



## Article

# When music therapists adopt an ethnographic approach: Discovering the music of ultra-religious boys in Israel

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### ABSTRACT

Our music therapy encounters with boys from a unique cultural sector in Israel, namely ultra-religious Jews, indicated an urgent need to investigate what their musical world was composed of. Since no prior research has systematically mapped the musical world of these children, a basic field study was required and an ethnographic approach seemed most appropriate. Interviews were conducted with the main musicians who are responsible for shaping much of the musical world of ultra-religious children, as well as music educators, and the data was analysed according to an ethnographically informed framework. Results indicated the existence of a rich and varied musical repertoire that contains sub-genres such as popular ultra-religious music, children's songs, play songs for toddlers, lullabies and waking up songs, Shabbat table songs, learning songs, and traditional melodies (audio recordings are provided). Several distinct environments were revealed in which the music was relevant to the children: the home, educational spaces, weddings and celebrations, and the synagogue. The contribution of these findings to music therapists is discussed. It is stressed that music therapists with such knowledge may increase the level of trust between themselves and their client. In addition, this knowledge has the potential of enabling a music therapist to be better attuned to the ultra-religious communal agenda and thus have increased levels of empathy and tolerance to the client and the issues he or she faces.

### KEYWORDS

music therapy, ethnomusicology, ethnographic study, culture, cultural-sensitive therapy, ultra-religious Jews

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**Publication history:** Submitted 22 September 2016; First published 8 March 2017.

## INTRODUCTION

There are moments in which we feel that we must put aside our role as music therapists whose job is "to effect change through programs of intervention and treatment", the locus of change being "the individual client, whose course of treatment should optimally be beneficial in terms of measurable gains in ability, functionality, health, wellness, or other areas of diagnosed need" (Bakan 2014) and to adopt a different stance. Such was the case when we began to work with Jewish ultra-religious boys in kindergarten and school environments. We found that these boys had different musical backgrounds than we did, and more disturbing, that the concept of music was different for these children and we did not quite know what it meant. Had we had scholarly accounts of the music in the lives of Jewish ultra-religious children (and more specifically, boys), we surely would have read them but, to our disappointment, no such accounts existed. An ethnographic approach was needed in which we could just observe, listen and try to understand how these boys conceive, produce, and consume music. Ethnomusicologists, and more specifically medical ethnomusicologists, base their work on an approach in which they "do not seek to 'change' their interlocutors through therapy, but rather strive to learn from them by listening to their narratives, observing their musical experiences, and participating in collaborative musicking with them" (Carrico 2015). Clients become musical experts, music therapists become knowledge seekers, and the locus of 'change' moves from the interlocutors to the music therapists.

In this article we will describe a modest ethnographic inquiry we began in which we tried to discover just a bit of the musical world of Jewish ultra-religious boys in Israel. As will be seen, we did not (and ethically felt that we could not) address our own clients, and instead started to track information through interviews with ultra-religious musicians and music educators who are responsible for creating and shaping music for ultra-religious children. This initial stage, we believe, can lead to other inquiries focused directly on the children and their musical world. We will begin with a literature review that will briefly describe the ultra-religious sector in Israel, their core values and their deep connection to music.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The ultra-religious sector

The ultra-religious sector is one of the most intriguing cultures in Israel. People in this sector are completely committed to the Jewish code of rules (*Halacha*) and they are generally reluctant to be influenced by Western/modern ideology and way of life (Friedman 1991; Friedman & Shelhav 1985). These people live in communities in towns and cities, usually in separate neighbourhoods that enable them to comfortably maintain their unique way of life. The *Sabbath*<sup>1</sup>, for instance, according to Jewish rules, is a day of utter rest in which no work is permitted, the use of electricity and electric appliances is prohibited, and instead an atmosphere of restfulness and prayer prevails. Thus, roads in the ultra-religious neighbourhoods are closed off, no traffic is permitted, and streets fill with pedestrians on their way to and from synagogue, and to their families and friends. The dress code of the ultra-religious is quite distinctive: men wear black suits with long black coats and black hats, and women dress very modestly, avoiding extravagance, covering all parts of their body, and married women cover their hair as well.

Evidently, these ideas and definitions are highly saturated with different meanings for different people. From our viewpoint as religious (not ultra-religious) men, one of the most important issues here is what we perceive as the ultra-religious total obligation to one set of rules leading to dichotomies such as 'permitted vs. prohibited' and 'pious vs. sinful' person. According to our religious ideology there is an aspiration to combine the religious set of rules with the Western way of life; thus leading to more flexibility.

One of the core (if not the ultimate ultra-religious) ideals is studying the *Torah* (the Bible and other central books in Judaism such as the *Mishna* and the *Talmud*). There is a strict separation between the sexes from a very young age. Boys are encouraged to develop their capabilities of coping with the intellectual challenges that are involved in studying *Torah*. They learn in kindergartens, followed by schools, and then from the age of 12-13, in the *Yeshiva*, a place dedicated entirely to *Torah* study

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<sup>1</sup> *Sabbath*, the Shabbat is the holiest day of the week for the Jewish people. Hence, as a religious imperative, working is forbidden and it is entirely dedicated to prayers, festive family meals and, in general, for the sake of restfulness of the body and soul.

(Scheransky 1999). The girls are encouraged to develop their capabilities of coping with the challenges of raising a family, educating the children, and attaining a job that will support the family financially. They learn in separate kindergartens, schools and then seminaries that provide them with these skills. This way of life greatly supports high birth rates.

As a central value in their society, great emphasis is placed on the education of children (Scheransky 1999). Education is important both as a way to indoctrinate the children to live according to the Jewish code of rules and as a way to develop the children's academic abilities to the maximum. It is quite noticeable, when entering ultra-religious neighbourhoods, that there is an ongoing preoccupation with education. This is because in the eyes of the ultra-religious society, education is not only another aspect of life but one of its supreme goals (Rose 2006). In recent years this tendency has seeped into early childhood education as well, which is no longer considered merely a "babysitting" framework (Landler 1999). To this extent, children, and specifically boys, are enrolled in education from a young age (usually 3 years of age) and the academic days are quite long. Academic abilities that are required for studying *Torah* are highly rewarded; the best learners have the highest status and are most admired by this society.

Generally speaking, people in this sector do not espouse a Zionist ideology and therefore do not serve in the Israeli army and do not celebrate national days such as the Israeli Independence Day and the Israeli Memorial Day for the fallen soldiers. Some ultra-religious sectors are reluctant to speak Hebrew, the formal language in this country, and instead speak Yiddish, a blend of German/Russian and Hebrew, the language used by Jews before the modern state of Israel was founded. This diversity in ideologies has caused quite a lot of tension and conflict between the ultra-religious sector and the mainstream society in Israel. This tension is intensified by the contrasting opinions on many issues such as marriage, abortion, women's rights, and the Sabbath, which have caused many confrontations, some violent (Amir & Ben-Ari 1989; Bizman & Yinon 2000, 2004).

### Music and the ultra-religious sector

Music plays a central role in the ultra-religious sector. Firstly, there is a vast repertoire of traditional tunes (*Nigunim*), some of which are used during religious rituals (*liturgical*) and others which are used in not necessarily ritualistic occasions

such as community and family gatherings (*para-liturgical*). Some of these tunes are said to be hundreds of years old, some were composed by highly esteemed figures while others are popular and well-known and are an integral part of the folklore (Stuchevsky 1988).<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the prayers, especially those cited on the *Sabbath* and during holidays and high holidays<sup>3</sup>, are sung by the community and by the cantor who leads the services. Here, too, many of the tunes are said to be hundreds of years old, others are newer but yet hold high emotional significance for the community members (Mazor 2005, 2014, no date). Thirdly, the actual study of the *Torah* has musical characteristics. The words are cited in a sing-song recitative, which became an integral part of study. It is said that the flow of this recitative is correlated with the extent the learner understands the text; flowing sing-song indicates understanding while broken sing-song indicates difficulty in understanding (Gshuri 1963). Fourthly, music is an integral part of traditional ceremonies and rituals such as weddings and Bar-Mitzvahs and other communal happenings. The music used here is usually upbeat and energetic because it is connected to dancing, eating, and celebration. Finally, in the past two decades there has been a burst of popular ultra-religious music, which is a hybrid of liturgical words with pop and rock style music (Gilboa 2010). There is a flourishing industry of such CDs and these are purchased and used mostly for leisure and entertainment. In fact, part of this industry includes music for children and it is produced and monitored by a handful of well-known and informally authorised songwriters.

Meanwhile, awareness of the possible psychological treatments for people with special needs has developed quite significantly during the past two decades. Parents of children with special needs were inclined to send their children to non-

<sup>2</sup> Some *nigunim* are unique to only one ultra-religious sub-sector, thus, delimiting it from others. Within the ultra-religious sector there are indeed sub-sectors that originated from different countries and regions, mostly from Eastern-Europe.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Jewish religion there are several holidays that are celebrated throughout the year (e.g. Sukkoth, Pesach, Shavuot, Purim, Hanukah). Each of these holidays entail special customs, prayers and tunes. The high holidays, Rosh Hashanah (literally 'the beginning of the year') and Yom Kippur (Day of Repentance) are celebrated at the beginning of the Hebrew calendar (around September). There are extensive prayers and musical modes and tunes that are designated to these holidays.

religious schools which enabled them proper treatment and development. However, this stirred complex moral dilemmas among the parents who did not want their children to be influenced by non-religious ideas and lifestyles. During the late 1990s, many special needs schools for ultra-religious children were founded, enabling the children a culturally appropriate place to develop. Part of this process was the training of an increasing number of ultra-religious psychologists, social workers, speech clinicians and other professions. As noted above, due to the fact that this sector cherishes music and its power, music therapy programmes for ultra-religious music therapists (women only) were also founded (Gilboa 2015). Despite the fact that there are ultra-religious music therapists, there are still many cases in which *non* ultra-religious music therapists work with ultra-religious children, such as the authors of this article. In many cases this happens with schools for boys which, to keep strict gender separation, prefer to employ male music therapists over female ones. Given that ultra-religious music therapy programmes train only women, the only male music therapists are not ultra-religious.

### Music therapy and the ultra-religious sector

Starting to work with ultra-religious boys was, for us, quite a challenge. It was immediately apparent that these children grew up in a cultural environment that seemed to us completely different to ours. We had a different dress code; we spoke with a different accent; we grew up on different games, different songs, different heroes and different ideals. These differences were apparent despite the fact that we were both acquainted with the religious ways of life. Likewise with music, although we were acquainted with many genres and sub-genres of ultra-religious music, we were not fully aware of the meanings and roles that music had in this culture and, more specifically, for young boys. We felt that this challenge went far beyond listening to recordings of ultra-religious music and getting acquainted with the music. This challenge required that we learned how music was connected, perhaps intertwined, with the emotional development of ultra-religious boys.

Normally, music therapists working with clients from a culture that they are not acquainted with are required to 'do their homework' and to become familiar with the musical world of their clients (e.g. Stige 2002; Yehuda 2005). There is usually a corpus of literature written by ethnomusicologists or

music sociologists to relate to in order to acquire such information. For instance, there is a substantial platform of knowledge and ethnographic research on children's music in various cultures around the world (Campbell & Wiggins 2013). In our case, however, we experienced difficulty in doing so. We found no specific sources of information, no books, no articles and no informants to tell us about music in the lives of ultra-religious boys.

At this point we understood that we were supposed to rise to the challenge and to adopt an ethnographic approach (Ashkenazi 1986; Wolcott 1994). It would be our mission to discover as much as we could what the musical world of ultra-religious boys was. It was not our intention to investigate ultra-religious music at large since, as mentioned, this field has already been explored; rather, to focus on the music that ultra-religious boys listen to. As a first step we decided to locate the hard core of songwriters who wrote music for ultra-religious children. These musicians were unofficially approved as producing acceptable music for the children and therefore had tremendous impact on the musical consumption of ultra-religious children. At this preliminary stage of our study they seemed to be the key informants for the inquiry. We also addressed music educators who could report on the ways music is used in kindergartens and schools. These informants all had the additional perspective of parents of ultra-religious children and also their personal histories as ultra-religious children. It is important to stress that we were aiming at the music of boys, not girls, knowing that in ultra-religious education boys and girls are enrolled in separate education systems designated for their distinct gender roles. Therefore, we assumed that the musical world of ultra-religious boys and ultra-religious girls would be quite different and we indeed received such indications from our initial inquiries. In addition, we aimed our investigation at boys up to the age of primary school (six to seven years of age), knowing that at this age there was a significant change in the attitude towards boys both in the educational environment and in the family environment; when the boys are enrolled in primary school they are expected to be much more focused on their academic abilities, possibly having an effect on their leisure time and their musical life (Spiegel 2011). Our research questions were therefore as follows:

1. What does the musical repertoire of ultra-religious boys up to the age of seven include?

2. Where are the main environments in which music is meaningful to ultra-religious boys?
3. In what ways is the music meaningful to the boys?

## METHOD

The research framework in this study was ethnographic. Ethnography is a description of the cultural aspects taking place within a group of people (Angrosino 2007). The role of the ethnographer is to examine, accompany and document a series of events in the everyday life of a specific society, which provides him or her with rich data about its cultural and social activities (Wolcott 1994). Such a framework seeks to verbally outline the cultural reality, giving a preference to experience the society in its natural environment (Creswell 2007; Tsabar-Ben-Yehoshua 1995).

## Participants

Seven ultra-religious informants participated in the study: four men and three women. They were from different ultra-religious communities and all had children of their own. They were chosen because of their in-depth acquaintance with the music of the ultra-religious world and especially children's music. Some of the informants are well-known composers of ultra-religious children's music and are thus considered by many ultra-religious people as experts in this field. Men as well as women were included in the sample to provide different perspectives on the subject. The women in the sample were well acquainted with preschool boys and their music, both as mothers and as kindergarten teachers. The men recalled their personal musical memories as boys and also reflected on their boys' experiences as they saw them. In addition to the expert informants who were interviewed and at times observed or re-interviewed, there were five participants who were spontaneously interviewed. They were located during observations and then contacted and interviewed.

## Tools

Data was collected in the following ways:

### *Ethnographic interviews*

A general list of subjects is addressed throughout the interview although there is no inclination to raise the issues in a specific order or to limit them in any way. Instead, a free discussion is

encouraged in which the interviewer only lightly directs the interviewee. In the context of the present study the following subjects were raised: the informant's musical world as a child, the music s/he sings to his/her children, and his/her acquaintance with the ultra-religious children's musical world (see the full list of questions in appendix 1). Interviews lasted between one and two hours. In two cases there was a need to return for a follow-up interview. Interviews were all recorded on a 'zoom' recorder, and later transcribed word by word for further analysis. The musical material from these interviews included songs and parts of songs that the interviewees recalled from memory.

### *Observations*

Observations were conducted in natural environments (school, synagogue) with minimal observer involvement. The observations were non-participatory in nature in that the observer was not part of the observed environment (Tsabar-Ben-Yehoshua 1995). Altogether four observations were conducted: three at the preschool wing of ultra-religious schools and one at a synagogue. Field notes were taken immediately after each observation including a detailed description of the environment, the participants and the interactions between them. In addition, personal notes were written, elaborating on the observer's subjective feelings. The school observations, including the musical material, were audio recorded so that it could be transcribed and analysed.

## PROCEDURE

Participants were contacted via telephone by the first author and given an explanation of the general idea of the study. They were asked to participate in a one-to-one interview at a location of their choice. If they consented, an appointment was made. At the beginning of each interview the purpose of the study was reiterated and the interviewee was asked to sign an informed consent form. When the data analysis was well underway we sent the results to participants to give interviewees control over the information they revealed during the interview and they had the freedom to omit or revise parts of their interview, if they felt the need. Such consultation with participants is customary in qualitative research. This serves to enhance research credibility because the data is exposed to people other than the researchers thereby gaining more perspective on the material.

Observations took place alongside the interviews. Here, too, a participant, either a teacher

or the principal of the school was first contacted by the first author and given an explanation about the general idea of the study. The informant was asked for permission to conduct an observation in their school or class. After permission was granted, a date was arranged and the observation took place.

Data was analysed according to Wolcott's (1994) ethnographic method which includes description, analysis and interpretation. The *description* includes an exhaustive layout of the data that was found. In the present study we had both verbal and musical materials to describe. To this extent we transcribed all of the interviews and all of the music that we collected. The *analysis* included a classification of the musical genres that we found and the musical environments where the music was played. The *interpretation* of the material focused on understanding how the genres and environments that were found in the study were connected to the emotional development of ultra-religious boys and what implications this had on music therapists. To do this, we combined the new knowledge we obtained from this study with former knowledge we had about music, and music therapists in connection to children, and more specifically – ultra-religious boys.

To ensure proper ethical standards were maintained, interviewees signed informed consent forms. Observations in school were conducted only after we attained the authorisation of the school principal. In addition, the research was approved by the Ethics Committee at Bar-Ilan University's Music Department.

## FINDINGS

Typical to ethnographic studies, the amount of musical and verbal data gathered was enormous. We organised it according to two main axes so that they answer both research questions: (1) *musical genres* that were found, defining each genre, describing what it includes and giving some representative examples. This angle provided answers to our first research question regarding the musical repertoire of ultra-religious boys; and (2) *musical environments* where music existed for the boys. This angle provided answers to our second research question regarding the environments in which ultra-religious boys are exposed to music and how it impacts them.

## Musical genres

### Children's songs

This genre includes original songs that are intended for children. These songs are divided into those intended for babies and toddlers (0-3), those intended for young children (3-7) and didactic songs that are used to enable better learning for the children.

i. Songs for babies and toddlers: The songs in this sub-genre are mostly play songs that are intended to involve the baby or the toddler in game and motion. Words are very simple and the music mimics 'motherese', the natural intonation in which mothers speak to their babies (Stern 1985). This genre, which exists in many cultures, including mainstream Israeli culture, was picked up by ultra-religious children's song composers in the 1990s and modified according to ultra-religious content and restrictions. A good example of such a song is Ariela Savir's 'We sit here together' from her CD 'Hamudisk'<sup>4</sup> (see track 1, appendix 2). The words are "We sit here together today / and look up to the sky / a hand rises up and says hello / and then drops! Bum, bum, bum". Savir explained the didactics behind the making of this song, the need for it to be simple and relevant, connected to the child's body and connecting all of the children together. She also explained what she had to do in order for her songs to be appropriate for ultra-religious children. This was done mainly by regulating the verbal content to avoid sensitive issues such inter-gender hugging and kissing, which are considered inappropriate in this culture, avoiding 'dirty' or 'street' slang, avoiding situations in which males and females mingle together, and avoiding Zionist content, which is usually not acceptable to the ultra-religious ideology (Friedman 1991). There is also a preference for songs with a solid didactic goal (e.g. to teach a word or an idea) and less so for songs that are primarily just for fun. There are many other CDs in this sub-genre, which has been quite popular since the 1990s.

ii. Songs for young children: This sub-genre includes original songs that are intended for boys older than the ones in the previous sub-genre, that is, between the ages of three and seven. At the age of three, boys in the ultra-religious culture go through a significant change where they move from being cared for and taught by female figures at home or at small day care centres to being taught by male figures in a kindergarten called a *cheider* –

<sup>4</sup> A word game combining the words "cute" and CD.

literally 'a room', conceptually a place for learning (Bilu 2000; Spigel 2011). At this age they begin to learn to read and to study *Torah*, and they are separated from the girls. The goal of these songs is, in contrast to the previous sub-genre, to introduce and teach religious ideals. The lyrics are typically about cherishing the *Torah*, love of God, and encouragement to engage in good deeds and in the religious code. Yehudit Shikman's song 'Akiva goes his way' is an example of a song in this sub-genre (see track 2, appendix 2). The transition to the *cheider* has major implications for the songs. Firstly, from this age onwards, boys are not encouraged to listen to women singing; therefore the musical repertoire intended for them will be sung only by boys and men. Secondly, the content of the songs will be more directly aimed at keeping the religious code and loving the *Torah*. Thirdly, the verbal message will be short and simple. Finally, the music will be simple and enjoyable.

iii. Didactic songs: These songs are intended to assist ultra-religious toddlers and children to learn and memorise. Unlike the songs in the previous sub-genre where the song contained a general idea or ideal, here the verbal content includes specific verses and texts which the children are expected to know and memorise. The music 'coats' the words and makes them more accessible and appealing to the child. In this way, the child learns without even realising that he or she is in study mode. There are four different possible combinations of lyrics and music in this sub-genre including a well-known verse with a well-known melody, a well-known verse with an original melody, an original verse with a well-known melody, and an original verse with an original melody. Similar to these songs are short prayers and verses such as the blessing after eating a meal (*Birkat ha'mazon*) which are recited in a recitative-like mode. Here, too, the music 'coats' the text and makes it accessible and easier to remember by heart. This recitative mode is, in some ways, an introduction to the grown up world in which recitative is pervasively used when studying and praying.

### *Bedtime songs*

The genre includes songs in Hebrew and in Yiddish that are intended for (a) putting the children to sleep (lullabies) and for (b) waking them up in the morning. This genre includes traditional and original songs.

i. Lullabies: Some of the lullabies are well-known melodies usually in Yiddish that were passed on from mother to child for generations. Others, most if not all of them, in Hebrew, are lullabies that were

adopted from the mainstream Israeli culture and in some cases adjusted so that the content reflects the ultra-religious culture. For instance, in one well-known lullaby the verse "father went to work..." was changed to "father went to learn *Torah*..." to accommodate to the ultra-religious reality in which fathers usually and ideally learn *Torah* as their main occupation. A third and more recent type of lullaby is a mix of original ultra-religious lullabies that are commercially distributed on CDs for the ultra-religious parents to put on during bedtime (see track 3, appendix 2). Another interesting and fairly recent trend takes the line of the popular baby and toddler CDs such as 'Baby Mozart' and 'Baby Bach', and accommodates central Hassidic *nigunim* that are considered the 'classics' among these communities and arranged to a simple version appropriate for children and babies. Such is the CD 'Hassidic dreams', which includes soft and simple versions of Chabad<sup>5</sup> *nigunim*.

There was quite a diversity regarding the centrality of lullaby singing among the participants in this research. On the one hand there were those who claimed that lullabies were a 'must' in their homes while, on the other hand, there were those, mostly men, who did not recall singing to their children or being sung to by their parents. Possibly, lullabies are more prevalent among mothers, and possibly, as Yehudit Shikman<sup>6</sup> argued, the tradition of live lullaby singing is eroding in the present generation: "today they [the parents] don't sing... and this is because of the CDs and the cassettes. Mothers today, even when they take their children for a walk, speak on their cell phones...they don't have the time or the patience...". These assumptions await further research.

ii. Waking up songs: These songs, which are typically sung in the morning by parents to their children to encourage them to wake up, are eclectic and improvisatory in nature. There is no formal record of such songs and it seems that they are part of a local family tradition. There are parents who simply improvise a verse to fit the atmosphere during the morning and the request to wake up

<sup>5</sup> Chabad, an acronym that stands for wisdom, understanding and knowledge is one of the most famous ultra-religious communities in Israel. Chabad attaches great religious value to music, and considers it an important means for spiritual elevation.

<sup>6</sup> She was one of the interviewees with many connections to this study: She is an ultra-religious musician and a senior music teacher for ultra-religious children. As a parent and grandparent, she also had important inputs for this study.

because it is time. Others simply turn on CD music to accompany and to temper the difficulty of waking up. Yet another participant encountered a scene of waking up music in his *Yeshiva*, where one of his Rabbis walked through the dorm rooms every morning with his guitar singing songs to wake up the boys. Waking up songs are apparently not an organised genre, and certainly not a documented one and further research is required to understand how prevalent it is and what types of music it includes.

To conclude this genre of 'bedtime songs', we shall point at the uniqueness of these songs which relates to the place and time they are used: inside the home, in the family environment, near the child's bed, and never in public; timewise, they are used during the transitional time between day and night, between wakefulness and sleep, or vice versa, between night and day, between sleep and wakefulness. It is exactly because of this intimacy that this genre has not yet been fully revealed, which is why further research must be extremely delicate and culturally sensitive. Families might want to keep their songs to themselves; others might find it embarrassing to reveal such songs, which may be considered by others as foolish or unworthy.

### *Shabbat table songs*

This genre includes songs, some of which are said to be hundreds of years old (Hajdu no date). These songs are unique in that they are sung in the home environment, with the family, during *Shabbat* meals (see track 4, appendix 2).<sup>7</sup> There are three *Shabbat* meals: one on Friday night, one on Saturday late morning and one on Saturday evening. Each of these meals takes place with the entire nuclear family and often with friends and extended family as well. It is customary that in between courses, the family sings some of these songs out of a booklet that includes the lyrics of the most popular songs. In some families it is customary that one or more of the family members chooses the song or the specific melody to be sung.

Yehudit Shikman emphasised the special atmosphere that singing these songs elicits: "they [the children] experience the music, the singing, the power, all through these songs, pure delight! How unifying this is for the family...". Motti described the

quality time he has with his two-year-old son during *Shabbat* meals: "The *Shabbat* evening meal can take two to three hours. What do I do for so long? I dance with my son and we sing songs throughout the meal". Rabbi Alter, one of the accomplished musicians we interviewed, added his personal memories of the *Shabbat* table scene: "We used to sing around the *Shabbat* table. The *Shabbat* table, you could say, is the source of my knowledge of songs. And I am sure this is the case for many people". He went on to describe how the *Shabbat* table serves as a site for passing on family tradition and merging it with other traditions:

"first you imitate you father, right? You begin as a child and sing what your father sings. Then you start leading the *Shabbat* table singing, right? You add new songs that you learned in the *Yeshiva*, some other popular songs, some that your father might not know. But then, you always return to your home, to your father's musical heritage...".

Evidently, this genre has a central role in moulding the family identity as well as one's personal identity.

### *Prayers*

Jewish prayers in general and Hassidic prayers in particular have been extensively documented and studied (e.g. Fleischer 2012; Gshuri 1972; Mazor 2005, 2014, no date) and it is beyond the scope of the present study to elaborate on them. It is, however, important to refer to this music in regard to ultra-religious young boys (up to the age of seven) and to examine whether they are exposed to this music. Most of the prayers take place in the synagogue, and the prayers most rich in music are those held on *Shabbat*, on holidays and especially on the high holidays.

Generally speaking, ultra-religious boys are brought to synagogue from the age of three, which is the appropriate age for boys to move from female company to masculine company in the ultra-religious community (Bilu 2000). However, the boys do not have an active role in synagogue. Instead they are exposed to their particular traditional communal melodies which have the potential to profoundly shape their identity and sense of belonging. By absorbing the atmosphere, they will be able as adults to integrate and take an active part in prayer. In one of our observations that took place during *Shabbat* evening prayers we could see that some boys sat near their fathers while others wandered in and out of synagogue. At one point in the services, children were called to gather at the stairs of the Holy Ark, but remained passive.

<sup>7</sup> Live recordings of such songs are quite rare because it is forbidden to use electric appliances during *Shabbat*, recorders included. Most recordings of these songs were therefore conducted out of the authentic scene, usually right after *Shabbat* is over.



### *Hassidic music*<sup>8</sup>

This genre is intended for ultra-religious people in general, not necessarily for children. However, children are exposed to this music at various occasions such as weddings and other celebrations, at community gatherings and also through the (limited) media channels such as the ultra-religious radio stations, CDs and specially produced ultra-religious DVDs (but not through the television and the internet, which are generally prohibited). This genre is divided into (i) Hassidic *nigunim* and (ii) Hassidic pop music.

i. Hassidic *nigunim*. These are melodies, originally with no instrumental accompaniment that are considered to be decades and sometimes centuries old (Hajdu & Mazor 1974; Mazor 2005 2014, no date; see track 5, appendix 2). There are many stories about the fantastic, sometimes miraculous ways in which the *nigunim* were composed by the Rabbi of the community or the designated composer (Gshuri 1963) and indeed some of these *nigunim* are considered sacred to the extent that they are not supposed to be performed out of their designated context – e.g. a wedding or a holy day (Leibman 2010). It is important to stress that different sub-sectors of the ultra-religious culture ‘own’ different *nigunim* that they composed, although it is quite frequent and natural that ‘local’ *nigunim* become public.

Some *nigunim* start in a very basic form but then become freer and even improvisatory. Many *nigunim* serve as the platform for movement and dance, sometimes building up to an ecstatic point. Motti, for instance, described the experience of singing one of the *nigunim* in his community: “our *nigunim* have no words, you sing continuously and then each person improvises the words that are appropriate for him”. Evidently, *nigunim* have a deep meaning to ultra-religious people and they reflect a very intimate connection that these people have with music (Harari 2013). Singing these *nigunim* require that one is involved in deep contemplation and has the spiritual capabilities to

do so. This is why it is rare for children to be initiated into the world of *nigunim*. The fact that *nigunim* are not accompanied by instruments, or words sometimes, and if so by powerfully sacred words contradicts the simplicity of form and content that is needed for children. Although the official approach is to leave *nigunim* out of the realm of children, they are passively exposed to them or to milder versions of them (instrumental versions, more popular arrangements of them). One of the wedding *nigunim*, for instance, is well-known and much loved by ultra-religious boys (see track 6, appendix 2). As mentioned before there is a Chabad CD intended for babies and toddlers that arranges some of the well-known *nigunim* in a simple ‘baby Mozart’ style. This CD is quite new and rare and it is far from being mainstream in the ultra-religious sector. In any case, ultra-religious boys know about *nigunim*, and are influenced by the attitudes that their parents have towards this music, which is why we include this genre in our review.

ii. Hassidic pop music. This sub-genre is also not intentionally aimed at children but at grown-ups. These songs, which are a hybrid of religion-related words and pop and rock style music, are extremely popular, and are successfully sold as CDs and DVDs, are played on ultra-religious radio channels and in live performances. In addition, many of these songs are played at community gatherings such as weddings and other celebrations (see track 7, appendix 2). The dynamics of this genre resemble that of pop and rock music in the Western world, including more and less fashionable songs, more and less fashionable singers including singers who are considered ‘stars’, huge audiences in live performances, etc. There are also some very popular children’s groups, some of which are considered by ultra-religious children as ‘stars’ and role models (see track 8, appendix 2).

It is exactly for this reason that there is a constant struggle between the music industry and the formal ultra-religious gatekeepers, the former trying to expand its horizons and the latter trying to contain the music within the strict boundaries of the non-Western ideology. The struggle is especially severe in relation to teenagers and children, whom the gatekeepers feel most obliged to guard from undesired influences. For this reason, much of the Hassidic pop music is not welcome in kindergartens and schools, places that are supposed to be ‘sterile grounds’ in relation to Western influences. This attitude towards pop songs is evident in Naftali’s account of the pop music: “These are very nice songs, but they come and go... This song “*ma, ma,*

<sup>8</sup> The terms ‘Hassidic’ and ‘ultra-religious’ are sometimes used interchangeably although they do not have the same meaning. The ‘Hassidic’ sector is just a part of the greater ‘ultra-religious’ sector. It is composed of many ‘Hassidic sub-sectors’, each led by a leader (i.e. the Rebbe), each following a slightly different tradition, dress code, etc. In the context of the ‘Hassidic genre’, however, we preferred to use ‘Hassidic’ because it is the term used in Hebrew for ultra-religious music, mainly because it was the Hassidic sectors that cherished and therefore promoted music much more pronouncedly than other sectors during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

*ma, tovu ohalecha...*" it was such a hit for two to three years and then it disappeared. What happened? Why? Is this song really better than "*tov li torat picha*"? [a traditional song]". It should be noted though that in homes, this music is not as strictly limited to the point that in some homes, popular Hassidic music is part of the regular playlist. In addition, there are some songs that eventually became an integral part of the regular and esteemed songs in the sector and some singers are considered very mainstream and accepted, such as Avraham Fried (see track 7, appendix 2) and Yakov Shweki (see track 9, appendix 2).

### Musical environments

To answer the second research question we will examine in what environments ultra-religious boys are exposed to music and how it impacts them.

#### Home environment

The home is the most basic and important environment for any child, including ultra-religious children. During the extended time that children are in their homes and through their interactions with their parents and other significant figures, they are mostly passive; they absorb the sounds, become familiar with them. The sounds become an integral part of their identity. On a daily basis, these include more and less popular songs that are played on the radio, or more correctly on ultra-religious radio channels, and also more trivial sounds that penetrate the house from the street. In many ultra-religious neighbourhoods, streets are very vibrant and noisy, and they include sounds such as 'live' advertisers asking for donations, announcing the special communal events, and more. In some neighbourhoods it is customary for a siren to go off when *Shabbat* begins, followed in some places by a song connected to the uniqueness of the *Shabbat*. We count all of these as part of the child's musical environment because in line with the ethnomusicological approach, we believe that these all add up to the multi-soundtrack typical of the home environment.

In addition to this ongoing soundtrack there are specific times when music takes place in the home environment, such as the bedtime songs, which we referred to before. As noted, the context of these songs emphasise feelings of warmth, security and love transmitted from parents to children. In addition, there are several verses that are cited in incantation before falling asleep, some of which ask God for a safe night, sound sleep and to wake up

safely in the morning. In the morning it is customary for children from a very young age to chant the prayer '*modde ani*' in which God is thanked for giving the soul back. These prayers are often said together with one of the parents and this imparts upon the child a feeling of double security, that which the parent provides and that which God provides.

*Shabbat* table songs, another genre that takes place inside the home, emphasises the family and its special identity. Around the *Shabbat* table and through these songs, the family dynamics are reflected and emphasised. In families where the father is very dominant this will reflect in father-dominated singing; in families that suffer from constant power struggles this will reflect in a struggle over what song will be sung and by whom. Music, then, becomes a signifier of the family and its emotional status.

#### Educational environment

The educational environment includes the kindergarten and the '*cheider*' in which the ultra-religious boy spends much of his time. It is a place where the child will not only learn academic material but will also absorb the basic ideals of his religion and culture. As mentioned before, music is one of the means through which this process is promoted. Some of the music is introduced repeatedly as part of daily rituals such as the incantation of the morning prayers or the blessings before and after meals. Other music is used as the basis for learning and memorising. Yet other music is used to regulate the children's energies, welcoming calmly in the mornings and energising later in the day. Naftali, a *cheider* teacher, said that knowing how to sing is one of the basic skills required of *cheider* teachers. He added that much emphasis is placed on how music is used within the boundaries of the *cheider*, how to create a calm atmosphere or a more energetic one, what songs to teach and at what age, etc.

The music that children absorb in this environment is therefore emotionally connected to the most basic foundations of religion and culture, to the value of learning, to the understanding of what is allowed and what is not, to the authority of the teacher and to being together with peers, singing with them and chanting with them in unison. This environment is the most safeguarded against external influences and therefore the music is carefully chosen to include only the traditional and the conventional.

### Communal environment

This environment includes times and places when the boy is engulfed by his community, which includes much more than his close family. The ultra-religious sector, more than other sectors, is comprised of many such communities, which share common dress codes, key figures, and collective stories and histories. The community, whose boundaries are not formally defined, meets at celebrations (e.g. weddings, funerals and other events) and for prayers at the synagogue.

i. Synagogue. Men pray at a synagogue three times a day. However, the more pronounced prayers take place on *Shabbat*, during the holidays, and especially during the high holidays. Young boys attend these prayers with their fathers and they wander in and out of the synagogue. Most of the time the boys are receptive to the music and they will become more active partners in the prayers as they approach their *Bar-Mitzvah*<sup>9</sup> at the age of 13. Nonetheless, being exposed to the sound of the synagogue, during *Shabbat*, holidays and high holidays, engraves these tunes deep in the hearts of the boys. In certain communities there are designated places in the prayers when the young boys take an active role, such as the custom in one community to gather the children at the end of the prayer to yell "*umein*" together (the Yiddish pronunciation of the word 'Amen') at the ends of the verses of the *Kaddish* prayer. In other more central synagogues where choirs accompany the prayers, boys will join the choir to add to the pathos of the prayer. The message to the boys is that they are welcome in this environment and that they are expected to be an active part of it in the future. The music in this environment is gradually engraved within the boys and it represents their communal identity.

ii. Weddings and events. Many weddings, Bar-Mitzvahs, and circumcision events<sup>10</sup> take place in ultra-religious society. Children are not usually invited to these celebrations unless they are part of the close family. At weddings, it is customary that children only stay for the first part of the wedding when the actual wedding ceremony takes place, but are then sent home. For this reason, children consider attending these events a real treat and a memorable event. The music at the wedding is

usually subdued at the beginning, including customary *nigunim* specifically designated for weddings. However, once the wedding ceremony is over, louder, more energetic music, a mix of traditional tunes and Hassidic pop is played to accompany enthusiastic dancing. Children who are still around at this stage take an active part in the dancing. Yehudit Shikman stressed that "at a wedding the children have an opportunity to dance, to see the musicians and the real instruments from up close". Rabbi Alter suggests that for the children this is considered one of the greatest forms of entertainment, considering that they are not exposed to TV shows and theatre. There are other events throughout the year where there is energetic music and enthusiastic dancing, such as *Simhat beit hashoeva* and *hilulat lag ba'omer*. Boys take an active part in these festivities, in the dancing and in the singing.

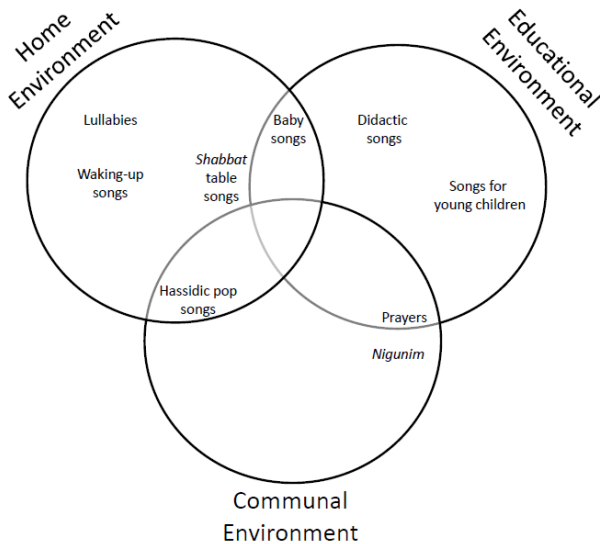
### DISCUSSION

The goals of the present study were to discover, as much as possible, what the musical repertoire of ultra-religious boys up to the age of seven includes and in what environments they are exposed to this music. Through this we could understand the musical world of ultra-religious boys and how music is emotionally intertwined in their lives. Such information could then help us be better music therapists with this population.

Figure 1 provides an integrative summary of the musical genres and sub-genres that were found in this study to be typical to ultra-religious boys. The genres are located in the environments in which they are relevant. This graphical layout enables an understanding of how each environment includes different types of music, and how each environment plays a unique, sometimes conjoint role in the musical life of ultra-religious children. The home environment is mostly about providing parental warmth, the security of routine and the particular identity of the family. The educational environment provides the basic fundamentals of the child's culture and religion which includes obedience to the code of rules and to the authority of the Rabbi, the obligation to pray and to study the *Torah*. The educational environment also provides the foundation for social life and for bonding with the peer group. The communal environment provides group identity and the sense of belonging to a larger entity, to knowing its unique customs, its celebrations, festivities and holidays throughout the year.

<sup>9</sup> A celebration of the boys' thirteenth birthday in which, according to the Jewish tradition, one becomes responsible for his (good or bad) doings.

<sup>10</sup> Boys are circumcised at the age of eight days. This is usually done in a public event and followed by a festive meal.



**Figure 1: An integrative summary of the musical genres and sub-genres of ultra-religious boys in relation to the environments they are played in**

Lullabies, didactic songs or other musical genres as an instrument to convey a cultural tradition, are not necessarily unique to the ultra-religious society. This can be found in various traditions worldwide such as the musical world of children in North India (Sarrazin 2013), in Gambia (Huisman-Koops 2013) and in South Africa (Emberly 2013). Nonetheless, we think that music for Jewish ultra-religious children is different. While according to Emberly, there is in addition to the adult-driven music (by community leaders, teachers, etc.) a factor of self-made, autonomic children-to-children music making factor, ultra-religious children are entirely receptive to musical enculturation. They are not expected to convey or to teach their tradition, but to receive it from the adult, to experience and to digest it. Though it seems that the children enjoy this music, they are less aware of its ways in marking their religious, cultural and communal boundaries and determining what is allowed and what is forbidden. As adults, these children will have the role of taking all their absorbed tradition, and conveying it to the next generation, including through music.

Given that the child is receptive to music and to its enculturating influences, from the adult viewpoint, music therapists might have an impact on children, depending on what music they play during sessions. Indeed, throughout the years we have been practising, we have encountered the concerns of teachers and parents when their children begin music therapy. They frequently ask "what music are you going to put on?" and "do you know our music?" implying that they want to be sure that their children will not be exposed to forbidden music which might have a negative

impact on their enculturation. At times parents are quite direct about this asserting that: "remember that our music includes holy songs only" or "be aware that we don't want our son to be exposed to 'hollow' music". Interestingly, this does not apply so directly to other, more active modes of music therapy such as improvisation. For many of these boys (and their teachers and parents), the idea that anyone can play, that anyone can produce sounds and that this will be given time and space, dignity and understanding, is unfamiliar. It is therefore not perceived as being potentially prohibited by the religious code. Given this, we find that improvisation, the mere idea of playing freely with no constraints, is in itself a wonderful medium for many ultra-religious boys to examine, to fantasise, and to express themselves.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC THERAPY

Our findings have several implications for music therapists working with ultra-religious boys. Firstly, as we mentioned above, this study shows how central, prevalent, and powerful music is in the lives of ultra-religious boys. Indeed, our experience has shown us that many ultra-religious boys are highly drawn to our music rooms, in comparison to children from other sectors who find the room less appealing or are even intimidated by the fact that music therapy is only for 'disturbed' children. The deep connection that we find between many ultra-religious boys and music is a great advantage. Most of the children that we see in the music therapy room are not usually diagnosed with severe pathologies; they are what their parents and teachers define as 'normal children with emotional problems' and indeed many of them are not (yet) psychologically or psychiatrically diagnosed. The fact that they are attracted to music is therefore even more important. Music therapy is not perceived by them (or by their parents) as a 'treatment', though as the sessions progress it becomes apparent to them how deep this medium is rooted in their emotional world and how much potential it has to help them.

Secondly, music therapists must take careful responsibility when getting acquainted with this music, its many genres and sub-genres, the different environments in which it appears and the emotional implications that all of these have. Different musical genres are related to different environments. Therefore, when an ultra-religious client is involved in a specific musical genre he is indicating to the music therapist what environment

he is placing himself in and perhaps what emotional needs he is seeking. For instance, a child who repeatedly asks for *Shabbat* table songs is indicating a specific atmosphere and a specific emotional need. If, however, he is involved in loud wedding music, he is placing himself in a different environment, which calls for a different emotional focus. Only the music therapist who is aware of these nuances can professionally attend to the child's emotional needs.

Thirdly, it is important that the music therapist is acquainted with the different sub-sectors of the ultra-religious society. Different boys come from different sectors in the ultra-religious society and therefore have different connections to music. It is important for the music therapist to find out about this background so that s/he can better understand the client. In one of the sessions one of us gave, for instance, a boy came in dressed up in his best clothes and with very high spirits. It was so obvious to him why this was a day of celebration that he did not explain it. The music therapist, although acquainted with the ultra-religious world, was not acquainted with the customs of the specific sub-sector that this boy belonged to. A short inquiry revealed that the grandson of the head of his community (the *Rebbe*) was getting married that day and his entire community was planning to celebrate. The session then became one big (musical) party.

The cultural-sensitive approach that we are suggesting here has a great impact on the children. They understand that we, the music therapists, belong to a different cultural world; they understand that at first we do not understand them. Therefore, any attempt by the music therapist to get acquainted is perceived as an attempt to get closer, to respect their world. If the music therapist already knows some of the music that 'belongs' to these children, and presents it, it is usually perceived as a pleasant surprise. It can enhance the rapport between the client and the music therapist.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was conducted in the limited time and space of a single research project. The ultra-religious society, however, is vast, complex and heterogeneous and it is beyond the scope of any single study to encompass all of the musical styles in all of the sectors of this society. In the present study we did our best to get as broad a picture as possible of this phenomenon but additional studies are needed to complete the task. After asking

adults about children's music, it is pertinent to see and to hear what the children themselves do with music and to see what they think it means to them. In this respect, it is important to focus on the musical world of boys from different ultra-religious sections, each of which has different musical heritages that might influence the musical education that the boys receive.

An additional limitation of this study was that we, as researchers, had an outsider's perspective and this naturally affected the ways we gathered, understood and interpreted the data. Even if we had the opportunity to get to know better parts of this sector (i.e. by becoming acquainted with music genres and musical environments) and even if some of our perspectives have changed (i.e. we understand more deeply how music is connected to the emotional infrastructure of the ultra-religious boy), we still cannot consider ourselves as ultra-religious. Hence our perspective is that of outsiders. Although insiders were interviewed as part of the study and consulted regarding the findings, the organisation of the data, the analyses and interpretation were conducted by us. It is therefore advisable that in future studies, ultra-religious people, perhaps music therapists, take part as researchers and provide a different, 'insider' perspective on the phenomena.

Other information about the musical world of ultra-religious children still awaits further research. For one, it is important to know about the emotional and social roles of music in the lives of ultra-religious adolescents. As was inferred in our description of Hassidic pop music, there is a conflict between some of this music and the ultra-religious mainstream. This and other music that ultra-religious adolescents are exposed to might turn out to be important in understanding their inner world, and in identifying typical conflicts that they, like many other adolescents, have with the world of adults. A second direction of inquiry would be to study the musical world of ultra-religious girls. As mentioned before, the educational tracks of boys and girls in the ultra-religious society are mostly separated and in any case extremely different. It is important to know what genres and sub-genres the girls are exposed to and what environments are relevant to them. Through such an inquiry it would be possible to see what roles music plays in the world of these girls and consequently to improve music therapy with them. Such a study will need to be conducted by a woman who will have access to environments that are designated for women only, so that she could comfortably interview mothers and female educators, and hear their authentic

singing and incantation.

On a more general note, we believe that the idea that music therapists can adopt an ethnographic approach and that this can benefit our field was successfully demonstrated in this study. We hope that this idea is implemented more in the future and that the connections between the fields are strengthened for the benefit of all.

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## APPENDIX 1

1. Please tell us about yourself in general.
2. Please tell us about your childhood. (Where did you grow up? Where did you learn? Where and what did you play? Any significant experiences in childhood?)
3. Are you acquainted with the term 'children's songs'? Which children's songs do you know?
4. Did your parents sing to you? If yes – could you give examples (preferably sing them).
5. Did these songs influence you in any way? Back then as a child, today as an adult?
6. To the best of your knowledge, what music are children exposed to today? Is this any different to what you were exposed to as a child? Could you please give examples?
7. Do you sing to your children? In what situations?
8. Do people other than you sing to your children in any other situations?
9. In your opinion, what are the roles that music plays in children's lives? Does it contribute anything to their emotional/educational environment?

## APPENDIX 2: LIST OF TRACKS

Track 1: We sit here together / Ariela Savir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoAtAMqcBol&feature=youtu.be>

Track 2: Akiva goes his way/Yehudit Shikman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8F84UriYymQ>

Track 3: A Lullaby/Ariela Savir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5nKfLuVwus&feature=youtu.be>

Track 4: A Shabbat table song

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpEk\\_ODNluE&spfreload=10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpEk_ODNluE&spfreload=10)

Track 5: A *Nigun*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI6DOBZUBJo&spfreload=10>

Track 6: The Canopy *Nigun*/ piano: Avishai

Borovsky

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RwTaOKSPcK&spfreload=10>

Track 7: "Ki Hirbeiso"/ Avraham Fried

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFosdm5-BuQ&spfreload=10>

Track 8: the "Kinderlach"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ix7hMGN1SL0&list=PLLFW7Kfoc5zLAHEorB5S7QqalcJSZrYh&spfreload=10>

Track 9: Va'Ani Be'rov Hasdecha/ Yakov Shweki

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3EtlVaiZyo&feature=youtu.be>

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### Suggested citation:

Seri, N., & Gilboa, A. (2018). When music therapists adopt an ethnographic approach: Discovering the music of ultra-religious boys in Israel. *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy*, 10(2), 189-203.