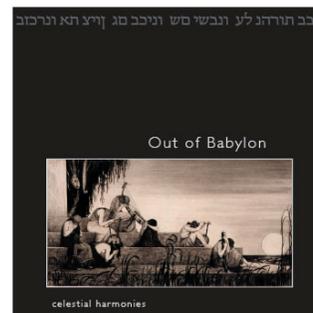


celestial harmonies

out of babylon:
the music of baghdadi-jewish migrations
into asia and beyond
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file classification: classical,
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the project

In 1993 during a visit to carry out some Southeast Asian music research, Margaret Kartomi stumbled on the Maghain Aboth Synagogue in Singapore. The congregational community she discovered were of Baghdadi descent; their forebears had originated in Babylon, the land of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and home of the very first Jewish diaspora 2500 years ago. As is well known, the Jewish community of ancient Baghdad went on to found a rich civilisation that would give rise to the great rabbinic academies of learning in the first three centuries CE, and would eventually come to influence the traditions of the Sephardi (literally, 'Spanish') and Ashkenazi (east European) Jews.

From the late 18th century, Jewish merchants from the rich and famous city of Baghdad settled in port cities around colonial-British and colonial-Dutch Asia, such as in Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, Surabaya, Hong Kong and Shanghai, where they plied their wares or ran their shipping, spice and clothing businesses. Kartomi visited and studied the music she recorded of some of these communities; and fellow ethnomusicologist Sara Manasseh researched the Baghdadi-Jewish music of her hometown, Bombay. As they found, families such as the Sassoons and the Kadooris had made significant contributions to life in their local cities, such as setting up the tramcar system in early 20th century Hong Kong; but they also lovingly maintained the Baghdadi way of life (minagh babli, 'Babylonian custom') across the generations, built Baghdadi-style synagogues and practised their music-liturgical tradition in their numerous synagogue services. To this day the community claims that they have succeeded in preserving their ancient tradition, singing many of the same liturgical melodies as in past generations. Research has shown that some of the songs sung today resemble those recorded by the musicologist Idelsohn in the Baghdadi community in Israel early in the 20th century, although the styles of singing vary according to the background and experience of each singer.

As the colonial era came to an end around 1950, members of the Asian-Baghdadi diaspora communities and those in Baghdad itself emigrated again, settling in cities in Israel, the UK, Canada, USA and Australia. When Manasseh and Kartomi recorded the liturgical music in the synagogues in cities such as Manchester and Sydney, they found remarkable similarities to the performances they had recorded in Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong, etc. and that they also resembled those recorded by Idelsohn a century before. Clearly the cantors', rabbis' and worshippers' belief that they had preserved ancient music-liturgical practice had some truth in it. Though some relatively minor changes can be observed in the recordings made in different eras, individual singers continue to sing the same texts set to basically the same melodic ideas, though they are free to vary them on the spur of the moment, creatively ornament a melodic phrase, add melismatic notes, and vary the rhythms in their own personal style, as did their forebears over the centuries.

Thus, in principle the music on this CD belongs to the ancient tradition of Baghdadi-Jewish music. In fact it documents songs performed (i) in the synagogues of the Baghdadi-Jewish diaspora in Asia from the end of the 18th to the mid-20th centuries, and (ii) in a further diaspora since the 1950s to Australia, the UK, and beyond. The songs were recorded in Bombay, Poona, Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Manchester, London and Sydney by ethnomusicologists Margaret Kartomi and Sara Manasseh of Melbourne and London respectively as part of the CD project team which also included Regina Randhofer of Halle, Germany and Bronia Kornhauser of Melbourne. Randhofer's interest in psalmody led her to the National Sound Archives in Jerusalem. From there she selected a number of valuable historical recordings, originally collected in Iraq and Israel, to provide more comparative material for the CD. Kornhauser has been the research archivist for the Australian Archive of Jewish Music (in the School of Music, Monash University) since its inception in 1995 and has been collaborating with Kartomi for a number of years in researching the Jewish music of the Asia-Pacific region. The CD is one of the outcomes of that research. Although the recordings that it contains have a documentary character, they have been carefully prepared to maximise their audio-technical qualities.

