Music Tides in the Mediterranean: Sephardic Jews, Maghrebian, Latin Americans...

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In the Mediterranean many music traditions survive that form a complex heterodox ecosystem, the result of the interaction between them, some of which are very old. Such traditions still exist because they have achieved an emotional bond beyond a cultural space in constant change. Thus, the current Mediterranean intangible musical heritage is represented by repertoires of highly diverse origins which, on many occasions, merge and overlap, enabling them to reach new audiences. Some of them, such as the Sephardic, have persisted throughout the Mediterranean time and space thanks to their capacity to enrich themselves through contact with other traditions, always maintaining their own idiosyncrasy and serving as a source of inspiration for other very different and distant types of music.

History tells us that music has left historically significant landscapes in the Mediterranean, sound ecosystems that have unequally represented their inhabitants throughout the recorded centuries. We know of the importance of population exchanges, invasions, empires and their falls. And each of them were standard bearers for music repertoires, instruments, styles and forms. The successive cultural tides that have always bathed the Mediterranean from all points make it one of the most heterodox and complex music ecosystems known.

While the geographic and administrative borders that their inhabitants have built are very different to those that we knew over hundreds of generations, most of the population have maintained ancestral oral traditions while including successive new forms of expression with every change. Still in the 21st century, the music tides that bathe the Mediterranean coasts are as indebted to the change that modernity continues to bring as to the ancestral oral heritage of their inhabitants.

What is most surprising about this immense ecosystem is the intangible oral heritage that still exists — and here we include the second level orality, which encompasses sound recordings or reproductions. Some examples can help us understand the power of attraction, retention and cultural transformation of its different coasts. Because traditions in Europe have had
many lives, some of them overlapping, others successive.

We find a good example of these multiple lives in the book by Edwin Seroussi *Ruinas sonoras de la modernidad. La canción popular sefardí en la era post-tradicional* (Sound Ruins of Modernity. The Popular Sephardic Song in the Post-Traditional Era, 2019), which describes the round trips of some of the most representative ritual, religious and popular songs of Sephardic tradition. All of them are exhaustively documented in their highly diverse origins, but they came together around the Mediterranean in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, developing a musical rebirth of tradition. Then they were dispersed by wars, made up great waves of migration, moved to other continents, mixed... and became different and yet equally relevant.

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The photo on the book cover, kindly provided by Ana Benarroch, a member of the current Sephardic community in Madrid, tells us a story of Sephardic Jews in Morocco, in which women are dressed in the traditional Berber manner; that is, in the traditional way of Sephardic women in that area, with heavy elaborate clothes made with fine materials to be worn mainly at weddings. The photo shows some young Sephardic women making a tableau in 1920 at the Gran Teatro Cervantes in Tangier – the tableau was a depiction of a traditional scene so it could be observed, recognised, learned or photographed by the audience. The tableau shows one of the parts of the traditional Sephardic wedding, the bath, a scene that could not normally be contemplated by men, since in photography, however, there is no shame in showing the bath: the situation is acceptable because it is stylised, adorned, de-contextualised, de-ritualised... The scene is kitsch even though it has extraordinary value as heritage. And it is in this new kitsch space caused by dislocation where many of the old traditions are inserted into contemporaneity. Ana Benarroch told me after the book came out that her inherited dress – one of those that appear in the photo – is still circulating all over to be used by Sephardic women in one part of their wedding; it has already travelled through Europe, Africa and America, just like the music and poems that usually accompany it in weddings.

One of the curiosities of Sephardic history is that its persistence over time and in all kinds of spaces has made it accessible to many non-traditional audiences, so it has inspired musicians and performances that are completely different and distanced, such as Irish or Korean music. The new space-time of the Sephardic tradition is now a third place between tradition and modernity, between the homeland and the host, between the inherited culture and learned cultures, but it retains enough identity elements to be recognised internationally as a reference, influence and source of inspiration. Successive Sephardic migrations throughout the world have contributed greatly to this fact for centuries: they maintain their own characteristics in the successive displacements, but others are gradually added. The author frames these changes in the so-called post-traditional society, one in which modernity is superimposed on tradition without replacing it.

The history of Sephardic music around the Mediterranean in the 20th century is unique in its particularities, but not in its circumstances. More than twenty years before, the book *Música y emigración: el fenómeno musical marroquí en Barcelona* (Music and Emigra-
tion: the Moroccan Musical Phenomenon in Barcelona, 1997), by the author of this article, had already told us how, with the successive migration waves from the Maghreb, the types of music and their performance spaces were changing: hybridisation had officially reached Maghrebian popular urban music. Thus, while some traditions were transplanted, literally, from one shore to the other, others recreated a new space in which the fusions of rai and rock, or flamenco and chaâbi, appealed to new audiences: young people not only with economic and work aspirations, but also identity and intercultural ones.

There was a time when the origins of the residents of some Barcelona neighbourhoods could be recognised just by the music heard through their windows. This is no longer the case. Old and new traditions still overlap; while some survive as an intracultural reference, others begin to share the same space with intercultural aspirations first and transcultural aspirations later. In the communities that began to migrate en masse at the end of the 20th century, as happened with the young Maghrebi ans, tradition had already shown them that it was not a good passport for post-industrial Europe: it marked a difference in the modern imaginary that was not necessarily positive and was unfail ingly associated with a demonised Arab-Islamic image that rarely represented them.

And herein lies one of the biggest differences between Sephardic Jews and Maghrebi ans on the move: cultural differences were associated with different social and economic statuses. Fundamentally for political and religious reasons, the emigrated Sephardic communities flourished in their community movement, showing an incredible capacity for adaptation and resilience, while maintaining cohesion in terribly complex historical circumstances. The recordings and different versions of their best-known songs multiplied throughout Europe and a network of constant exchange emerged between the populations of the different cities.

In the case of Maghrebi ans, emigration was fundamentally economic, unequal, very rarely community-based, basically individual or in a group, without the intergenerational cohesion of other more widespread migrations. In most cases it required abandonment of the family or forced separation for years, and their means were often limited to their ability to work. Thus, when they formed new communities after individual trips, their diversity and circumstances directed them to smaller repertoires—a kind of lowest common denominator, which tended to be modern according to the ages of the displaced. In the early 1990s this was the situation, although it changed over time, incorporating many of the radicalities that they had abandoned in their countries of origin as a
pure means of material and emotional survival in the new environments.

In this way, the traditional Sephardic repertoire (e.g., romances) became a default reference of the successive settlements of the communities, without creating frictions with the appearance of other repertoires less linked to the Jewish tradition, and the old and modern recordings passively moved aside in many homes; tradition travelled with the families and became part of any new place they inhabited. In the Maghreb case, they were the most modern repertoires (e.g., rai), those that championed the difference with religious traditions, those that separated them from their places of origin and that in some cases were even prohibited, those that most triumphed in the late migrations at the end of the 20th century; in this case, the most modern recordings prevailed in the most significant sound space, and the tradition was linked to the place of origin, creating a gap that successive generations would make more complex by incorporating religious music again, while rapping about everything they felt did not represent them (e.g., I am Islamic, not Arab; or I am Arab, not Islamic; or I am Berber, etc.).

Today, there are no studies on how those repertoires have evolved among those who are no longer so young, among other reasons because belonging to the community and closeness between distant places have been transformed by digital media, but also because other transnational repertoires have found their space by appealing to the most recent generations. This is the case of hip-hop, reggaeton or trap. These new repertoires now appeal almost exclusively to certain generational spectra, but they link them together transnationally through digital platforms, blurring the “cultural difference” and the concept of “place of origin”. They are also part of the Mediterranean, like the rest of the music tides, but they are rarely identified with it or with its people and traditions. They coexist and interbreed, but the bases of their mere existence or their international popularity could not be more different from those of the oral traditions with which they still coexist.

There are many more examples of how successive population movements have changed the musical (and cultural) tides of the Mediterranean, but I would like to close this story with a situation in process: the insertion of the protection of the music of oral tradition within our post-industrial and digital society; that is, the place occupied by traditional music that is considered representative among the rest of the most modern and diverse music tides.

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In today’s intangible musical heritage, significant oral traditions are halfway between UNESCO heritagisation and the most radical kitsch. Traditions have bastard children and develop schizoid variants, nostalgia and transnational exchange being among their most common characteristics. The immersion of tradition in contemporaneity is kitsch: the feeling of constant loss, the stylisation of its most recognisable features, nostalgia, the still recognisable mix, the new performance and listening scenarios, the (different) interpretation of the others... In these musical circumstances kitsch becomes an effective channel of emotional communication between those who do not speak the same cultural language.

The musical traditions that survive in the Mediterranean do so largely because they have achieved an emotional bond beyond a cultural space in perpetual change, beyond geographies and theatres. In this respect, the music tides
of the Mediterranean in the 21st century continue to amaze us, not only revealing some of their most hidden ancient secrets (such as the Sardinian canto a tenore), but also for decades bringing other music traditions, including a myriad of popular Latin American repertoires (from the bolero or ranchera to the pasillo or forró). The current perpetual dislocation and reuse, as well as the mere digital existence of the most deeply-rooted oral traditions, creates a kitsch sentimentality that, in many situations, can be its best guarantee of survival.
Festival de Fès: L'Eau et le sacré, 2017.