

“Behind the Sounds”: Matti Caspi, Shlomo Gronich, and the Politics of Genre in Israel

MICHAEL A. FIGUEROA

The relation between poetry and song has long interested music scholars, but what if we were to view the intersection of the two as the very crucible in which genre is forged? Beginning in the early 1970s, several prominent figures within the Israeli popular music industry made a concerted effort to promote a body of songs known as *shirei meshorerim*, or “songs of poets,” through radio broadcasts, live festivals, television programs, and commercial recordings. In 1972, 1973, and 1980, the Israeli army radio station Galei Tzahal, a powerful media outlet for popular music broadcasting, hosted a trilogy of special programs called *Erev Shirei Meshorerim* (Evening of songs of poets). The station producers invited songwriters to set canonical or recently composed poetry to music. In addition to the broadcasted programs, the radio station ran editions of the Festival of Songs of Poets in each of those years presenting the musicians and their new songs to live public audiences.

On one level, this was not a novel project. The practice of setting poetry to music was already a defining feature of Israeli popular music prior to the 1970s, as was the case both with Mediterranean song traditions in France (*chanson*), Greece (*rembetiko* and *entechno*), and Italy (*canzone d'autore*) and with trends emanating from the British Isles and North America.¹ As in the Italian music industry, studied by Marco Santoro and

¹ I use Motti Regev's phrasing “pop-rock” to denote the genre's status as “a resource in the formation of aesthetic cosmopolitanism, in the re-figuration of world culture” and whose “style and genres become objects of interactions, building blocks that afford individual and collective actors the arrangement and construction of life-worlds, of ways of

Marco Solaroli, Israeli songs were “the final product of a collective manufacturing process that clearly distinguished between creative and performing roles.”² On another level, however, *shirei meshorerim* represented a self-conscious attempt to associate Israeli pop-rock music in the early 1970s with the prestige conferred on popular music associated with poetry on an international level. In France, for example, Dimitris Papanikolaou has shown that “specific notions of ‘poetry’ and the ‘poetic’ have been used as basic instruments for the construction of a firm genealogy of French singer-songwriters over the last fifty years, and for a classification of the upper echelons of French popular music.”³ The popular song genres formed around *auteurs-compositeurs-interprètes*, *cantautori*, and singer-songwriters in the French, Italian, and US music industries of the 1950s and 1960s—involving figures identified with the music-poetry complex, such as George Brassens, Fabrizio De André, Bob Dylan, and others—prefigured changes in Israeli musical culture.

Like its international counterparts, *shirei meshorerim* was “a conscious attempt to elevate the literary aspect of SLI [songs of the land of Israel] by choosing texts by *serious* writers.”⁴ This rethinking of *shirei erts Israel* (“songs of the land of Israel”)—the dominant popular song genre associated with national culture through the *Yishuv* period of Jewish settlement in Palestine (1880s–1948) and the early years following the establishment of the state in 1948—went hand in hand with a shift away from the Hebrewism (*Ivriyut*, also known as *tarbut Ivrit* or “Hebrew culture”) of early Israeli cultural production, in which musical settings of poems had served as a de rigueur compositional practice in Zionist circles. The musicians involved with *shirei meshorerim* were drawn instead toward “emerging variants of Israeliness [*Isra'eliyut*]” following the State of Israel’s maturation as a regional power after the Six-Day War of 1967.⁵ Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi characterize this shift “not as a straightforward revolt against Hebrewism, but as an attempt to modernize it, to make Israeliness less separatist and more open to contemporary world

being in the world.” Motti Regev, *Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 4. For a fuller discussion of the modern Mediterranean circulation of song styles, see Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets: Literature and Popular Music in France and Greece* (London: Legenda, 2007). For more on how Anglophone discourses on popular song influenced songwriting in practices in Israel, see Michael A. Figueroa, “Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Dan Almagor and Rock Ideology in Israeli Musical Theatre,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 25 (2016): 261–82.

² Marco Santoro and Marco Solaroli, “Authors and Rappers: Italian Hip Hop and the Shifting Boundaries of *Canzone d’Autore*,” *Popular Music* 26 (2007): 463–88, at 466.

³ Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets*, 11.

⁴ Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 65 (emphasis added).

⁵ Regev and Seroussi, *Popular Music*, 16.

culture.”⁶ The move away from aesthetic collectivity was also mirrored in working practices: in musical terms this resulted in a proliferation of stylistic borrowing that evinced an increasingly global approach to Israeliness as well as an eventual move toward the musician-as-auteur model engendered by the European traditions from which Israeli musicians drew.

The international musical currents flowing through this movement entered via Galei Tzahal, which had joined the Israeli Broadcast Authority in 1956 after six years of unregulated broadcast. By 1972 it was one of three official radio stations, the others being Kol Israel (the main official station) and Reshet B, which was founded in 1960.⁷ Standing apart from the other state radio stations, Galei Tzahal was run by and for post-adolescent soldiers and was the media channel associated with youth culture, with its appetite for global music and development of Hebrew slang through polyglot appropriations and *portmanteaux*. The station was a significant conduit for the importation of music from outside of Israel, such as Anglo-American rock and traditions from Europe and Latin America, that underwent significant localization. The station had its finger on the pulse of global musical movements, reoriented the listening habits of the post-1967 generation, and helped generate the eclectic compositional strategies of pop-rock and *shirei meshorerim*. The self-styled cosmopolitanism of the radio station’s personnel differentiated Galei Tzahal from both the other radio stations and the nascent state-run television broadcasting that had begun in 1968 and almost singularly focused on educational programming geared toward solidifying a concept of citizenship known as *mamlakhtiyut*, or Israeli “republicanism,” according to the Labor Zionist political apparatus and the Israel Broadcast Authority.⁸

Within this context, the phrase *shirei meshorerim* (hereafter SM) came to denote a subgenre of pop-rock that differed from other genres not so much in attributes of musical style as in its explicit literary character and cultural association with poetry, thus creating an analogy between music—the cultural field most obviously tasked with producing a national culture in the first decades of Israeli statehood, often under the guise

⁶ Regev and Seroussi, *Popular Music*, 18.

⁷ See Andrea L. Stanton, *This Is Jerusalem Calling: State Radio in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).

⁸ Amit M. Schejter, *Muting Israeli Democracy: How Media and Cultural Policy Undermine Free Expression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009). The state held a monopoly on television broadcasting from its introduction to Israel in 1968 until 1993. Nir Kedar defines *mamlakhtiyut* as “a normative expression that stresses ‘state consciousness,’ i.e. society’s ability to construct a civilized sovereign polity based on the respect of democracy, law, and civic values.” This issue of normativity is paramount to understanding how media broadcasting disseminated ideas of citizenship vis-à-vis Israeli national culture prior to and across the divide of 1967. Nir Kedar, “Ben-Gurion’s *Mamlakhtiyut*: Etymological and Theoretical Roots,” *Israel Studies* 7, no. 3 (2002): 117–33, at 117.

of SLI—and modern Hebrew literature, whose institutionalization closely aligned with the interests of the country's cultural elite. In effect, the SM programming created a distinct genre out of an otherwise customary division of labor in the Israeli music industry while at the same time self-consciously articulating emergent forms of Israeliness that were intended to depart in significant ways from the emphasis on unified collectivity that characterized Israeli cultural production prior to the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In this article, I argue that SM's development was characterized by an aesthetic distinction, wherein the high cultural register of poetry—a value produced by both the domestic discourse on art vis-à-vis politics and the broader global discourse in which the local field was embedded—and an associated move to cosmopolitanize music production contributed to the “cultural accreditation” of post-1967 pop-rock in Israel.⁹ What follows is an exploration into what poetry meant for song, and vice versa, in Israel during the 1970s and 1980s, using a combination of sociopolitical analysis and close listening to the text-setting practices and stylistic affinities of two musicians strongly identified with SM: Matti Caspi and Shlomo Gronich.

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Many songwriters and performers were active in the proliferation of SM, and they operated across a range of musical styles. I have chosen to focus on the work of Caspi and Gronich here not because it is most emblematic of a general “SM sound” (which, in any case, does not exist) but rather for three reasons: (1) these two figures have been most visibly active in the propagation and promotion of SM through their recordings, festival performances, and other types of participation in SM programming, extending even into the first decades of the twenty-first century as they actively curate SM's legacy; (2) they exemplify the ways in which SM manifested the wider currents of the changing sociopolitical context of the 1970s via their stylistic choices; and (3) their aspiration to musical sophistication through adapting styles and studio techniques from other cosmopolitan genres helped to support the cultural accreditation at the heart of pop-rock SM.

Pop-Rock SM and the Development of Israeli Songwriting

In the liner notes for a 1994 compilation album commemorating the success of Galei Tzahal's SM programming, the station's director of culture, arts, and entertainment, Muli Shapira, reflected on the project:

⁹ I borrow the phrase “cultural accreditation” from Jay Keister and Jeremy L. Smith, “Musical Ambition, Cultural Accreditation and the Nasty Side of Progressive Rock,” *Popular Music* 27 (2008): 433–55.

The Evenings of SM, which were edited and produced by Galei Tzahal during the 1970s and 1980s with a desire to renew the word in Israeli songwriting, prompted a public debate at the time: alongside the many accolades, some have argued that SM are not suitable for composition, and, beyond the publicity gimmick, these pretentious productions would not last into the future. Galei Tzahal's years of insistence on the issue, over the course of a decade, have proven justified. Many of Galatz's [Galei Tzahal's] SM songs have long become assets in the Israeli song canon, but mainly caused a wave of SM compositions by many creators, and thus Israeli music was enriched with valuable texts. On the CD before you, we present a selection from Galatz's Evenings of SM.¹⁰

The SM project did facilitate the creation of some classics within the Israeli song canon that pushed against what Shapira and his collaborators perceived as being the stylistic boundaries of politically legitimate and commercially successful music in Israel. But the project's desire to "renew" (*latet me'amad meh'udash*, "to give renewed status") the place of "the word" in Israeli songwriting was more an example of institutionalization than of innovation: poetry and poets had always been central to Israeli songwriting. During the pre-state *Yishuv* era, Hebrew song was primarily functional—serving the ends of Zionist nation-building and bolstering Hebrewism—and occupied a liminal space between "two opposed systems: the 'light' song (termed *pizmon* [pl. *pizmonim*], lit., a song with refrain, an ancient term renewed in modern Hebrew) and the art or lyrical song."¹¹ Poets recognized for elevating Modern Hebrew poetry to a high art in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Avraham Shlonsky, Nathan Alterman, and Lea Goldberg, were also highly active in writing poems that utilized collectivist themes and detailed landscape imagery for the express purpose of being set to music for participatory performance in kibbutz dining rooms and school halls where Zionist settlers gathered. Even later in the 1960s, when the Israeli popular music industry was navigating social changes in the young state, musicians continued to draw upon these poets for their work. Chava Alberstein, for instance, was preoccupied with the musical transformation of Hebrew poems. In collaboration with Danny Granott she even dedicated a whole album in

¹⁰ *Evening of Songs of Poets—Gathered from Performances in 1972, 1973, and 1980*, NMC Music Ltd. 20096-2, 1994, compact disc. This and all Hebrew translations were prepared by the author; see the appendix for the original Hebrew. Here "Galatz" is a contraction of Galei Tzahal.

¹¹ Regev and Seroussi, *Popular Music*, 56. See also Ziva Ben-Porat, ed., *Lyric Poetry and the Lyrics of Pop: The Israeli Popular Song as a Cultural System and a Literary Genre* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1989); Philip V. Bohlman, "Foreword," in *Israeli Folk Music: Songs of the Early Pioneers*, ed. Hans Nathan (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1994), ix–x; and Talila Eliram, *Bo, Shir Ivri: Shirei Eretz Israel, Hebetim Muzikalyim ve-Hevratim* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2006).

1969 to the poetry of Rachel, another key figure in the pantheon of Modern Hebrew poetry.¹²

In other words, by 1972 there was hardly a palpable need for Galei Tzahal to insist on the value of poetry to Israeli songcraft in general terms. But what Shapira and others sought was an approach that gathered a diverse set of pop-rock styles under the same umbrella of SM and also expanded the textual sources to include poems written by figures who did not necessarily operate within a Hebrewist paradigm and experimented with prosodic forms that were not obviously suitable to music. By setting this new kind of Hebrew verse, with its lack of traditional meters and rhyming patterns, and by using songwriting techniques borrowed from progressive rock, jazz, funk, *Tropicália*, and other imported genres, musicians like Caspi and Gronich took opportunities to push against the formal constraints of earlier text-setting practices within Israeli popular song.

Participating in the SM project was a career-making opportunity for Caspi and Gronich, who were relatively new to the scene when the project began in 1972: Gronich's debut full-length album had been released in 1971, and Caspi's would come out in 1974. They became major figures in the development of SM, releasing three albums together featuring live material from the festivals under the title *Behind the Sounds (Me'Ahorei HaTsilim)* in 1973, 1985, and 2002, the latter also including their respective spouses, Michal Adler and Rachel Caspi.¹³ The 1973 album is the most canonical: as the first of the set, it marked the clearest stylistic departure from SLI, and was closely linked with the traumatic Yom Kippur War of 1973. Songs from all three records, however, continue to enjoy successful programming on state and commercial radio and in live performances today.

The generation of songwriters who worked extensively with poetry and who, like Alberstein, established themselves prior to the start of the SM project most often utilized the works of the Zionist poets of pre-state and early-statehood Israel, such as Rachel, Goldberg, and Alterman. Many of those songs made it onto official and mainstream channels—for example, on televised programs dedicated to the singing of poems by Zionist poets and through records released on major labels Hed Arzi and CBS. Caspi and Gronich, however, mostly chose poetry arising out of

¹² Chava Alberstein and Danny Granott, *Songs of Rachel*, CBS S 63488, 1969, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM.

¹³ See Matti Caspi and Shlomo Gronich, *Behind the Sounds*, Hed Arzi BAN 14277, 1973, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM; Matti Caspi and Shlomo Gronich, *Beyond the Sounds 1984*, CBS 26781, 1985, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM; Matti Caspi and Shlomo Gronich, *The First Time*, Phonocol, 1992, compact disc; and Matti Caspi and Shlomo Gronich, *Behind the Sounds 2002*, Hed Arzi, 2002, compact disc. For the 1985 album, they translated the Hebrew title on the bilingual cover as "Beyond the Sounds." The trilogy of albums is the source of this article's title.

literary movements in the 1950s and 1960s that were largely defined against the Hebrewist paradigm.¹⁴ Among the most prominent names represented on their albums were Yehuda Amichai, Meir Wieseltier, Yonathan Geffen, and Nathan Zach. These were poets who did not necessarily approach the symbolic lexicon of Hebrewism with reverence but instead gave voice to a maturing society that had fought and won wars, thus setting the stage for a departure from statehood- and *Palmach*-generation messages of social unity (in service of building up a nascent nation) and a move toward an oblique articulation of social and ideological fragmentation that would transform Israeli society by the end of the decade.¹⁵

Listening to Poetry

One of the most popular songs to come out of the first Festival of Songs of Poets in 1972 was Caspi's "Kshe'Elohim Amar BaPa'am HaRishona" (When God said the first time). The song appears in various renditions on all three *Behind the Sounds* albums (1973, 1985, 2002), on the 1994 compilation album *Evening of Songs of Poets—Gathered from Performances in 1972, 1973, and 1980* (discussed earlier in the context of Shapira's retrospective commentary), and on Caspi's first solo album: *Matti Caspi* (1974).¹⁶ The original festival recording, released on the 1973 *Behind the Sounds*, was also included in a compilation album of Caspi's songs, *BaPa'am HaRishona* (The first time, 1992), whose title references the first line of the poem—clearly signaling the song's core place within his career and legacy.¹⁷ Even though the recorded versions vary according to tempo, feel, and other minor parameters, Caspi's core compositional choices (the elements that make different instantiations recognizable, i.e., melody, rhythm, and harmony) demonstrate the transformative ethos of text-setting practices under the umbrella of SM.

The poem, written by the post-symbolist Hebrew poet Nathan Zach, uses the backdrop of the biblical creation story presented in the first

¹⁴ This is also true of some of their direct collaborators, including Nurit Galron.

¹⁵ The term "Palmach" refers to the underground fighting brigade that was pivotal during the 1948 War of Independence and produced a number of canonical poets, such as Haim Gouri, who solidified combat fraternity, bereavement, and the national cause as core values of early-statehood poetry. Although Gronich and Caspi primarily focused on Hebrew poetry, they also worked with non-Israeli materials, such as in "Al Na Telech" (Please don't go), which features lyrics taken from Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore and melodies by J. S. Bach; the song—a staple of Gronich's repertoire—appears on all three of the SM albums.

¹⁶ Matti Caspi, *Matti Caspi* (I), CBS 80208, 1974, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM.

¹⁷ Matti Caspi and the "They Don't Care" Trio (Shlishiyat Lo Ikhat LeHem), *The First Time*, Phonokol, 1992, compact disc.

book of Genesis (*Bereshit*), drawing its connection with the original text through wordplay:

When God said the first time, "Let there be light,"
 He meant that it wouldn't be dark.
 He didn't think then of the sky
 but already the trees began to fill with water
 and the birds got air and body.
 Then the first wind blew into the eyes of our Lord,
 and he saw with His own eyes the Cloud of His Glory
 and thought it was good. He didn't think then
 of people, people in their multitude.
 But they already began to think of themselves without gods,
 and already brewing in their hearts
 was a plot to cause pain.
 When Our Lord first thought of night,
 He did not think of sleep.
 Thus, thus I will be happy, the good Lord said to himself.
 But already they were a multitude
 good Lord.

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Zach was by no means a religious poet but rather one who drew on the symbols and language of the Hebrew bible to articulate a godless or god-indifferent human existence, in which "the divine Creator is portrayed as having only a limited interest in the universe He is creating."¹⁸ As Glenda Abramson has written, "the Lord he addresses or invokes is ... a deity at the nub of a philosophical discourse applying to all humanity, not the dominating factor of one man's life."¹⁹ In this poem, Zach departs from the cosmological account of Genesis and, with the gift of retrospective insight, ponders the motivations of God and even seems to imply a limit to God's omniscience. As Dan Miron writes, this and other poems from Zach's 1960 collection, *Shirim Shonim* (Different poems), "seriously focus on the most unsettling aspects of the modern human condition: unmitigated pain as something human beings inevitably invent as soon as they appear and wherever they go, in spite of God's initial wish to create a 'good' world for Himself and his creatures."²⁰ This negation of the good occurs in the poem's admission of mankind's wickedness and shamelessness in doing evil. By repeatedly reminding

¹⁸ David C. Jacobson, *Does David Still Play before You? Israeli Poetry and the Bible* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 218.

¹⁹ Glenda Abramson, "Amichai's God," *Prooftexts* 4 (1984): 111–26, at 113. Although the article cited focuses upon the poetry of Yehuda Amichai, here the author is referring to Zach.

²⁰ Dan Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2010), 571.

the reader that humans are a multitude, the poem progresses with an overwhelming sense of inevitability, as if—whatever God’s intention—the situation will eventually spiral out of control. In the poem, “egoism is presented as the natural right of the Creator and even as the natural order of things.”²¹ But God was naïve in his egoistic decision to create us.

In Caspi’s setting of Zach’s poem for the 1972 festival, the combination of an allegro tempo and multiple syllables per line (with an irregular meter between lines) makes for a rapid, syncopated delivery of the text.²² Constant harmonic motion and the absence of leading tones—indeed, the use of pitches occurring in the natural minor mode puts functional harmony into question—give the song a sense of restlessness and a bitter acceptance of time’s inexorable passage: humankind becomes a wicked multitude and resolution seems nowhere in sight. Notably, although repetition is the only parameter that clearly operates as a distinguisher of form, the repeats in the music do not correspond with the poem’s formal structure, resulting in blurred lines between through-composed and strophic song. After a solo guitar introduction, Caspi sings through the whole poem once to a musical setting that is played twice. This is punctuated by a middle section, in which Caspi shouts a series of vocables (“na na na na”) that recall the main melody, followed by a restatement of the poem’s final lines, which serve as a pseudo-refrain, especially the poignant phrase —“Ha'Elohim HaTov” (the good Lord)—that seems to cry out in incredulity. This eventually leads to a complete restatement of the poem before the vocable section and “Ha'Elohim HaTov” repeat again at the end of the song, which concludes with the same guitar chords with which it began.

The 1974 studio version of the song shows another side of Caspi’s approach to SM. The studio techniques he employed on this album (*Matti Caspi*) further marked him as an innovator within Israeli music while connecting him to global Israeliness and its attendant importation of global styles of production and composition—most especially British pop-rock and progressive rock. He showcased his abilities as a multi-instrumentalist, providing layers of acoustic, electric, and even electro-mechanical sounds that placed studio production on an aesthetic par with lyrical authorship and melodic and harmonic arrangement. On “When God Said the First Time,” for instance, he included a string accompaniment on a Mellotron—one of the first appearances of the

²¹ Hamutal Bar-Yosef, trans. Louise Shabat Bethlehem, “Neo-Decadence in Israeli Poetry 1955–1965: The Case of Nathan Zach,” *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 109–28, at 119.

²² Of the multiple recorded versions, here I am working with the recording from the 1972 festival, released on *Behind the Sounds* in 1973. A digital copy can be found on Caspi’s official YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/2lFd58QdMLQ>.

instrument on an Israeli recording.²³ Invented in 1963, the Mellotron—a magnetic-tape-based sampler with a keyboard interface—was popularized by George Martin in his more experimental work with the Beatles, most notably on “Strawberry Fields Forever” from their 1967 album *Magical Mystery Tour*.²⁴ More immediate to the development of both SM and Caspi’s recording career, however, was the instrument’s prominence among British progressive rock bands such as King Crimson and Genesis, whom Caspi and his professional circle—Gronich included—cited as inspiration.²⁵ As with the literary cachet of the poetry with which he worked, Caspi’s auteurism as a studio musician and producer helped to solidify his music’s status as highbrow, cosmopolitan art that deviated from the norms and values of music geared toward Israeli nation-building.

In the song, text-setting and production techniques worked together to articulate the idea of a mature Israeli social reality in which the biblical register rang false. On a functional level, the various poetic and compositional layers reveal the attention to detail and disregard for the rules with which Caspi and other musicians approached their transformations of poetry. As I discuss below, as SM developed, the poets’ compositional intentions and political standpoints mattered much less than those of the musicians who reinterpreted, reimagined, and manipulated both the poems (as bounded aesthetic objects) and their poetic content. Through SM, poems could take on new valences via musical settings that were, in turn, programmed in live performance and through mass media.

To illustrate this point further, I turn to Caspi’s chief collaborator, Shlomo Gronich. Gronich is behind what is perhaps the most widely known and still-performed song to emanate from the SM project: his setting of Meir Wieseltier’s poem “Yesh Li Simpatiya” (I have sympathy). He wrote the song in 1979 while studying composition at Mannes College of Music in New York City. In an apparent flash of inspiration, he worked out the musical elements within half an hour.²⁶ The song, which became known as “one of the diamonds in the crown of Israeli pop,”²⁷ was an immediate staple in Gronich’s live repertoire, including at the *Evening of SM* in 1980, but the first studio recording was made in 1982 by Nurit Galron as the title track for her full-length album *Sympathy* (*Simpatiya*).²⁸

²³ This occurs at 1:16 on the recording, available at <https://youtu.be/JOKcwqKKaXo>.

²⁴ The Beatles, *Magical Mystery Tour*, Capitol Records SMAL-2835, 1967, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM.

²⁵ Regev and Seroussi, *Popular Music*, 158–59.

²⁶ Ben Shalev, “Suddenly Flooded with Light,” *Haaretz*, January 14, 2010, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5085802>.

²⁷ Shalev, “Suddenly Flooded with Light.”

²⁸ Nurit Galron, *Sympathy*, CBS 85761, 1982, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM. The recording is archived on Galron’s official YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/PAPZ3R3IMGw>.

The poem-*cum*-song lyrics describe the poet's complicated relationship with his adopted home city of Tel Aviv, Israel's main urban center on the Mediterranean coast:

I have sympathy
 For conceptual art in Tel Aviv.
 A city without a concept—
 Plaster falls,
 A shutter weeps,
 A bus dies.

I have sympathy
 For people who stick their necks out for Tel Aviv.
 I have sympathy
 For people who insist on Tel Aviv.
 I have sympathy
 For people who get excited about Tel Aviv.

An unexciting city,
 A den of desperate stucco,
 A noisy tin teeter-totter.

I have sympathy
 For people who despair in Tel Aviv.

In the poem, Wieseltier renders his version of Tel Aviv through architectural materials and poetic images from everyday life. The reader/listener is invited to imagine a dystopia with decaying evidence of a modern past—buses, stucco Bauhaus buildings, and “meaningless” conceptual art. The musical setting enhances the lyrics' iconic flippancy. Gronich's compositional style, like Caspi's, is playfully eclectic, assimilating jazz and funk into an eclectic pop-rock SM song—thus emphasizing the cosmopolitan ethos of post-1967 Israeli musical tastes while irreverently playing with explicit musical signifiers.²⁹

Indexing the big-band-era jazz of New York, this song's introduction features a sequence of syncopated, boisterous chords on multitracked synthesizer keyboards. Throughout the song, the drummer plays a hard swing pattern on the hi-hat, and the rapid-fire electric piano part contains several blue notes that are in turn doubled by the flute. An extended bridge even features Galron vocalizing in unison with the chromatic electric piano solo (1:42–2:33). The ludic nature of the song, emanating not least from its genre-bending style, has been emphasized in subsequent cover versions, including by Gronich himself. In live

²⁹ On British rock modernism, see Barry J. Faulk, *British Rock Modernism, 1967–1977: The Story of Music Hall in Rock* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

performances I witnessed in the field, musicians frequently manipulated the lyrics through alternate pronunciations, mimicking silly voices that one might hear in children's songs, as audiences laughed, clapped, and sang along in unison.³⁰ As indicated by the poem's final lines—"I have sympathy / For people who despair in Tel Aviv"—despite its flaws and its people's (supposedly) insufferable nature, Tel Aviv is rendered musically and poetically as a place in which to keep one's faith and fidelity.

Conflicted Collaborations

Wieseltier had starkly different feelings about "I Have Sympathy" and SM more generally. As he relayed to me during an interview, Galei Tzahal had commissioned Gronich to compose a song for an upcoming gala and sent him a stack of poems from which to choose. Gronich chose "I Have Sympathy" and asked Galron to sing it. Wieseltier, however, was completely unaware of this, since the producers at Galei Tzahal had neglected to ask his permission to use the poem. As a rule, Wieseltier had previously rejected any such proposals; he believed that musical settings of his poems enacted a kind of aesthetic violence against the original "music of the poetry," which he characterized to me as being "fragile."³¹ During our interview, Wieseltier compared the process to seeing his poems "run over by a tractor." Perhaps, then, the producers had been wise to postpone their request, which they only made a week in advance of the planned performance—in other words, after Gronich had finished writing the song. Acquiescing to the producers' pressure, Wieseltier agreed to allow the use of his poem but only because he did not want to ruin the hard work of Gronich and Galron, both of whom he characterized as admirable artists and faultless in this situation. He did, however, threaten to sue the radio station producers if they attempted to force him into another such difficult situation.

On the heels of the commercial success of "I Have Sympathy," Gronich contacted Wieseltier to ask if he could set another of his poems. Owing to his discomfort with the idea of seeing the "music of [his] poetry" transformed, Wieseltier rejected the request but instead suggested that the two collaborate in another way: Wieseltier would write a text whose express purpose was to serve as song lyrics. When I asked Wieseltier to explain the difference between such a text and a regular poem, to my surprise he did not produce an answer rooted in prosody or the craft of writing. For him, the distinction lay instead in how the texts

³⁰ My recurring fieldwork in Israel and Palestine spanned 2010 to 2018.

³¹ Meir Wieseltier, interview with the author, Tel Aviv, June 5, 2012.

were conceptualized: one was a poem and one was a song, in spite of any structural/prosodic resemblance between the two. It was the presence of melodic sound that distinguished song lyrics from a poem; in the latter sound operates according to its formal linguistic properties rather than performative ones to create opportunities for language play: rhyme, meter, puns, explorations of the Hebrew root system's interconnected morphologies, and so on.³²

The song that emerged from this collaboration became another well-known song about Tel Aviv, "Afshar Lihiyot BeTel-Aviv" (You can live in Tel Aviv). Gronich performed and recorded the song in collaboration with Caspi in 1984.³³

You can live in Tel Aviv until the day of destruction
 But be buried, dear friend, only in Holon
 At the city limits you will not find a burial plot
 Even if you're not picky, there are none for me and none for you
 And you and I at the end of our lean years
 On a day of loss will be deported from this city

[Refrain:]

You can die in Tel Aviv when the day of destruction comes
 But be buried, friend, only in Holon

Yes, they build expensive plazas and high-rise hotels
 Yet there's no corner of the whole metropolis to drop a corpse
 How come when the dirt of this city was established
 They did not allocate half a corner, not even for a patriot

[Refrain]

Cemeteries here and there, but only for the elders
 A generation ago our corpses could go there
 But we were born late, we missed the hole
 And we will not win precious dirt in Trumpeldor Cemetery

[Refrain]

Wieseltier was inspired to write the lyrics after attending the funeral of a friend in Holon, a town southeast of Tel Aviv. Barbara Mann has observed that in Wieseltier's poetry, "Tel Aviv's profanity—the beauty of dust blossoms, the peeling cement of Allenby [Street], the often

³² As a Semitic language, Hebrew uses a root system of three consonants (and in rare cases, four) that connect using different combinations of long and short vowels, prefixes, and other appendages, such as markers of gender, number, and possession. These morphologies allow for complex affinities between words on the order of rhyme, meter, and meaning.

³³ This version was released on *Beyond the Sounds* in 1985. I will refer below to the recording archived on Caspi's YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/QLcA98XjHAo>.

sordid behaviour of its residents—is especially pronounced against Jerusalem’s holiness.”³⁴ At the time, cemeteries in Tel Aviv proper were somewhat scarce, and people were buried primarily in suburbs and neighboring towns, such as Jaffa, Petah Tikva, and Holon. As Wieseltier told me about his friend, “although she never set foot in Holon while she was alive, there she lies for eternity.”³⁵ Reflecting on the irony of her interment, Wieseltier decided to write lyrics about how Tel Aviv is a city built only for the living, who dump evidence of death outside the city limits like trash. In other words, one can live and die in Tel Aviv, but no one is allowed to be dead there. Of course, in many cities burial grounds are similarly placed outside of spaces meant for dwelling, but in the Israeli context this practice creates a palpable distinction between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, two cities that, as I write elsewhere, “represent for many Israelis distinct ways of inhabiting the same national identity.”³⁶ In this formulation, the former is a modern city associated with a cosmopolitan orientation to Zionism and its renewal of Jewish national life, while the latter, an ancient city seemingly filled with cemeteries, represents a provincial Zionism obsessed with the past.³⁷

As he did in “I Have Sympathy,” here Gronich gives Wieseltier’s words a provocatively high-energy setting. The piano plays an up-tempo vamp, while a synthesizer outlines the vocal melody. Later in the song (2:05), the synthesizer doubles Gronich’s sung vocables, recalling the vocalization passage in the middle of “I Have Sympathy.” The musicians here again are having fun with lyrical meaning, playing with an irreverent impertinence that characterizes Wieseltier’s overall output as a poet and lyricist and indeed is paralleled in Caspi’s and Gronich’s genre-bending approach to songwriting, in which stylistic norms are gleefully abandoned.

Wieseltier’s negative stance toward musical settings of his poetry raises important questions about whether the songful transformation of a poem’s prosody—the nuts-and-bolts craft of composing a text according to its sonic and rhythmic content—also changes the meanings of the poem that may have inspired a musician to choose the text in the first place. In referring to “the music of the poetry” during our interview,

³⁴ Barbara Mann, “The Vicarious Landscape of Memory in Tel Aviv Poetry,” *Prooftexts* 21 (2001): 350–78, at 366.

³⁵ Meir Wieseltier, interview with the author.

³⁶ Michael A. Figueroa, *City of Song: Music and the Making of Modern Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2022).

³⁷ In reality, the situation is far more complex. As the sociologist Uri Ram argues, “despite their blatant antagonism, [Tel Aviv and Jerusalem] belong to the same Zionist colonialist project. Yet despite this commonality between the cities, each of them indicates a distinct potential.” Uri Ram, *The Globalization of Israel: McWorld in Tel Aviv, Jihad in Jerusalem* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 32.

Wieselstier was alluding to T. S. Eliot's oft-cited lecture by that name, published in 1942.³⁸ There, Eliot made clear his belief in the integrality of sound to a poem's meaning: "the music of poetry [i.e., prosody] is not something which exists apart from the meaning. Otherwise, we could have poetry of great musical beauty which made no sense, and I have never come across such poetry."³⁹ If Eliot's claim were to hold in the Israeli context, and indeed a musical setting were the "tractor" that Wieselstier claimed it to be, then a body of song built on poetic source material, such as SM, would have little aesthetic justification from the perspective of the poets involved. And yet this tension between poem and song exemplifies how SM represented a departure from the language and musical style associated with the Hebrewism that marked early Israeli national culture.

Conclusion

During the 1970s and 1980s, the combination of the curatorial power of a radio channel like Galei Tzahal, which "granted implicit recognition and legitimacy to genres, songs, and singers and determined the cultural hierarchy in the local field of popular music,"⁴⁰ and the high cultural register of poetry within Israeli national culture, privileged the efforts of individual poets and musicians by creating ready-made aesthetic-ideological frameworks and channels of distribution. The station promoted the connection of pop-rock to highbrow literature in an attempt to solidify its reputation as the preeminent arbiter of global Israeliness and "serious" music. In other words, the project was as much about market forces as it was about ideology.

Like musicians operating within other global song traditions, Israeli musicians took poetry—much of which originally circulated in written form for silent reading—set it to music, and performed the new songs in various recorded and live contexts. Figures such as Matti Caspi and Shlomo Gronich took the opportunity to develop the preexisting relationship between popular music composition and Modern Hebrew poetry into an eclectic musical language that highlighted or manipulated the social meaningfulness of poems while sometimes transforming parameters that were seemingly analogous between the two cultural fields (i.e., sound and rhythm). In so doing, they secured for their music the kind of cultural accreditation that their literary colleagues had long since enjoyed at a time when Israeli national culture began to blur its focus on national

³⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Music of Poetry* (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Company, 1942).

³⁹ T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 21.

⁴⁰ Regev and Seroussi, *Popular Music*, 36.

collectivism and prioritize individualized expressions of identity and forms of authorship that underscored a shift toward global Israeliness.

In addition to the *Evening of SM* programs that cemented Caspi's and Gronich's status as SM songwriters, there emerged a host of recordings operating under the ethos of SM. For instance, there was a whole sub-genre of children's songs, including Ilanit's *Shirei Meshorerim LiYeladim* (Poets' songs for children, 1974).⁴¹ Also common were entire albums of songs set to lyrics by a single poet: in 1975 the Brothers and the Sisters released *The Brothers and the Sisters Sing Poems of Nathan Yonathan* (*Hofim—MiShirei Natan Yonatan*), featuring arrangements by the band's manager Gidi Koren; and Nurit Galron released *Songs in the Middle of the Night—Poems and Songs by Nathan Zach* (*Shirim Be'Emtsa HaLila—BeShirim UPizmonim Shel Natan Zakh*) in 1981.⁴² The roster of songwriters who contributed text settings to that production included many elite members of the Israeli music industry: Caspi, Yoni Rechter, Shalom Hanoch, Ilan Virtzberg, Shlomo Ydov, Hanan Yovel, Sasha Argov, and Asher Bitansky. By the end of the 1970s *shirei meshorerim* had acquired something of an identity in its own right, one that brought together a constellation of songwriters, poets, and performers who also worked in other idioms. Such cases reveal how the SM programming that began in 1972 catalyzed a heightened level of analogical thinking about poets and singers, and thus about poetry and music, in a society undergoing rapid sociopolitical change.

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Appendix: Hebrew Texts

Muli Shapira, liner notes to *Evening of Songs of Poets—Gathered from Performances in 1972, 1973, and 1980*, NMC Music Ltd. 20096-2, 1994, compact disc.

ערבי שירי המשוררים שנערכו והופקו על ידי גלי צה"ל בשנות ה-70 וה-80, מתוך רצון לתת מעמד מחודש למילה בפזמון הישראלי, עוררו בזמנו ויכוח ציבורי: לצד המשבחים הרבים, היו שטענו כי שירי המשוררים אינם מתאימים להלחנה ומעבר לגימיק המתקשר לא יישאר בעתיד מהפקות יומרניות אלה ולא כלום. השנים הוכיחו שהתעקשות גלי צה"ל בנושא, במשך למעלה מעשור, הצדיקה את עצמה. רבים משירי המשוררים של גל"צ הפכו זה מכבר לנכסי צאן ברזל בזמר הישראלי, אבל בעיקר גרמו לגל של הלחנת שירי משוררים על ידי יוצרים רבים, וכך הועשר הפזמון הישראלי בטקסטים בעלי ערך. בתקליטור שלפנכם, אנו מגישים מבחר מערבי שירי המשוררים של גל"צ.

⁴¹ Ilanit, *Shirei Meshorerim LiYeladim* (Poets' songs for children), Hed-Arzi 99661, 1974, 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ RPM.

⁴² The Brothers and the Sisters, *The Brothers and the Sisters Sing Poems by Nathan Yonathan*, CBS, 1975, 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ RPM; and Nurit Galron, *Songs in the Middle of the Night—Poems and Songs by Nathan Zach*, CBS 84851, 1981, 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ RPM.

Nathan Zach, "When God Said the First Time" (music by Matti Caspi)

כשאלוהים אמר בפעם הראשונה יהי אור!
הוא התכוון שלא יהיה לו חשך.
הוא לא חשב באותו רגע על השמיים
אבל העצים כבר החלו מתמלאים מים
וציפרים קיבלו אויר וגוף.
אז נשבה הרוח הראשונה אל עיני אדוננו
והוא ראה אותה כמו עיני ענן כבודו
וחשב כי טוב. הוא לא חשב באותו רגע
על בני האדם, בני אדם לרוב.
אבל הם כבר התחילו לחשוב על עצמם בלי אלים
וכבר החלה מתרקמת בליבם
מזימה על מכאוב.
כשאדוננו חשב בתחילה על הלילה
הוא לא חשב על שינה.
כך, כך אהיה מאושר, אמר בליבו האלוהים הטוב.
אבל הם כבר היו לרוב
אלוהים הטוב.

Meir Wieseltier, "I Have Sympathy" (music by Shlomo Gronich)

יש לי סימפטיה
לאמנות קונספטואלית בתל אביב
עיר בלי קונספציה
טיח נופל
תריס מתייפח
אוטובוס מת

יש לי סימפטיה
לאנשים שמתאמצים בתל אביב
יש לי סימפטיה
לאנשים שמתעקשים בתל אביב
יש לי סימפטיה
לאנשים שמתרגשים בתל אביב

עיר בלתי מרגשת
מאורת טיח נואשת
נדנדת פח רועשת

יש לי סימפטיה
לאנשים מתיאשים בתל אביב

Meir Wieseltier, "You Can Live in Tel Aviv" (music by Shlomo Gronich and Matti Caspi)

אפשר לחיות בתל אביב עד יום הכליון
אך להקבר, חבר חביב, אפשר רק בחולון
בגבול התחום העירוני לא תמצא חלקה
גם אם אינך בררני, לא לי ולא לך
וגם אני וגם אתה בתום שנים רזות
הן נגורש ביום אבדה מתוך העיר הזאת

אפשר למות בתל אביב בבוא יום חידלון
אבל להקבר, חבר, אפשר רק בחולון

כן, הם בונים ככרות יוקרה, מלונות רבי קומות
איך אין פינה בכל הכרך לטבול קצת עצמות
כמה שלא נכוננה עפרות העיר הזאת
הם לא יקצו חצי פינה, גם לא לפטריוט

אפשר למות בתל אביב...

בתי עלמין יש פה ושם, אך רק לפרנסים
לו התפגרנו לפני דור היינו נכנסים
אבל נולדנו מאוחר, החמצנו את הבור
ולא נזכה לזלול עפר יקר בטרומפלדור

אפשר למות בתל אביב...

ABSTRACT

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In this article I explore the aesthetics and political valence of *shirei meshorerim* (SM), a body of Israeli sung poetry that emerged out of a series of radio programs, festivals, and recording projects beginning in the 1970s and drawing on long-standing local practices in both Palestine/Israel and contemporary Mediterranean sung-poetry movements. I argue that the development of SM was characterized by an aesthetic distinction, wherein the high cultural register of poetry—a value produced by both the domestic discourse on art vis-à-vis politics and the broader global discourse in which the local field was embedded—and an associated move to cosmopolitanize music production contributed to the “cultural accreditation” of post-1967 pop-rock in Israel. This article explores what poetry meant for song, and vice versa, in Israel during the 1970s and 1980s through sociopolitical analysis and close listening to the text-setting practices and stylistic affinities of two musicians strongly identified with SM: Matti Caspi and Shlomo Gronich.

Keywords: music and poetry, Israeli music, Jewish music, cosmopolitanism, music and politics