

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

Roda, Jessica, preface by Edwin Seroussi. 2018. *Se réinventer au présent: Les Judéo-espagnols de France. Famille, communauté et patrimoine musical*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes. 268 pp.

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Most publications with the term “Judeo-Spanish” in the title are about the language and/or the songs in that language. Here, “Judéo-espagnol” is a practical term referring to a language, a people, a culture, a song corpus and its transformations, and how they all work together. The reader who opens the book expecting a docile corpus of Judeo-Spanish songs with transcriptions, analyses, and a discussion of singing styles will not find these but will become acquainted with a song repertoire intriguingly presented more as actor than object. Roda uses her training as an ethnomusicologist, an anthropologist, and an accomplished musician to juggle history, politics, theory, concepts, pioneers of past generations, and living people, for whom she has clear respect and affection. The theme of *patrimonialisation* is central, along with its inseparable companions, production and safeguarding.

Part 1 discusses the construction of Judeo-Spanish identity in pre-expulsion Spain, then in the Ottoman Empire and, finally, in mainland France — referred to throughout the volume as “the Hexagon,” which might puzzle readers who read French but are not familiar with the term. The discussion goes into more detail for

developments after World War II and the Holocaust, especially from the 1960s on, introducing the main organizations that were formed, Judeo-Spaniards as a transnational community, identity construction, the renaissance of Judeo-Spanish culture, an overview of early recordings and publications, and the standardization of the sung repertoire. Part 2 adds more details to this discussion and introduces the concept of music that is “artified” (French: *artifiée*), and the interpretation and theory of “performance” as a process of interactions among artists, the community, and the musical “objects” themselves. Roda introduces four central “moments”: (1) early 20th century immigration to France and assimilation; (2) the Holocaust; (3) the renovation of the community after World War II; and (4) community expansion, including the creation of community associations and activities (54).

Rather than discuss specific performance practice traits of traditional songs within a community, the author explains early on that most of the people she interviewed became familiar with the repertoire, except for select Passover songs, only as adults. Most had heard Judeo-Spanish spoken little or not at all in their families (44, 56-7, and elsewhere): the absence of memory is a recurrent theme, together with the construction of identity and of new memories. It should be noted that Roda’s fieldwork began in the early 21st century; during prior generations of fieldwork, there were more people alive who had grown up with at least a certain amount of Judeo-Spanish as a family language and more familiarity with the songs.

During my own fieldwork in Paris in the early 1990s, some of the professional singers Roda discusses were already active, while a group of women from the community met weekly to sing some of the old songs. At the time, I was also interviewing both older tradition-bearers about their reactions to professional singers, and younger, professional singers about their approach to performing a tradition which was, in most cases, not their own. It is fascinating to read Roda's approach to both these issues over two decades later, adding the changes brought by easy access to the internet; greater comparison of the reactions and approaches between these two time periods would further illuminate her findings (Cohen 1996).

The study continues with thoughtful analyses on community, family, and individual levels, drawing on in-depth fieldwork conducted with both community members and professional singers. Along the way, classic issues such as romantic notions about connections of Sephardic songs to medieval Spain, the Westernization of repertoire, canon formation, and approaches to performance practice are addressed, with detailed references to early recordings and print publications, while never losing sight of the key concepts mentioned earlier. In the relatively short chapter evocatively named "Interlude," the concept of *artifaction* is developed, and its early origins highlighted (143-52). *Artifaction* is also closely linked with the *signature singulière*, the artists' own personal performance styles (145ff). All this is also discussed in the context of "authenticity," and that rather fraught term's meanings (232 and elsewhere). Following the "Interlude," the remaining chapters focus on performance, at various

levels from wide-ranging festivals to community venues and individual practices; on the changing construction, contexts, and functions of the Judeo-Spanish song repertoire; and, always, the development of its role and character in the context of patrimonialisation. The inevitable paradoxes that emerge in this complex, constantly evolving scenario are explored in often absorbing detail. Performances by professional artists who learned the repertoire from recorded and/or printed sources are analysed in terms of their role as model song sources for the community, rather than dismissed as "inauthentic." Indeed, a recurring theme in the book is the irony of "les Judéo-espagnols" knowing that a reconstructed heritage is not "authentic," yet coming to not only accept polished professional products but also, in a way, to re-appropriate them so thoroughly that they end up becoming a new symbol of their identity.

It is impossible to include every player in any scenario. The Belgian-Spanish professional artist and educator Sofia Noel (1915-2011), and her recordings and dissemination of Judeo-Spanish songs, might have been added to the classically trained singers mentioned in the book. The Canadian Moroccan Judeo-Spanish ensemble Gerineldo, with its insistence on authenticity, flourished in the late 20th century and after a long hiatus was invited to Paris by the Moroccan Jewish community (2014) and the Festival des Cultures Juives (2015); its reception by the community as professional artists (mostly) from Judeo-Spanish family backgrounds would have been interesting to learn about, especially in relation to notions of heritage and authenticity. One can always think of a few more examples to add to a study, but

in any case, the central associations and individuals discussed by the author are brought to life in an engaging way, which only this kind of active, ongoing, and well-considered fieldwork, along with reflection backed up by solid research, could permit.

Fieldwork conducted in the same place decades apart often yields interesting comparisons. In a few cases, my earlier fieldwork led to observations somewhat different from the author's. With respect to her remarks about singer Gloria Levy (132), my conversations with the latter's mother, Emilie Levy, in the early 1990s suggested that it was the mother's idea that the younger woman sing for the recording which became so influential, while she, Emilie, played mandolin. Emilie and other women also told me that the mandolin was quite commonly played by young Sephardic women in the former Ottoman regions, and was not necessarily an example of later Westernization, as Roda suggests (132). The American singer Judy Frankel (196-8; video example 7), who passed away in 2008, did indeed sing during the folk revival years, but her formal music studies were in Western art music, and she sang with professional choirs, as well as medieval and renaissance ensembles, which influenced her singing at least as much as the folk revival (conversations with Judy Frankel, 1990-2006; notes for the documentary about her: Regan 2008). About the songs themselves, one small cautionary remark comes to mind: identifying the melody used for the popular Sephardic song "La comida la manyana" as Greek (60) is likely to irk those who identify it as Turkish or Armenian.

These and a few other details aside, any problematic aspects are technical rather than content related. The absence of

an index is inconvenient and, occasionally, a reference is fully cited in a footnote but does not appear in the bibliography. There is no list of the musical examples on the corresponding website; the two long links given for them must be painstakingly copied and then do not function, at least at the time of writing this review. An online search yields a web page with the video examples, but it lacks sufficient information about performers' names, song titles, and corresponding page numbers. Finding the discussion of a video example by returning to the book is hampered by the lack of a list of examples and corresponding page numbers, or of an index, unless one has previously thought to jot down the page number each time a video is mentioned, or has constant access to the internet to call the examples up as one is reading. There are a few minor errors, such as an extra "n" in Benedict Anderson's name (32, n. 8), and a few instances of missing uppercase letters, even taking into account the differences between French and English usage. Internationally respected ethnomusicologist Edwin Seroussi's knowledgeable and perceptive preface appears in a French translation, with the original English version provided as an annex at the end of the book. There are a few errors in both. In the original, these include the prepositions "on" for "in" (254) and "of" for "about" (253); the plural verb "create" where a singular verb is required (254); superfluous definite articles, and a few typographical errors, such as "in from of" rather than "in front of" (254) and "provides them will" rather than "with" (255). In the French translation, "this unique ethnomusicological study" (255) is mis-rendered as "*cette étude unique d'ethnomusicalité*" (17), and "old romances" (253) becomes "*vieilles bal-*

lades romantiques,” “old romantic ballads,” instead of “old narrative ballads” (15), thus reinforcing common misunderstandings of the Spanish term “romance.” It might seem unduly nitpicky to list these, but as the essays are both the first (French) and the last (English) words one reads, more careful proofreading would have been helpful.

None of this detracts from the high quality of this thought-provoking, nuanced, multi-layered volume, which is a development of the author’s doctoral dissertation, and was awarded the Université du Québec à Montréal’s 2014 “Respatrimoni” prize. While the world of Judeo-Spanish music culture in France as evoked by Roda is fascinating in itself, the book’s solid research and fieldwork, and its central concepts and ideas go well beyond this community and its old, new, and emerging traditions. Her innovative approach toward music, heritage, and identity is likely to spark productive discussions and lead to other new pathways for a long time to come. 🌱

REFERENCES

- Cohen, Judith. 1996. ‘Pero la voz es muy educada’: Reactions to Evolving Styles in Judeo-Spanish Songs Performance. In *Hommage à Haim Vidal Sephiba*, 65-82. Ed. Winfried Busse and Marie-Christine Varol-Bornes. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang
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Steintrager, James A. and Rey Chow, eds. 2019. *Sound Objects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 312 pp.

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The interdisciplinary field of sound studies can be unwieldy due to the range of field-specific terminologies and methodologies, but cross-disciplinary dialogue makes this expansiveness productive. In *Sound Objects*, co-editors James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow, along with their 12 contributors, join that cross-disciplinary dialogue, placing sound studies scholars, approaches, and ideas from different fields together in a shared space of interaction, productively engaging multi-faceted approaches to the study of sound and its complexity. As literary scholars, Steintrager and Chow share a philosophically and theoretically informed engagement with the messy and unruly subject of sound; however, the co-editors do not abandon history, culture, or listeners. As they argue in their introduction, “you cannot theorize sound without thinking [about] the engagement of interior and exterior, of perceiver and environment” (12). The contributors to this volume engage with theories and philosophies of sound that are historically and culturally grounded and situated in the bodies and sensory experiences of a contextualized listener (13).

Sound Objects pushes its readers to examine sound objects and how they function relationally in the world, employing diverse frameworks to address these varied auditory experiences. These frameworks include the commodification of sound, posthumanism and nonhuman