

Between Nationalism and Postmodernism: Betty Olivero's *Achot Ketana* and *Zimaar*

Abstract. Most of Betty Olivero's music, considered one of the most prominent composers in Israel, refers to Jewish musical traditions alongside Mediterranean musical signifiers. Although similar traits already appeared in works by the first generation composers in the 1930s–1940s considered the founders of Israeli music, Olivero's style presents a different agenda. In her works, folk borrowings from diverse Jewish sources combine with Arab tunes and Western art music while crossing cultural gaps. National tendencies are thus redefined under the influence of postmodern aesthetics.

My paper discusses the tension between these two influences in two pieces: *Achot Ketana* (Little Sister, 2000) for soprano, 3 solo violins, clarinet and a string orchestra and *Zimaar I* (2003) for singer and chamber ensemble with harpsichord. Both works combine folk material with borrowings from Western music. In *Achot Ketana*, a Jewish liturgical poem appears next to Bach's D minor Chaconne for solo violin, and in *Zimaar* Ladino songs originated in various Jewish communities combine with a song-poem by Folquet De Marseilla. Despite the immense stylistic gaps between the borrowed materials, they influence one another and at the same time retain their essential features. While basic melodic contours remain intact, Middle-Eastern musical techniques such as heterophony, improvisation and ornamentation become contemporary devices through tone clusters, octave displacements and free rhythm, and thus create an innovative sound. Both works therefore convey myriad aesthetic meanings.

Keywords: Betty Olivero, Israeli music, nationalism in music, musical Postmodernism, borrowings.

Prologue

In an interview with Noam Ben-Ze'ev (September 2013), Israeli composer Betty Olivero emphasized the importance of the Jewish heritage together with a constant dialogue with myriad sounds she defines as “a common sound ocean” as major simultaneous influences on her style. As she explained: “Over the years, my connection to Jewish sources became more and more essential ... for me it is a strong motive for creativeness.” At the same time, she stated that we are in a constant, unlimited dialogue with everything we absorb: “The dialogue crosses borders of time and place. In thousands of years borders will fade, like nowadays, when we transcribe a Yemenite folksong and the result resembles a Gregorian chant.”

Olivero often borrows tunes from Jewish traditional music, but also draws on quotations from Arab and Western music. Her style combines techniques such as heterophony, improvisation and ornamentation, clearly influenced by Middle-Eastern music, together with tone clusters and complex rhythmic structures. The prevalence of Middle-Eastern techniques and Jewish themes in her music, traits, which were typical to the founders of Israeli music in the 1940s might suggest that her works are related to national agendas, an opinion developed in previous researches.¹

However, as this paper shows, her style is influenced first and foremost by postmodern aesthetics. In her music, postmodernism is manifested in border crossing between folk music and art music, in an avoidance of rigid, pre-defined forms, and in a deliberate emphasis on conflicts and multiply meanings.² She sees various sources as equally important elements, which share a common human ground that enables their coalescence through contemporary musical language.

Following a concise biographical background, which provides a cultural framework for the analytic discussion I focus on two pieces in which Jewish and Western borrowings are combined – *Achot Ketana* (2000) where a Jewish liturgical poem (a piyūṭ) appears next to Bach's Chaconne in D minor BWV 1004, and *Zimaar I* (2003/2009) where Ladino (Judeo-Espagnol) songs from various communities are combined with a song-poem by a French troubadour. Despite the immense stylistic gaps between the borrowed materials in both pieces they serve as equally important raw materials, open to the composer's individual interpretation. In each work, I present the mutual influences between them and discuss the techniques, which enable the transformation of the traditional or classical materials into contemporary music.

¹ See for example in Hirshberg (2007–2008: 106–107). According to Hirshberg, Olivero's music represents a modern expansion of “Collective Nationalism,” i.e. first generation Israeli music that drew on Jewish themes and Middle-Eastern signifiers based on an ideology that connected new music to the time and place of composition, and perceived the composer as a leader who shows the way to the collective. See also Seter (2014: 2). Seter argues, “national, cultural and religious identities form an ideational basis—more precisely the ideational basis— for her music.”

² For a full account of the characteristics of musical postmodernism see, for example, Kramer (2002: 16–17).

A Biographical Survey

Olivero was born in Tel-Aviv in 1954. Her parents came from Greece and were descendants of Jews expelled from Spain in the Inquisition of 1492.³ The Ladino songs she heard as a child were a major source for both texts and tunes in many pieces since the early 1980s, and she continues to use them in her most recent works. According to Olivero, the immigrants from Middle-Eastern and East-European countries who lived side by side in her childhood neighborhood symbolize the heterophony of musical cultures in Israel, which is an example for a worldwide multiplicity of sounds which she translates into heterophonic textures.

Alongside these influences, she received strict Western musical education from an early age. She continued her formal studies at the Tel-Aviv Music Academy with the Israeli composer and painter Leon Schidlowsky, who, according to Olivero, contributed to her humanistic approach towards music, and in Yale with Jacob Druckman, Bernard Rands and Gilbert Amy. A life-changing meeting with Luciano Berio in 1982 led to studies with him in Italy (1983–1986), where she continued to reside for the next 18 years before coming back to Israel in 2001 as a professor of composition at Bar-Ilan University.

Berio's interpretive approach towards folk material and their role as borrowings in art music, reflected in pieces like *Naturale* for viola, percussion and a recorded voice of a Sicilian singer (1985) as well as his use of borrowings from Western music in pieces like *Sinfonia* (1968) and the *Recital I for Cathy* (1972) were the most dominant influences on Olivero.⁴ Regarding folk quotations, Berio declared: "I tend to be interested only in those folk techniques and means of expression that I can in one way or other assimilate without a stylistic break, and that allows me to take a few steps forward in the search for unity underlying musical worlds that are apparently alien to one another" (Osmond-Smith 1985: 106). Olivero expressed a similar approach: "I do not look for this material out of a scientific-academic or ethnomusicologist motive, they serve me as a pure dramatic generator . . . I never use them in their original form, they go through processes of transformation so that their original form changes in a significant way, while their spirit fully remains" (Olivero 1990: 27).

One of the most influential projects, which encouraged Olivero to use Western quotations, was her involvement in a transcription of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* done by a group of young composers led by Berio in 1984. Her new interpretation of Monteverdi's opera not only served as a basis for borrowings in her piece *Neharot, Neharot* (Rivers, Rivers, 2006), but also had a wider effect on her perception towards the possibility of combining previous material in contemporary music.

Achot Ketana

"The little sister prepares her prayers and intones her praises
O God, we beseech thee, heal now her infirmities
May the year and its misfortunes now cease altogether."

The liturgical poem *Achot Ketana* (Little Sister) written in 13th century Spain by Abraham Gerondi is the basis for Olivero's piece under the same title composed for 3 solo violins, soprano, clarinet and string orchestra. It centers on the little sister as a metaphor for the people of Israel asking for salvation. The tune used by Olivero was probably composed in the Florence synagogue in the 16th century.⁵ The quotation is taken only from the first part which has a free, improvisational character (the second part has a rhythmic, dance-like character). The original melodic movement is dense and ornamental, and its tonal basis combines modal movements together with tonal implications such as the raised seventh as an ornamental pitch leading back to the opening pitch at the ending of each phrase.

Achot Ketana is dedicated to the memory of the celebrated violinist Yehudi Menuhin. This dedication induced a focus on the violin sound reflected in the replacement of the solo violin with 3 solo violins strengthened by 6 more violins in the ensemble. Furthermore, the borrowed material is taken from one of the most famous pieces for violin, Bach's Chaconne. Its tonal basis (D minor), the main melodic and harmonic material as well

³ The Spanish expulsion occurred when Jews were driven from their lands and spread mainly to North African countries. Ladino, known as Judeo-Espagnol (other names are Judezmo, Dzudezmo and Spaniolit), is the language of Jews of Spanish origin. Ladino songs are an oral tradition, which were originally performed without instrumental accompaniment. Contrafactum, namely the practice of setting words to different tunes, or the other way around, was a well-established practice in Ladino songs.

⁴ Baroque quotations also appear in works by Olivero's teachers in Yale. For example, Druckman's *Prism* (1980) combines different versions of *Medea* composed in the 17th and 18th centuries. Another example is Rands' *Madrigali* (1977) based on Monteverdi's eighth book of *Madrigals (Madrigals of Love and War)*.

⁵ Olivero uses different versions of many traditional tunes in various pieces. *Achot Ketana* is one example: it appears in her song cycle *Juego de Siempre* (The Never-Ending Game) in 1991, and next to a Ladino song in her 1994 piece *Bakasbot* (Supplications) for clarinet, choir and symphony orchestra. The version for *Achot Ketana* appears in Piattelli (1992: 82–83).

as the Baroque ornamentation style become a part of a heterophonic texture with Middle-Eastern ornamentation influenced by the *piyū*'s style. The original, directional chord progression in the solo violin part goes through processes of fragmentation and is divided between the solo violins.

A clear connection to the borrowed material is accompanied by its extreme transformation. This is evident already in the short instrumental prelude, which precedes the entrance of the full quotation. Although it creates an intentionally blurred sound by using a slow tempo, simultaneous sound layers and frequent dynamic changes, it is in fact based on two intervals borrowed from Bach, the fifth (a-e) and the minor second (e-f) (Ex. 1a, 1b).



Example 1a. Bach, *Chaconne* in D minor, mm. 1–11

Example 1b. Olivero, *Acht Ketana*, mm. 1–5

The music then continues to a more explicit but fragmented quotation. The fragmentation and heterophony between the violins transform the original chord progression into simultaneous soundings (Ex. 2).

This technique is a reflection of Olivero's perception of solo sounds as multi-voiced music.⁶ Two main motives are borrowed from Bach – the opening harmonic progression (mm. 1–7) and the ornamental patterns, which are based on the melodic motion towards *b* flat (m. 7). Each new pattern in the fragmented progression is added above the resonating sounds from the previous pattern, thus contributing to a constant sound.

⁶ In a recent interview I conducted with Olivero (October 2016), she explained her intention to transform her own early works for solo instruments or small chamber ensembles into multi-voiced music. She plans to create electronically devised sounds, which will respond to the solo material in the *Tempo Reale* center in Florence, Italy.

Example 2. Olivero, *Ahot Ketana*, mm. 11–15

Example 3. Olivero, *Ahot Ketana*, simultaneous sounds, mm. 69–72

Middle-Eastern characteristics borrowed from the *piyūṭ* appear not only in the vocal line, set partly in the *sensa misura* (without meter) framework with tonal-modal harmonic tendencies, but also influence the character of the ornamental patterns in the violins and clarinet. Although these are based on the Chaconne's melodic gestures, they are designed as Middle-Eastern ornaments. Olivero therefore uses the common importance of ornaments as an essential part of melodic lines in both Baroque music and Arab music to create a new platform.

Another evident aesthetic implication in these ornamental lines is the pointillist formation of the melodic movement. Individual pitches are connected to one another through long, complicated ornamental sounds. The ornamental patterns, which first appear as an interlude played by the ensemble, are combined with the melodic line of the *piyūṭ* and with the Chaconne's theme. Their character changes in a significant way from a sequential quick movement to slow, pointillist, reflective sound.

The first dramatic entrance of the soprano with the words “Achoť Ketana” is followed by a short ornamented passage, after which she continues on to a longer section of the piyūť. She is accompanied by two contradicting textures: a tonal, pizzicato, song-like accompaniment next to dissonant fragments from the broken segments of the Chaconne. The piyūť and the Chaconne alternate throughout the piece, but all along signs of both appear at the same time. Towards the end, the density of the simultaneous soundings and the tension between the borrowed material increase (Ex. 3). While the vocal line remains faithful to the original liturgical song, the instrumental ensemble combines broken chords with dissonant ornamental figurations and adjacent intervals with melodic leaps and fluctuations between registers. The vocal part ends with a loud dramatic high sound accompanied by prolonged, dissonant sounds in the ensemble. The last quotation comes back to the opening chords of the Chaconne, in their final, fading appearance.

Achoť Ketana focuses on the combination of two apparently contradicting material, but the emphasis on common characteristics does not eliminate the unique character of each one. Together they create what Paul Griffiths calls “meta-music”, the place where past and present blend into a new time zone (Griffiths 1995: 183–189).

Zimaar I

Zimaar I (a composed poem) is written for soprano, 2 violins, violoncello, and amplified harpsichord with percussion.⁷ Its texts and tunes are borrowed from Ladino love songs from various Jewish communities next to a song-poem by the French troubadour Folquet de Marseille.⁸ The first songs of Greek origin are *Kamini por Altas Torres* (I climbed on the highest mountains) and *Esta Montaña d’Enfrentre* (This mountain in front of me). After the troubadour song *Sitot me soi a tart apercebutz* (Although I realized it too late) appears the Turkish song *Noches, Noches, Buenas Noches* (Good Nights) and in the end, two lines are borrowed from the Moroccan song *Alta Luna Al Esclarecer* (When dawn breaks). In most songs, basic melodic gestures remain intact, but variants in different parameters are added. The main innovations are the artistic rendition of the folk song and the combination of its melodic material with the ensemble.

The lyrical, relatively simple character of the opening recitative becomes a long continuous song with short instrumental transitions. The first chord is built on adjacent sounds, which create a prolonged tone cluster. The singer then continues to a variation on the original version of the first song. Heterophonic responses to the vocal line appear in the violin and create subtle movements which unstable the texture (Ex. 4).

Example 4. Olivero, *Zimaar*, m. 3

⁷ Its second version, entitled *Zimaar II* is for female voice and chamber orchestra. The harpsichord is replaced with a harp, and a clarinet is added.

⁸ Folquet de Marseille’s poems were written between 1180 and 1195. Among 19 remaining poems, 13 have tunes. His poems have an emotional tone, accompanied by a complex syntax and a rich vocabulary of sounds and rhythms. See: Rosenberg et al. (1998: 143–150).

Simultaneous implications of different musical cultures are most evident in the harpsichord's role. Modern composers such as Krzysztof Penderecki, Elliott Carter and György Ligeti used the unique harpsichord sound in several works. The harpsichord's role in *Zimaar* continues the same tradition by employing different styles. First, Baroque music, especially in the beginning where broken chords accompany the melodic line in a texture typical to a recitative; secondly, a medieval sound manifested in parallel intervals; third, the Arabic instrumental ensemble by using adjacent intervals which resemble the sound of an Arabic qanun (an important multi-stringed plucked instrument); fourth, a contemporary, dissonant sound created by clashes between the harpsichord and other instruments which together create multi-layered textures (Ex. 5). As the music progresses, dense intervals become wide melodic leaps through octave displacements. This technique enables them to disturb the sense of a linear melodic line.

Example 5. Olivero, *Zimaar*, The contemporary harpsichord sound, m. 55

Another important aspect in *Zimaar* is the use of the singer as a percussionist, a characteristic, which appeared in several works by Olivero.⁹ In this case, she is required to play a large frame drum and Sleigh Bells (Sonagli). This ancient phenomenon relies on biblical references and ancient terracotta figurines, but mostly on reflections of women musicians in medieval Spain who sang while playing hand-held drums. At the same time, the move from the intimate, spontaneous scene of women's songs to the concert hall and the combination between folk songs and contemporary instrumentation creates an innovative sound.

In the instrumental section, which follows the opening recitative the harpsichord moves in parallel intervals. Despite the definition of meter, it changes almost every bar, thus creating unstable movement. The second Ladino song is already sung in wider intervals, distancing itself from the original version of the song. The dramatic tension rises towards the troubadour song. While basic melodic gestures are kept, the original melodic line turns into an extremely ornamental line with complex rhythmic structures. Three pitches – b flat, a and g – appear both as triplets in 16ths in the vocal line and the first violin and with additional rhythmic variants in the second violin and cello (Ex. 6a, 6b).

Heterophony between string instruments and the voice is an important technique in *Zimaar*. Most of the time, the voice is leading the melodic movement, and they meet on specific points within the melody. The simultaneous appearance of basic gestures from the melodic line in the instrumental ensemble strengthens them, but at the same time contributes to the diversity and richness of momentary musical events. Similarly, in *Achot Ketana* the density increases towards the end. The last song begins with a dramatic sound, but ends in *ppp*, with quite dissonant chords in the ensemble, a gesture, which again resembles the last bars of *Achot Ketana*. The uniqueness of *Zimaar* derives from its myriad aesthetic and stylistic implications, but the conflict between them is unresolved and handed to the listener as an intriguing “food for thought.”

⁹ The singer-percussionist appeared in Olivero's music since the early *Makamat* (1988), a cycle of five Middle-Eastern songs, through *Juego de Siempre* (1991), a cycle of 12 Ladino songs and *Zima'ar* and once again in one of her recent pieces *En La Mar Hai una Torre* (2014) for three female voices, viola, cello, harp and percussion.

Si tot me soi a tart a- per- ceu- butz,
 Ais- si cum cel qu'a tot per- dut e ju- ra
 Que mais non joc, a gran bo- na- ven- tu- ra
 M'o dei te- ner car me sui co- no- gutz

Example 6a. *Sitot me soi a tart apercebutz* (In: Rosenberg et al. 1998: 147)

S.
 dei te- ner car me sol

Crot.
 Vln I
 Vln II
 Vcl.

Example 6b. Olivero, *Zimaar*, The troubadour song, m. 80

Epilogue

In Betty Olivero’s music, heterophony serves not only as a musical technique, but primarily as an aesthetic point of departure. Stimulated by her dialogue with childhood musical experiences alongside contemporary musical thought, a montage of musical quotations gradually became an integral part of her style. Each borrowed material is confronted not only with its original form and context, but also with a second borrowed material, thus creating both confluences and divergences.

Achot Ketana and *Zimaar* both show an emphasis on multi-layering of various styles while using Middle-Eastern musical techniques as contemporary devices. In accordance with postmodern thought, Olivero’s aesthetic approach refuses to see art as distinct from life itself. Through Bach’s Chaconne, Folquet’s poem and Jewish traditional music she therefore seeks to explore the contemporary possibilities inherent in the language of myriad sources.

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Tarp nacionalizmo ir postmodernizmo: Betty Olivero *Ahot Ketana* ir *Zimaar*

Santrauka

Betty Olivero muzika pasižymi lankstumu, postmodernumu. Ji skatina dialogą ir kuria iki galo neišsprendžiamas situacijas, kartu atsiribodama nuo nacionalistinių idėjų. Vis dėlto nostalgija neišvengiamai yra vienas pagrindinių Olivero motyvų ir meninių šaltinių, nukreipiančių į žydų kolektyvinę atmintį ir kylančių iš vaikystės prisiminimų.

Dilema tarp nacionalizmo ir postmodernizmo gali būti aiškiau atskleista pasitelkiant Svetlanos Boym nostalgijos apibrėžimą. Boym įvardija du nostalgijos tipus – atkuriamąjį ir reflektinį. Ji teigia: „Atkuriamoji nostalgija pabrėžia *nostos* aspektą ir pasižymi siekiu atkurti prarastus namus ir užpildyti atsiminimų spragas. Reflektinė nostalgija akcentuoja *algia*, išskeldama ilgesį ir praradimą – netobulą atsiminimo procesą.“ Atkuriamoji nostalgija pabrėžia laiką kaip chronologinį, istorinį konceptą ir šiuo požiūriu yra antimoderni. Priešingai, reflektinė nostalgija akcentuoja asmeninius atsiminimus ir prieštaras, todėl gali būti netgi ironiška. Boym teigia, kad nors abu tipai nukreipia į panašius prisiminimus ir simbolius, jų naratyvai iš esmės yra skirtingi. Tad nors Olivero kūryba turi bruožų, atpažįstamų kaip nacionaliniai, tačiau jos mąstymas yra reflektinis.

Kūrinių *Ahot Ketana* ir *Zimaar* analizė atskleidė, kad Vidurinių Rytų elementai kompozitorės darbuose negali būti traktuojami kaip orientalistinės laikysenos požymis. Heterofonijos, ornamentacijos, mikrotoninių intonacijų, improvizacijos naudojimas buvo įprastas daugelio ankstesnių kartų Izraelio kompozitorių kūrybai. Vis dėlto, užuot jas taikiusi kaip išorinius, dažnai dekoratyvinius elementus, Olivero, absorbavusi šiuos skambesius ir techniką iš pirmų lūpų per vaikystės patirtis, juos traktuoja kaip sudėtingas muzikos išraiškos priemones. Taip heterofonija transformuojasi į tirstus disonansinius sluoksnius, ornamentai tampa esminiais, vos ne primygtiniais melodiniais elementais, o iš siaurų intervalų sudaromi klasteriai. Be to, vienalaikis Vakarų ir Vidurinių Rytų skolinis derinimas sustiprina nuolatinį dialogą tarp prieštarų muzikos kryptį.

Kitas aspektas, kvestionuojantis Olivero, kaip nacionalinės kompozitorės, etiketės pagrįstumą, yra jos ir kitų panašios kartos šiuolaikinių kompozitorių artimas požiūris. Tokiu pavyzdžiu galėtų būti amerikiečių kompozitorės Tania León (gimusi Kuboje 1943 m.) ir Chen Yi (gimusi Kinijoje 1953 m.). Abi kompozitorės naudoja temas, ritmus ir melodijas iš savo gimtųjų kraštų, bet nesutinka, kad jų muzika būtų siejama su nacionalizmo reiškiniu.

Kalbėdamas apie citavimą postmodernioje kultūroje filosofas Frederickas Jamesonas teigė: „Jie daugiau necituoja tų tekstų, kaip Joyce’as ar Mahleris darė, jie inkorporuoja juos tokiu būdu, kad riba tarp aukštojo meno ir komercinių formų atrodo vis sunkiau apčiuopiama.“ Olivero muzika, žinoma, yra nekomercinė, bet ji deklaruoja kritišką požiūrį į stilistines ribas, kurias mes esame linkę nustatinėti.