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Review

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Budapest, 1976. The 22-year-old musicology student Judit Niran Frigyesi is called to the office of her professor, together with the only other Jewish student in their program, and tasked with a research project to study Jewish music in Budapest. At first, her only thought is "how did they find us?" (35). Jewish identity was not something one talked about in Communist Budapest, and definitely not something one disclosed. But gradually, this research assignment turned into one of her most important academic works as well as the start of a personal journey into the investigation of her own Jewish identity. Today Frigyesi is a professor of musicology and ethnomusicology at Bar Ilan and Tel Aviv universities and, in addition to being an expert on the music of Béla Bartók, is one of the most prominent scholars on Jewish synagogue music, and particularly Ashkenazi prayer chant. Her recent monograph, *Writing on Water: The Sounds of Jewish Prayer*, tells the story of the formational moments of her academic career in Jewish music when she started field research in clandestine Orthodox prayer houses in Communist Budapest, interviewing and recording prayer leaders, almost all of whom were Holocaust survivors. This book is one of a kind in two ways: it is the only ethnography of Jewish prayer in Communist Budapest, opening a small window into the sounds of an oppressed minority community that was hidden from public view and that no longer exists in this form. But it is also remarkable in its evocative, reflexive writing style and the use of poetry and image to convey a sonic atmosphere.

The reasons for this choice of form lie in a problem that has accompanied ethnomusicology from its very beginnings: how to translate sounds into words. The inevitable failure of any attempt to do so is alluded to by the poetics of the title. However, Frigyesi's

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engagement with this problem goes beyond the question of describing sounds, it is rather a question of how to "grasp the meaning of sound in prayer" (v). While Frigyesi was initially assigned with the task of studying Jewish music in a systematic manner with the use of transcriptions and analysis, she gradually discovered through her fieldwork encounters that such an approach would get her nowhere – and that it would not do justice to what her interlocutors cared about most. In a reflection that is relevant to all studies of sacred and transcendental musical practice, she writes,

> [M]any of us suffer from the demand of scholarship to clarify what is not possible to clarify and to systematize what is not possible to systematize. I collapsed under the weight of this demand. I began to feel that by sticking to the rules of scholarly writing, I was betraying the people who had entrusted me with their music, culture, thoughts and philosophy. My scholarly writing failed to transmit what was most important to the practitioners of these rituals: *the poetics* in *the sound* of prayer (vi).

These poetics are what Frigyesi attempts to evoke through the use of reflection, ethnographic vignettes, poetry and photography. They cannot convey any direct forms of analytical knowledge, but they can convey an atmosphere and a soundscape from which multiple meanings emerge (15).

The challenge of conveying the sounds and meanings of Jewish prayer in scholarly writing also relates to the particular relationship between text and music in Jewish religious practice. When asking her research partners to translate the meanings of the text they prayed, they would first hum the melody of the prayer and then stop to translate in a neutral, disinterested voice. When this happened, she knew that she wouldn't "learn anything that really matters," as the "meaning of the words emanated from the melody," (95) not the words themselves.

> They were translating from a language and an existence in which *music and words are one*. They were translating a culture for which the meaning of words is *within the music*, into the language of a culture in which music and words had separated and become eternally alien to one another (ibid.).

The poetic writing style is therefore also a way to attend to a particular Jewish approach towards sound and meaning, where separating the meaning of words from the music would, in her opinion, completely obscure and miss what is meaningful about this practice.

This analysis builds on her earlier musicological work on Jewish *nusah* and rhythm, in particular her description of rhythm in Jewish prayer as "flowing" (Frigyesi 1993), following its own logic, temporality and aesthetics, which has become her most important contribution to Jewish music studies. *Writing on Water* is the continuation of the aquatic metaphor to describe what she considers the "essence" (vii) or "secret" in the sounds of Jewish prayer: the flowing rhythm that emerges from the practice of *davening*, the practice of prayer. This flowing rhythm, however, is impossible to transcribe, as the secret of davening lies in the "*color* of the voices and in their *fluctuation*"

(121). These voices might sound "ugly" when judged by Western classical aesthetic ideals but in the sounds of prayer their timbre and heterophonic interplay create a soundscape of beauty and transcendence (see Frigyesi 2007). Throughout Frigyesi's writing, one can sense the deep love and appreciation she has for these seemingly "messy" and "disorderly" musical practices. However, the use of the term "essence" does seem unsettling, and its essentialist undertones seem to contrast with the otherwise highly reflexive ethnographic writing.

The book is deeply autobiographical, telling the story of how this research assignment rattled both Frigyesi's scholarly and personal identity and shaped her into the person and researcher she is today. When she began this research, she was determined to study the religious practices of Orthodox Jews from a scholarly distance, applying all the analytical tools she had learnt in her studies to create an objective piece of scholarship that had nothing to do with herself and her identity. Although she was viewed as an insider by her advisor, these practices seemed very distant from her secular, assimilated life in Budapest. But even in her first fieldwork encounter at an Orthodox service, when she was overwhelmed with conflicting emotions and left hastily, she realized that it was impossible for her to remain emotionally untouched in the research process.

> [H]owever hard I tried to convince myself of the contrary, the object of my research *was* my 'tribe'. It was easy to call them 'religious' (while I am secular) and 'uneducated people from some backward village' (while I am an intellectual from the capital); […] but for me, this did not work. I tried to focus on my task and make myself believe that it was a purely scholarly undertaking: the ethnographer collects strange melodies and customs. But wearing the costume of the ethnographer among men who could have been my grandfathers, I began to feel ridiculous (33).

The encounters in her fieldwork therefore also enabled her to reconnect to her own Jewish identity, which in Communist Budapest was a combination of being self-evident and simultaneously taboo – "so much an ordinary matter of everyday existence," that it did not even occur to her "to ask what Jewishness really meant" (21).

Reflections on positionality weave through the book like a thread. The autobiographical stories situate Frigyesi within a secular, assimilated, urban and educated Jewish environment, which she perceives as distant from the religious lifeworlds of the Orthodox Jews she studies with. But the story of Frigyesi's research encounters is one that revolves equally around gender and her positionality as a secular Jewish woman researching Orthodox Jewish men. There is a stark contrast between the secular world, where she can inhabit all spaces regardless of her gender, and the women's section in the Orthodox prayer house, where she can only observe the prayers from behind a curtain of white lace.

> I take my place of sacred isolation, the only woman and the only non-believer in the empty women's section of a secret Jewish prayer house. Soon, prayer will descend on me through the arabesque of white lace. And so I will remain: close to them, flying with the gestures of their souls, while tied to the earth by the loneliness of my alien existence (12).

The loneliness is created, on the one hand, through her distance from sacred, faith-driven religious practice, and on the other hand through the spatial gender segregation. Her position behind the curtain, illustrated with photographs of white lace, is not one of discrimination, but one of distance. Throughout the book, she never speaks about this distance from a position of bitterness. On the contrary: her research encounters with elderly men are all characterized by the utmost respect – respect for the difference in age, gender, and belief, as well as respect for the common ground of identity, community and humanity.

Frigyesi's story is also emblematic for an entire generation of secular Jews in Communist Budapest that grew up with a silence not only around Jewishness but also around "those who did not come back" (22), a euphemism for those murdered in the Holocaust. As such it is also a second-generation memoir and an attempt at narrating the silence that surrounded the Holocaust in many survivor families, but also particularly under Communist regimes. Related to the problem of how to put sounds into words is also the problem of how to represent that which lies beyond words. The trauma of the Holocaust looms over the writing as the unspeakable and the unsounded presence, "the silence of unsung songs" (16).

> I lived under the protective veil of gentle silence. In my family, the most important things were never said. One does not need to speak too much about oneself—not to anyone, surely not to people outside the family, and absolutely not to the world at large. One does not need to tell *the story*, because we know it anyway and *the others* would not understand (21).

Throughout the book, the Holocaust continues to be addressed through this "protective veil of gentle silence" – rarely directly mentioned, and if so, often as something that is not talked about. Her parents rarely spoke about those relatives who had been murdered. One of her interlocutors only agreed to an interview if she didn't ask him anything about Auschwitz (199). And Frigyesi herself only touches upon trauma in the form of a poem called "It's a Tape," written "in the memory of those who did not come back": "ashen trails on magnetic tape / scars on the face of remembrance / a systematized, complete and collected / opus magnum…" (230).

Although Frigyesi's ethnographic descriptions are filled with richness and the beauty, the stifling atmosphere of the repression of Jewish religious practice under the Communist regime is felt throughout the book. Frigyesi's research turns out to be severely challenging and even dangerous when the suspicion of her tape recorder grows and she is accused by community members of being a spy (59), and is later advised to emigrate (193–194). She did so in 1980, thereby ending her research in these communities. When she returned to Budapest after the fall of Communism and visited Jewish prayer houses, the atmosphere had completely changed: the opening of the borders had also led to increasing influence of Israeli and American Jewish Orthodox organizations that reshaped the traditional prayer service – "replaced by the young, the healthy and the energetic, by a religion in the present tense that was transparent, obvious and immediate" (243) and no longer carried with it this sense of secrecy and memory. One

cannot help but to identify some nostalgia in the way Frigyesi describes the disappearance of the soundscape that had been so meaningful to hear at a young age, despite having emerged in conditions of oppression.

My own experience of reading *Writing on Water* partly echoes Frigyesi's story: I initially thought that I was opening a book for purely scholarly purposes, and that reading about Orthodox Jewish prayer in Communist Budapest was foreign to me as a secular, assimilated third-generation-survivor Jewish woman from Vienna. But I too was taken by surprise and overwhelmed by how deeply the book touched me. Perhaps it had to do with my own family's deeply entwined history with Jewish Budapest, and that my great-grandfather may have visited prayer houses that sounded similar to those described in the book. It is this experience of being continuously touched by the past, even though one thinks one has left it behind, that is for me a particular Jewish experience, but in general also so characteristic of diaspora communities which so often find themselves living between different places, times, and belongings. The book, however, goes beyond diaspora experience in that it tells a story about the messiness of all fieldwork and the necessary entanglement of the researcher with the communities she studies. Frigyesi reminds ethnomusicologists, and in particular minority researchers, that no matter how hard one tries to conduct fieldwork from a scholarly distance, remaining unaffected in the research process is not only impossible, it is also academically and personally impoverishing.

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