. Scholarship has tied this transnational Mediterranean Jewish diaspora to successful commercial networks that capitalized on family connections and extra-Jewish networks. Braudel pointed out another “secret” of the alleged success of this trans-imperial diaspora. According to him, Jews were “born interpreters of all speech,” exploiting their native multilingualism to become much-needed translators (Braudel, 1995: 809).

Trivellato (2009: 50, 73) proposed the notion of “communitarian cosmopolitanism” to describe how clear boundaries between Jews and Catholics facilitated cultural and economic contacts around the extended Mediterranean. Jewish converts to Catholicism and their descendants (*Conversos*), who often moved back and forth between Jewish and Christian identities, are emblematic of the porous borders in which families of musicians of Jewish origins navigated. Families of musicians such as the Bassanos from Venice and later London (Ruffati, 1996) and the Duartes from Antwerp (Rasch, 1995; Weinfield, 2019) played a role in the circulation of musical expertise across early modern Western Europe.

However, there were other reasons for this constant circulation of Jewish bodies and their musical knowledge between the extreme ends of this diaspora, between Al-Andalus, the Iberian Peninsula and the Maghreb in the West, and Cairo, Aleppo and Baghdad in the East. Religious motivations of at least three kinds enhanced movement. One is acquiring knowledge in the most prestigious education and political power centers. Second is appealing to supra-territorial higher courts when the

⁴ In the modern European context this image is tied to anti-Semitic stereotypes (see Gilman, 2008). For Jewish musicians in the Islamicate, see Seroussi (2006).

local authorities fell short of providing convincing rulings. The final one is Jewish pilgrimage to the Holy Land and other holy sites.

A modern example of this type of individual musical trajectories within diasporic Jewish spaces vividly illustrates the accumulation of compound musical capitals and their circulation since the distant past, becoming a classic micro-historical case study. Yehiel Adaqi (1903–1980), a Yemenite Jewish musician and singer, was one of the earlier brokers of arguably Yemenite Jewish music in Israel.⁵ A chain of movements and encounters that filtered Adaqi's musical baggage mediated his transfer of musical lore from Yemen to Israel, enriching it with stylistic features that deviate from the "authentic" Yemenite Jewish soundscape imagined by European Jewish musicians and music scholars as a sonic remnant of ancient national glories in exile.⁶ In other words, European-born Jewish musicians in Palestine/Israel who interacted with Adaqi as a reliable source of quintessential Yemenite Jewish music since the 1920s were unaware of the textured heritage this musician carried with him from his early years.

Adaqi's fascinating oral autobiography reveals a breathtaking transnational journey, one in which escape and adventure intersects with theological ideology. Most importantly for our argument, we learn from it about a young gifted singer who was exposed to multiple musical experiences in different places before becoming a representative of a venerable musical tradition in a new society in the making. Being born in Manakha in the Haraz Mountains of central Yemen, Adaqi was the only child, who was orphaned by his father at an early age. He was educated in a traditional religious Jewish schooling in the capital city of San'a, the main Jewish center in Yemen. At the age of nine, he learned the craft of silversmith, a very common Jewish occupation and went on to work in order to support his mother and himself while continuing his religious studies at night.

In 1920, Adaqi's life took a sharp turn when economic and political crisis hit Yemen. He turned to minting coins for a rebel prince, a profitable but dangerous enterprise that eventually forced him to escape once politics turned against his interests. After being released from jail and extorted by tax collectors, he decided to escape with the assistance of a friend to the port of Aden, a British outpost from where he planned to immigrate to Palestine. The long tortuous journey took him through the Horn of Africa, Egypt, Libya, and the Arabian Peninsula before making it to British Mandate Palestine. In each station, he was exposed to different Jewish liturgical music traditions that he willingly absorbed.

We learn about Adaqi's musical skills from his own narrative. During the magical nightly camel caravan to Aden, he remembers, he performed camel drivers' songs that he learned as a teenager from water drawers in San'a catching the attention of the caravan's guide, who was "crazy" about his voice. This testimony means that he was conversant in non-Jewish musical repertoires as well. In Aden, he organized a special midnight prayer with other Jewish refugees from Central Yemen, creating a performative space that was new to the Adeni Jews who are perceived as musically different from other Yemenite Jews. Adaqi introduced himself as the bearer of a venerable liturgical music tradition that has not been exposed to external (read Ottoman and British colonial) influences.

From Aden, he is lured to move to Djibouti, then under French colonial administration, and from there to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia where a rich family of Yemenite Jews hosted him. After getting sick and recovering from malaria, he moved to Asmara in Eritrea, under the Italian colonial administration. There he learned the Jewish liturgy for the High Holy Days from a Yemenite rabbi

⁵ His biography can be consulted in <https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/yehiel-Adaki> based on information provided by Adaqi's son. For a detailed account of his early life, see Ben-Nun (2019). Several anecdotes mentioned below appear in Ben-Nun's publication. Adaqi has attracted the interest of scholars before. For his interactions with the most prominent Israeli ethnomusicologists who studied Yemenite Jewish music, see Bahat (1979), and especially Adaqi and Sharvit (1981).

⁶ The classical formulation of this idea is found in the copious scholarship on Yemenite Jewish music and poetry by musicologist, composer, and teacher Abraham Zvi Idelsohn who was active in Ottoman and British Palestine from 1907 to 1921. See, for example, Idelsohn (1914). For the persistent permeation of traditional Yemenite music into Israeli contemporary art music, see Shelleg (2021). For the conceptualization of Yemenite Jewry in modern Jewish culture beyond music, see Gerber (2013). See also the short but incisive remarks by Wagner (2009, ch. 8, especially pp. 278–282) who also mentioned Adaqi's role as mediator.

from his hometown of Manakha, who became wealthy by a silversmith and was appointed as president of the Jewish community. Three years later, he illegally arrived to Port Sa'id, and then moved to Alexandria and Cairo. In Cairo, where he spent a year and a half, he often visited the Hanan synagogue. The sexton of the synagogue was impressed with his voice and taught him Sephardic (i.e., Eastern Mediterranean) *hazzanut* (cantorial art), which is a different musical tradition than the ones he commanded. To summarize, when he arrived to Palestine in the eve of Passover, the Festival of Freedom, in April 1926, Adaqi had experienced the soundscapes of four colonial territories, namely, Ottoman, British, French, and Italian to where the Yemenite diaspora expanded amid his musical training of youth in central Yemenite, the Horn of Africa and Cairo.

Adaqi was a mediator, a connector, and a creator. His movements throughout several Jewish diasporas are intercontinental and trans-imperial. His absorption, elaboration, and transmission of music informed the orientalist imagination of European Jewish composers who settled in British Palestine and dictated how the Yemenite Jewish sound, imagined by these composers to have remained immovable for two millennia, took shape within the young State of Israel. In turn, this Yemenite sound made in Israel would reverberate back in the American Jewish diaspora as an index of the new musical Israeliness. At present, this Yemenite Jewish/Israeli sound is on a more global scale as one of many “exotic” tracks in the recording studio of the “world music” industry (Erez and Karkabi 2019).

Adaqi was a Jewish musical globetrotter, but only one out of many such agents who were active throughout history. Even China, the country that hosted the first meeting of the ICTM Study Groups on Global Music History in which the present paper was first presented, became, due to historical circumstances, a destination for wandering Jewish musicians. During the 1930s and 1940s, displaced German, Austrian, Polish, and Russian Jewish musicians seeking a safe haven from hostile social and political scenes became agents in transferring European popular and avant-garde art music practices to then occupied Shanghai.⁷ Jewish diasporas offer then inspiring case studies of how global micro-historical research can be carried out in the future by students of Global Music History.

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⁷ The studies by Tang Yating (2004) and Christian Utz (2004), in the volume titled “Silk, Spice and Shirah: Musical Outcomes of Jewish Migration into Asia c. 1780-c. 1950” (*Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 1). More than 20,000 Jews who took refuge in the city during World War II have their stories chronicled at the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. Among them were 200 professional musicians who taught many Chinese children—some of whom became prominent. In 2021, a musical about these Jewish musicians produced and directed by Gao Xiang was announced online: <https://english.eastday.com/Shanghai/auto/u1ai8703080.html>, last accessed April 29, 2022.

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