

Bringing the Sounds Back to Etz Hayyim: An acoustic profile of a resurrected endangered space

By Dr. Ros Bandt

This article features accompanying sound files, available online at: http://www.akouse.gr/soundscape_journal_Vol11/bandt.html



Etz Hayyim Synagogue. Interior looking west to the bema, TuB' Shebat festival, 2011. Used with kind permission of Etz Hayyim Synagogue

The *Etz Hayyim*, (the Tree of Life), is the only remaining synagogue on the island of Crete, Greece. It is located in Parodos Kondylaki in the old Jewish quarter of Hania, a town in the north-west of Crete with a population of around 60,000.

In 1995, the Synagogue was listed as one of the 100 most endangered monuments in the world. This paper traces the sounds that were experienced, heard, listened to, and recorded in the restored synagogue from the beginning of November 2010 until the end of April 2011, just nine months after two arson attacks severely damaged the buildings and its contents. These sounds and stories heard and recorded at Etz Hayyim are those of a special and diverse international Jewish community. The building and the people have a unique history, whose values and identity are embodied in the sounds heard.

Historically Tracing the Sound and Silence, Presence and Absence

Etz Hayyim synagogue has had a puzzling and chequered history from its outset, a history of presence and absence, sound and silence, according to Crete's occupation. Originally, it was built by the Venetians as a Christian church, named St. Eirini. The earliest indication of Jewish presence in the building is a Hebrew inscription citing the year 1487, on the original entrance to the north courtyard. In the sixteenth century, Etz Hayyim was bombarded by Barbarossi, the infamous Redbeard pirate. It was left empty then from 1530–1630, when it was renovated as a synagogue. In 1840 an additional women's quarter was built. In 1912 there was an earthquake. By 1941 there were an estimated 265 Haniot Jews left after emigration due to political pressure and unrest. In May of 1944 the entire Jewish community was arrested by the Nazis and after a period of incarceration in a nearby prison, were herded onto a ship, the *Tanais*. It was struck by torpedoes fired from a British submarine and sank within fifteen minutes – there were no survivors. No one

really knows or remembers the last sounds that were heard at Etz Hayyim before the Nazi invasion when it was a living culture. From 1944 to the earthquake of 1995, the synagogue had been derelict, given over to post war squatting.

The director, Nicholas Stavroulakis, an English born Jew of Cretan descent, devoted himself to the idea of restoring the Etz Hayyim to keep alive the “thread of continuity of Jewish presence and memory.” He gave a paper to the UNESCO World Monuments Watch and Etz Hayyim was listed as one of the 100 Most Endangered Sites on August 4, 1995. Through international funding and immense effort, he succeeded in saving it from becoming a “kind of martyrdom – a witness to how successful at least one Nazi action had been.” (Stavroulakis, 1999, p. 11.) It was completely restored and re-dedicated on the 10th of October, 1999, (Rosh Hodesh Tishri 5760) when the mezuzoth¹ was put on its doors and a Sepher Torah was brought ceremoniously into the synagogue.

The Synagogue's website describes the building as follows:

The exterior is nondescript, as is typical of synagogues in Greece, the Jews keeping a low profile, and not wanting to draw attention to themselves. The interior is in the typical Romaniote style, the Bema, (the reader's table) on the western wall and the Aron, (Ark) on the eastern.²

One can see the remains of the original mikveh through an archway to the right and the tombstones of rabbis in the courtyard in the rear. In the entrance courtyard there is a plaque in memory of the Jews of Chania who perished in the Holocaust. (www.etz-hayyim-hania.org/_synag/arch.html)

The building was completed in 1999, but without a Jewish community. What sounds would enter this synagogue? Who would bring them and on what basis? In 1999 Stavroulakis wrote in his commemorative booklet:

“We are gathered together today Jews, Christians and Muslims to celebrate paradox and contradiction. We are the new community of Keilat Kodesh Etz Hayyim of Hania. In the coming years it is our hope that this precious place of worship will also play a significant role in the public cultural life of Hania as a resource centre and host for seminars and colloquia as well as concerts.” (p. 26)

In 2008 Stavroulakis writes in retrospect that, “the community built gingerly from all nations and creeds, following its Jewish orientation with weddings, bar mitzvahs, memorial services, festivals, as well as secular activities: evening lectures on archaeology, history of religions, poetry readings and even concerts.” (p. 13)

1 The Mezuzah is a parchment scroll of the biblical passages Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21 and marked with the word Shaddai, a name of the Almighty attached to the door of a home in a small case to proclaim its Jewish identity.

2 The Bema is the readers' table from where the rabbi addresses the community, the Ark is where the holy scrolls, (the Torah) is kept. Their position east-west is typical of Romaniot synagogues, unlike the Sephardic layouts.

There was a “well balanced and well represented library” providing an invaluable resource centre that is open to the public. A unique community was growing, due to the vision of the director and his unique knowledge and skills.³

In November 2010 this was the community I stepped into. Many of those who attend are non-Greek internationals. As well as the small number of Jews, not sufficient for a minyan, a quorum of 10, there are Roman Catholics, Protestants, a communist, an atheist, a Greek Orthodox and Buddhists. The services are carried out in biblical Hebrew and English, but other languages spoken include German (3), Danish (1), French (4), Spanish (1), Israeli, Modern Hebrew (2), Albanian (1), Greek (1), and Italian (2). Most have English as a second language. The synagogue is managed by a Cretan Greek/English speaker and the archivist is a German researching Zionism in Israel. Three quarters are permanent residents in Hania.

At one Friday Shabbat, Nikos Stavroulakis, asked this unusual community to try to define its identity and meaning. He posed three questions to help the focus of the response: What does the synagogue mean to you? Would it matter if there were no synagogue? Has it changed you in some way? People would be given a few months to make their written statements, which would be collated into a publication.

Listening and Recording the Community

Through my listening in this unique and tranquil multicultural meeting place, it seemed obvious to me that the answers should be audible, not just read. Hearing the sounds of the voices themselves, embodies the life force and individuality of everyone's different spirit, their age, gender, attitudes, emotions, their mood, conviviality, personality, style, as conveyed through the loudness, speed, timbre of the voice, the untouchable things which the written word often can't contain.

I offered to record their answers so their individual authentic voices would be the aural conduit for the information. This process would act as a catalyst for discussion, and would encourage listening to themselves and each other, in line with the UNESCO mandate to encourage participation of the local population in the preservation of their cultural and natural heritage. I was interested as a musicologist as to why certain songs and sounds had come here and why? This would begin a new oral history audio archive, so some of the history that was lost in the fires could be reclaimed. After some time everyone was excited about the appearance of the sound recorder and permission was given for the service to be recorded. They started to listen to their community with heightened sensitivity, suggesting various things, the cracking of the eggs, lighting candles, the resident cat, the clock.

I had a crash course in listening and participating in the life of Etz Hayyim. For five months, I recorded interviews and attended a weekly Shabbat service, Festivals of Channukah, T'ub Shebat, Purim for the fires, took Hebrew lessons, joined the Ladino singing group and shared in festivals. With Gabriel Negrin, a young devout Romaniote Jew brought up in the Sephardic tradition, I played a benefit concert of Sephardic and original music on flutes, recorders and Tarhu, a bowed spike fiddle.⁴ He also assisted as sound engineer for the mix of the CD, *Voicing Etz Hayyim*.

Indoor, outdoor, private and public, day and night listenings revealed the following rich sounds heard from the Etz Hayyim synagogue community captured in my digital recorder.

3 Nicholas Hannan Stavroulakis was the co-founder of the Jewish museum of Athens, a successful international artist, interdisciplinary scholar, expert on Byzantine and Ottoman art and architecture, academic in Greece, Tel Aviv and publisher of several culinary editions.

4 The Tarhu is a bowed spike fiddle invented by the Australian luthier Peter Biffin. It has frets, 12 strings, 8 of which are sympathetic and is a truly unique Australian cross-cultural mix of east and west. See <http://www.spikefiddle.com>.

The Acoustic Profile of Voicing Etz Hayyim Soundscape and Score

Some hundreds of raw sound files on 14 CDs, can be classified into 20 generic sound types in order to understand the variety and density of acoustic information recorded.

1. The synagogue's streetscape: Etz Hayyim is situated in the secluded and dead-end old Jewish quarter, with its narrow paved, reverberant streets – free of car traffic. It feels like the old town of Jerusalem. The walled entrance opens to the old Venetian pebbled courtyard with exquisite Turkish plantings, creating a garden haven of peace and quiet separated from the street.

2. Internal soundscape of the Etz Hayyim building: the building has excellent acoustics, due to its proportions, wooden staircases, woven prayer mats and cushions. Sound spreads up to the women's quarters and library if the doors and windows are open. Bird sounds abound in the courtyard gardens, and water drips into the fish ponds in the urn outside the office. Inside, the constant ticking and bell of the late eighteenth century French clock, its occasional winding up and the purring of Chiko the cat are ever present, almost unnoticeable. They give a lovely intimacy to the space.

3. People's movements can be heard from the buildings next door, visitors, rituals, the mikveh, a working library, an office, a bookshop, a kitchen, Hebrew lessons in the garden, festival gatherings for Channukah, Shabbat, TuB' Shebat.

4. The individual spoken word is prominent in the service and in the solo stories in interview. There are personal portraits and histories of involvement with the synagogue, stories of cleaning up after the fires, compassionate relationships, helping out in difficult times, commentaries of festivals, art exhibitions and cultural reports. Anja talks about the new research centre, Amelia about how special it

Lechah Dodi Tune for Sephardic Shabbat service
Transcribed by Dr Ros Bandt

is for her. Lorenzo guides his new singing group through linguistic refinements of Ladino pronunciation, the old language of the Sephardic Jews, and Roger speaks about bringing his special tune of Lechah Dodi from his community in Paris. The spoken word is charged with their personalities and individual voices.

5. Chant, intoning scripture, the psalms, and some prayers.

6. Secular and sacred song: two Ladino songs were learned for the festival of Pesakh, including the popular *Had Gadya* (One Kid). The sacred unison song for the Shabbat service, which follows the Sephardic Portuguese rite, is *the Lechah Dodi*, the Welcome of the Sabbath sung in Hebrew to the Moroccan-Sephardic tune, a four beat version brought by the director via his rabbi in Athens.

At a Shabbat service in December we were introduced to another tune in triple time that Roger, one of the members had sung in his synagogue in Paris. In April, I composed an instrumental variation on Roger's tune, so in all there were three versions of the *Lechah Dodi* tune heard during those five months. The first two were sung, and all three were woven together in an instrumental medley to dedicate the benefit concert to the director.

7. Massed Vocal Antiphonal and Ritual Responses of the people to the cantor. Amen Interjections, a blessing for the lighting of candles, the Women's prayer before Shabbat, *Nerot shel Shabbat*.

8. Sonic Ritual activities, include cracking of eggs, pouring of wine, eating of bread, lighting of candles, Shabbat Shalom Greetings, (that your Sabbath without work will be peaceful).

9. Communal Silent prayer: *the Amidah*, like that of the Quakers. In his interview, Nicholas Stavroulakis emphasised the importance of quiet and contemplation, "One knows before whom he stands." So much time for him had been spent in the building alone, the solitary space being a comfort for prayer and meditation. The quietness is amplified. One can hear oneself in the absence of other. In most synagogues there would be frequent times for male sung prayer. Here it happened rarely.

10. Educational activities: Hebrew classes twice a week in the garden or when cold in the library. Poetry, literature, translation, torah study.

11. Tours: Alex, Anja, Marianne and others giving tours to visitors, tourists, community groups and school children.

12. Maintenance work: Beznik, the caretaker restoring the leaking roof or any other maintenance requirement.

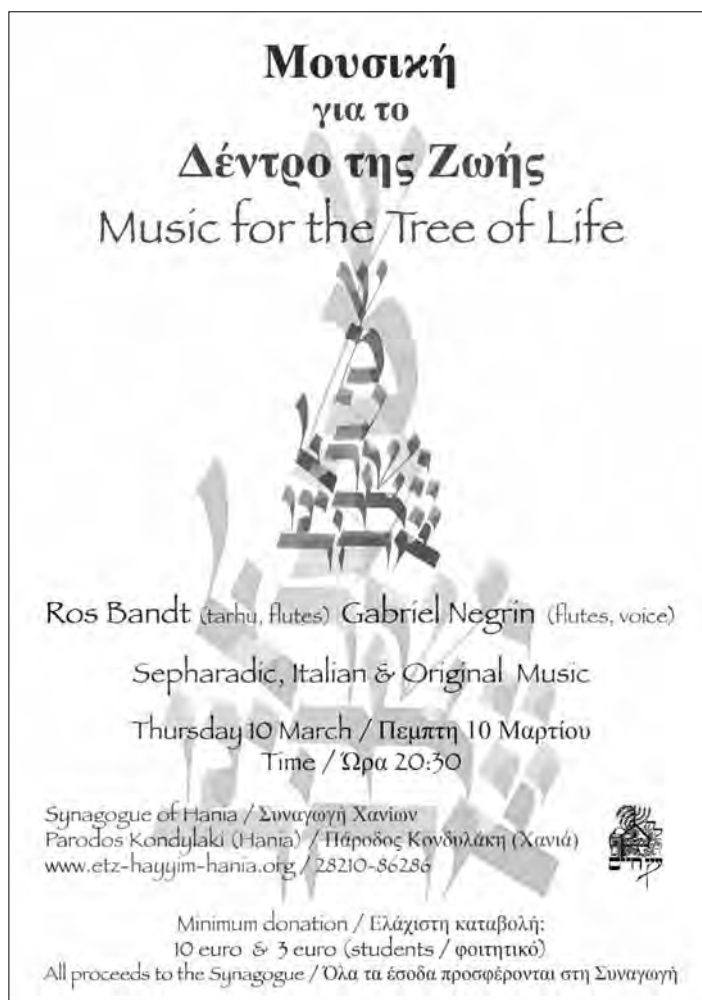
13. Music and Concerts: recorded Sephardic music playing in the office coming through the open ceiling, originally the women's quarters upstairs. It was to set the atmosphere before the joyous festival of Purim. On this occasion I played an original Tarhu dedication for the restoration by the community after the fires. In March there was a public benefit concert of original and Sephardic music by myself and Gabriel Negrin.

14. Professional activities: a writer working on Danish short stories in the loft, a librarian cataloguing and sorting books donated to the library, an office of administration and management.

15. Cultural activities: a DVD on Buddhism, a film, an exhibition, a lecture series on Turkish cuisine.

16. Festivals: we hear the sounds of eating together for festivals.

17. Socialising: lots of chat and socialising, the Havurah, derived from the term 'haver' or friend in Hebrew, but also meaning a 'circle' or 'joining' of friends together in a common ideal, or search for an authentic spiritual life.



**Μουσική
για το
Δέντρο της Ζωής
Music for the Tree of Life**

Ros Bandt (tarhu, flutes) Gabriel Negrin (flutes, voice)

Sephardic, Italian & Original Music

Thursday 10 March / Πέμπτη 10 Μαρτίου
Time / Ώρα 20:30

Synagogue of Hania / Συναγωγή Χανίων
Parodos Kondylaki (Hania) / Πάροδος Κονδυλάκη (Χανιά)
www.etz-hayyim-hania.org / 28210-86286

Minimum donation / Ελάχιστη καταβολή:
10 euro & 3 euro (students / φοιτητικό)

All proceeds to the Synagogue / Όλα τα έσοδα προσφέρονται στη Συναγωγή

Music for the Tree of Life, Poster for benefit concert.

With kind permission of Etz Hayyim

Illustration by Nicholas Stavroulakis

18. Children playing.

19. The echoey Mikveh room: the subterranean spring silently feeding the mikveh ritual bath with its constant stream of fresh cool water.

20. The silent outdoor graveyard, separated from the pathway by a shallow wall.

Voicing Etz Hayyim is a composition of 18'50" minutes built on the interplay of these rich sonic occurrences; the blending and mixing of the sounds against each other conveys the social aspect, more than words can possibly manage. Gabriel Negrin provided the much needed technical equipment and assistance for this large piece. I returned to Hania in November 2011 to present this new work to the director and the archive of the Evlagon Centre for Cretan Jewish History, as well as presenting a personal copy to everyone who had so generously donated their time and stories of attachment to the synagogue. The benefit concert, the archive of 14 CDs and the original work *Voicing Etz Hayyim* CDs, were gifts of my appreciation for the wonderful things I also experienced as a member of that community over the duration of a year.

Observations

How do we respond to the sounds of Etz Hayyim and what do we learn from them? What kinds of sounds are present?

The sounds of this synagogue are recognizably Jewish in the services and festivals but their location is different. Men, women and children sit side-by-side and facing each other at the same level. Women as well as men are included in the service reading prayers. There are fewer prayers out of service time and the use of the mikveh

has been infrequent for weddings and holy events. The clock and the cat are ever present sounds inside the beautiful acoustic. Singing and sharing music has been on the increase although as a community singing has not been an important element but for the *Lechah Dodi* each Friday. The community participates in all parts of the Shabbat and festival services, conversing in many languages, not necessarily in the native tongue. People make an effort to communicate. I found myself speaking French, German, a bit of Greek as well as English and Spanish. The meals contributed by all, are festive and gastro-nomic events. We hear communication through diversity. The sound is testament to a rich lively community. Etz Hayyim is indeed a tree of life. We hear density and quiet, the ebb and flow of life itself.

Sound as Information Transfer

We find out about the traumatic fires in January 2010 which burned all synagogue records and documents, 2,500 rare books and manuscripts, and some of the unique CD collection of international Jewish music, particularly of Sephardic origin. Some 100 or so CDs were saved although their cases had been burned. We learn about life stories and people's relationships, their feelings.

We hear personal identity through listening

It is not only the linguistic content of what is heard that matters. Sound contains clues in its delivery, telling us about the overriding emotions and mood, the age, gender, the number and proximity of the people, who is talking to whom and the overall politics of the social interaction. That is why it is so important to listen to oral histories. Much of this is lost in the written word alone. If there is a sardonic tone of voice or a worried element to the rendition of text this could be lost in the literal transcriptions. The timbre of each person's voice is a completely individual signature. Together they combine to reform a new identity. I have not transcribed every word but left CDs of all the files so that the process of listening continues with paths crossing through everyone's dedicated time and aural engagement. The act of listening shows respect for the other.

Conclusion

Bringing the sounds back has traced the sounds of *The Etz Hayyim* synagogue and its community during the months from November 2010 to April 2011. The sound recordings and mixes are evidence of a synagogue with a lively international community who shares common religious and cultural activities. The sounds reflect an acceptance and flexibility of national identity. The *Lechah Dodi* Shabbat song changes from Sephardic to French, any week with an instrumental variation by an Australian. The Jewish calendar of Festivals is preserved, as well as the weekly services, but its ecumenical calendar includes Christian and Moslem correlates. Education through the library, the new research centre and the Hebrew lessons given by the director, ensure the passing on of Jewish traditions and knowledge. This is an original acoustic community, unique in its multi-cultural and ecumenical breadth and newly created. Its pluralist nature is of ancient origins and its spiritual, educational and moral values continue the concerns of Jews throughout centuries.

Listening to the layers on many levels the *Etz Hayyim* is a model for international tolerance and co-operation. It is a jewel for Hania. The listening paths of this community are rich and varied. They make an effort to blend different languages, nationalities and creeds, thus forging a new modern multicultural Jewish identity. This acoustic profile validates and communicates the life and energy of this unusual Jewish community of *Etz Hayyim* in 2010–2011.

CREDITS

- The Etz Hayyim Synagogue <http://www.etz-hayyim-hania.org>.
- Its director Nikos Stavroulakis, Anja Zückmantel, Alex Phoundoulakis and the Etz Hayyim community.
- The Jewish Museum of Athens, particularly Anastasia Loudarou. The British School of Athens. The Blegen library, Athens. Dr Stavros Paspalas, Deputy Director, Australian Archaeological Institute of Athens. Arts Victoria. Gabriel Negrin.

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DR ROS BANDT is honorary senior research fellow at the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne. Her most recent book, co-edited with Michelle Duffy and Dolly MacKinnon, *Hearing Places* is published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK. It contains 37 international entries on how we respond to place through the auditory realm. This field work was completed while living in Hania for five months in 2010. She originally fell in love with the Minoan Hania while touring fourteenth century Italian music there with la Romanesca Ensemble for the Greek Ministry of Culture in 1985. She returned later in 2011 after performing her original sound works in Corfu and in Athens for ReMap3. She lives on her international sound art practice and is now based in North Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia.