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Forward

Radical Music for the New Global Shtetl

New Recordings Combine Dizzying Cosmopolitanism With Distinctly Jewish Melodies

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On Charming Hostess's new recording, "Sarajevo Blues," a capella girl-group harmonies blend with hip-hop beat-box techniques and Bosnian war poetry. Zohara's new album, "Scorched Lips," finds common ground among ancient Hebrew love poetry, the Turkish oud and contemporary space music. Koby Israelite's "Mood Swings" is a dizzying blend of ersatz klezmer, blues and New Orleans marching-band funk. And John Zorn's latest work, "Filmworks XV: Protocols of Zion," is an eloquently personal protest against the resurgence of worldwide antisemitism in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks, built on the acid-jazz stylings of jam-band Medeski, Martin and Wood.

What all four of these seemingly unrelated CDs have in common — besides the fact that they're all on Zorn's record label, Tzadik (really the only permanent home to creative new Jewish music) — is a dizzying cosmopolitanism, an engagement with contemporary culture and politics, and indisputably Jewish outlooks and melodies, characteristics that distinguish these new recordings in a fertile environment rich with possibilities.

More than that, these recordings speak to each other and to the modern, engaged listener in a language quintessentially of our time, with a multiplicity of voices suited to the reality of a global village — a village to which a several-thousand-year-old Diaspora culture and the distinctive outlook it has produced are uniquely suited to confront.

They are also, for the most part, recordings of new music inspired by texts — very much in the Jewish tradition of midrash — layering commentaries upon stories, and stories upon commentaries, both lyrically and musically. Thus, for example, Zohara's "Scorched Lips" takes as its leaping-off point vocalist Zahava Seewald's rendition of "*Re'eh shemesh*" ("See the Sun"), an 11th-century Hebrew poem by Solomon ibn Gabirol, which begins as a sinuous, Middle Eastern folk melody propelled by Seewald's soprano before opening up into a Casablanca-fried jazz jam, with Jean-Jacques Durinckx's saxophone blowing cantorially over Michael Grebil's

multilayered oud playing. Seewald surrounds this centerpiece with other renditions of Hebrew poetry, ancient and modern, including more dreamy, experimental tone poems like “*Al Tirah Yaldi*” (“Don’t Be Frightened”) and “*Miyom Lelaylah*” (“From Day to Night”), which seemingly float above celestial, electroacoustic arrangements that evoke a haunting timelessness.

Likewise, on “Sarajevo Blues,” Jewlia Eisenberg builds an entire song cycle around the writings of Bosnian poet Semezdin Mehmedinovic, whom Eisenberg met in a Bay Area bar in 2002. Mehmedinovic’s moving poems and stories of life during wartime — which Eisenberg sets to original music that occasionally recalls the Bulgarian women’s choirs that were all the rage about a decade ago — focus on the gray area where world news and personal lives intersect. Much as she did on her previous effort — the intoxicating, intellectually provocative “Trilectic,” based on the love correspondence between Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis — Eisenberg finds pop melodies hidden inside poetic meters, and releases them in explosive bursts of female voices and harmonies courtesy of fellow singers Marika Hughes and Cynthia Taylor. The end result, in a song like “Death is a Job,” is as catchy and virtuosic as Bobby McFerrin’s “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” It even boasts a catchy, lyrical hook: “I’m not even sure who to hate/ The sniper or the monkey with a Nikon.” Were the song not about avoiding a sniper’s bullet in downtown Sarajevo, it could even be a radio hit.

Zorn himself gets into the act with his “Protocols of Zion.” Ostensibly a soundtrack for a documentary by Marc Levin about the notorious antisemitic forgery that has once again gained purchase among those open to believing in a worldwide Jewish conspiracy, the work captures Zorn, whose main instrument is saxophone, in a rare moment behind the keyboards, improvising with a trio including Shanir Ezra Blumenkranz on bass and oud and Cyro Baptista on percussion. Having already spent much of the last decade and a half composing literally hundreds of new tunes based in Yiddish modes, the unique scales that organize and distinguish Jewish melodies, Yiddish modes with his Masada project, Zorn veritably breathes in a Jewish manner. His keyboard improvisations, alternately pensive and bubbly propulsive, sing in a key familiar to any frequent synagogue-goer, although having gone far beyond basic klezmer, part of the tension inherent in Zorn’s work here, such as “Mystery of the Jew,” is how his music resists the temptation to break out into a *freylekh* or a *niggun*, on instrumental numbers with provocative titles like “Fighting Time,” “Jew Watcher” and “History Repeats Itself.”

It’s not surprising that these disparate artists share much in their approaches. All but Zorn, a native New Yorker who still calls the Big Apple home, are uprooted from their homelands — Seewald and Israelite are expatriate Israelis living in Europe, and the well-traveled Eisenberg has traded her native Brooklyn for San Francisco. Their global wanderings and pan-cultural experiences give them an inordinately broad perspective, and the musical canvas on which they paint is suitably multi-hued.

What's most striking about their work, however, is the manner in which they draw from a palette that is part and parcel of the global village — call it the global shtetl — while creating works that are totally focused and coherent. This is due in part to the imprint of highly individual, stylized artists. Seewald boasts a crystalline voice that would probably be as suited to singing medieval chant or plainsong as it is to avant-garde Hebrew poetry; Eisenberg is the unique product of a Brooklyn upbringing, raised in an interracial urban commune, and all that implies musically; Israelite is a musical postmodernist, a multi-instrumental collagist filtering 21st-century sounds through a Jewish prism.

Zorn himself boasts an entire career as an avant-jazz saxophonist, bandleader and composer predating his overtly Jewish work, but what's most striking about his latest music is its generosity and how effectively it absorbs and reflects the influences of those whose music he has curated for the last decade as the overseer of the Radical Jewish Culture series on his Tzadik label — people like trumpeter Steven Bernstein, saxophonist Greg Wall and Basya Schechter of Pharaoh's Daughter, whose recent solo album, "Queen's Dominion," explores territory equally intriguing and pan-global, albeit from a solidly Jewish point of view.

That is to say, among all these Jewish musicians and composers, most of whom are well under 50, there is a vibrant, vital and ongoing musical and ideological conversation. It's a conversation that gathers up the various strains of diaspora Jewish language and tradition — a veritable Babel unto itself, including Ashkenazic, Sephardic and Mizrahic traditions, among others — and rewrites them with a new grammar and vocabulary that is distinctively modern, aware of the sounds going on all around them, yet one that speaks with a clear Jewish accent transcending that transcends time and space. In the end, this new, radical Jewish music does the conservative work of unifying a world and a history of disparate Jewish traditions.

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