

Israel at 60

The arts and national identity

THE ROAD OF ISRAEL'S COMPOSERS

MALCOLM MILLER on how Israel's classical composers have arrived at a style in tune with the country's contemporary pluralistic identity and its political reality

First generation: an east-west synthesis, which combined oriental as well as occidental Jewish folklore, favoured French post-Impressionism over Germanic modernism, and drew inspiration from the lyrical poetry of the Hebrew Psalms



PAUL BEN-HAIM (1897-1984) was born in Munich to an educated, assimilated family. He became assistant to Bruno Walter at the Bavarian Opera and conductor of the Augsburg Opera. He emigrated to Palestine in 1933. His most famous work was the suite *The Sweet Psalmist of Israel*, 1956, to be premiered with Middle-Eastern instruments at the JMI day of Israeli music at the South Bank, 30 November, 2008.



ALEXANDER URIAH BOSKOVICH (1907-1964) was born in Transylvania and studied with Nadia Boulanger and Paul Dukas. An invitation to Tel-Aviv in 1938 to attend the premiere of his first major work *Golden Chain*, a set of dances based on East European folksongs, by the recently founded Palestine Orchestra (later IPO), saved his life. He was never to return to Romania. In 1946 Boskovich composed a Violin Concerto which won the IPO's prize. A re-edited version by Israeli composer Michael Wolpe was premiered at the annual *Sounds in the Desert* Festival at Kibbutz Sde Boker in 2006.

While Israeli performers are renowned in the international arena, classical compositions by Israelis are far less well-known. Yet, since the birth of the State, 'serious' music by Israeli composers has attained a remarkably dynamic impetus despite, and perhaps because of, the harsh realities of daily life.

During the last 60 years, the changing style of the work of Israel's composers has reflected a changing perception of 'Israeliness' – and its relationship to Jewish culture. This question was debated even before the foundation of the State. Peter Gradenwitz, author of *The Music of Israel*, in 1959 wrote: "In the 1930s the question was ardently discussed: Is there a Palestinian music? Now, we hear the question asked in a different vein – what is an Israeli composer?" He goes on "whether or not Israeli in style and content, the works produced in the Land of Israel can only be appreciated as indivisible from the creative efforts of its builders in all spheres of civilisation and culture...".

By the 1920s, the early builders, Russian and Eastern European Zionists, had created an active concert and music education infrastructure. Notable was Joel Engel, who in his native Russia had been a founder of the Society for Jewish Folk Music. Engel composed the incidental music for a production of Ansky's *The Dybbuk* by the Habima theatre.

The arrival of some 40 émigré composers from Nazi Europe in the 1930s heralded important developments. In 1936 the Palestinian Broadcasting

Service (English, Hebrew, Arabic) was opened, and in December Toscanini conducted the debut of the Palestine Orchestra (renamed the IPO in 1948), whose members were drawn from young talented musicians gathered, and thus rescued, from across Europe.

The musical style was pluralistic, made up of many ingredients; as Max Brod, critic and composer and friend of Kafka, characterised it: "From every corner, very different stones are brought in, stones which constitute the structure of our music."

Yet one style eventually came to dominate, the 'Eastern Mediterranean School', a radical new aesthetic based on an east-west synthesis, which combined oriental as well as occidental Jewish folklore, favoured French post-Impressionism over Germanic modernism and drew inspiration from the lyrical poetry of the Hebrew Psalms. The leading exponent of this style was Paul Ben-Haim, the most famous of Israel's composers.

Akin to the folk music revival in England, Hungary or America, with composers like Vaughan Williams, Bartók, or Copland, the composers of the immigrant generation wanted to assimilate oriental Jewish and Arabic music. They collected the music of the oriental communities in Palestine; a Yemenite singer called Bracha Zifira inspired hundreds of arrangements which she performed in kibbutzim, towns and cities. Ben-Haim arranged some 35 songs for her between 1939 and 1951. One of the most popular was an arrangement of the Ladino folksong 'Mama yo no tengo visto' entitled 'Berceuse Sfaradite'.

Very popular in the 1940s and 50s was the work of Marc Lavry, originally from Riga. He composed the opera *Dan the Guard*, with a libretto by Max Brod. Set on a kibbutz, the opera was premiered in 1945 but fell into neglect after a couple of years. It would well reward a revival.

Though, with hindsight, this nationalistic musical quest could be seen as idealistically visionary, it was also somewhat naïve. Some aspects soon became anachronistic, including the exoticising of Middle-Eastern elements and, with notable exceptions, an isolationism that emphasised a discontinuity with Modernism.

Second generation Israeli composers, those either born in Israel or who came as young children from Europe did not share the same intense need to separate from

Second generation: a compelling synthesis that is fully engaged in contemporary music



YEHEZKEL BRAUN was born in Breslau in 1922 and came to Palestine as a two-year-old. He studied with the pioneer composer Boskovich and graduated in Greek and Latin at Tel Aviv University where he was later Professor of Composition. Braun's interest in classics led him to the Benedictine Monastery of Solesmes in France where he studied Gregorian chant (See also page34).



TZVI AVNI, born in 1927 in Germany, came to Israel as a child. His early lyrical style, shown in one of his most popular works, *Prayer* (1961, rev. 1969), underwent a radical change when he studied in the USA in the 1960s and encountered Copland and Lukas Foss and absorbed the Modernist style of Boulez and

Stockhausen. In 1971 he became Professor at the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem and Head of the Electronic Music Studio. Since the 1970s Avni has displayed an interest in Jewish mysticism, adding modal and neo-tonal elements to his style.



NOAM SHERIFF (b.1935), internationally-known conductor and composer, has composed large-scale oratorios on major Jewish topics: *Mehaye Hametim* (1987), a Holocaust memorial piece which intermingles shofar calls modified as air-raid sirens, Yiddish and Hebrew folk songs and modernist textures, the

Sephardi Passion (1992), which uses Ladino sources, and *Psalms for Jerusalem* (1995) commissioned by the JSO for the Jerusalem 3000 anniversary, which remarkably combines Latin and Hebrew Psalm texts interspersed with biblical instrumental interludes.

Europe or to reject the Austro-German modernist tradition. Indeed many developed their Mediterranean style in the avant-garde idiom of the USA and Europe. Yet these second generation composers also strengthened their Jewish and Israeli identity by researching far more deeply Biblical, Talmudic and Middle-Eastern sources, chanting modes and Arabic and Yemenite song. The result was a compelling synthesis that is fully

engaged in contemporary music.

The issue of east-west synthesis is potently encapsulated in a recent work by one of the leading composers of the second generation, Yehezkel Braun. Braun's *Psalterion* combines a Persian *santur* (a hammered dulcimer) with a western European piano trio, and uses the Persian 'dashti' scale, one of the most popular and important modes in Arabic folk music. This is close to a major scale with a flattened 7th, used in many types of folk music, but the Arabic modes use different tunings – 'microtones' – for some of the notes, making the music sound (to western ears) slightly off pitch, giving it an eastern flavour.

The composer has written that "Oriental and Western music are worlds apart, so different... that it is well nigh impossible to combine them. For me as a composer this was undoubtedly the most difficult task I have ever tried to tackle." It is a refreshing and imaginative work, with an intriguing east-west flavour, beautiful sonorities and engaging dialogue amongst the instruments.

One of the most significant composers of the second generation is Tzvi Avni. His Piano Sonata no 2, 'Epitaph', is a good example of his distinctive synthesis of avant-garde complex atonality and Jewish musical elements including cantillation (chanting). Avni's later piano work *Triptych* (1993) has many Jewish and eastern resonances, not least the final, third, movement, a witty piquant Chasidic dance inflected with dissonance, with a chirpy quotation of a famous children's Chanukah song.

For the third generation of composers, born in the late 1940s, 50s and early 60s, and maturing in the 1980s onwards, Israeli identity has evolved even further from the idealistic orientalisms of their forbears. The issue for them was no longer how to 'create' a style, but to express their own identity through the multicultural influences around them. As Oded Zehavi put it, "I am a native of Jerusalem and acoustically, the air of this city is full of sounds for me: oriental sounds, the sounds from the Sephardic synagogues, Eastern European music – these are not exotic, they are not to be cited and analysed as 'sources', they are part of my very being." Such a tapestry of influences is well illustrated in Zehavi's Violin Concerto, 1996, the finale of which is a post-modern amalgam of East European shtetl music, Chasidic klezmer elements, Middle-Eastern Yemenite-style

melody and dance rhythms, all blended into an atonal avant-garde texture.

The younger generation are also less naïve, and, having undergone national service, more politically engaged. Arik Shapira, one of the more controversial avant-gardists, regularly addresses political issues in his works (such as *Left-Right*) and several more accessible composers have memorialised in music issues and experiences such as the Lebanon and Gulf wars.

Simple idealisation is no longer possible. Israeli creativity has to take on the tough problems of multiculturalism, globalisation and an evolving Middle-Eastern political reality.

The challenge is to find an identity that is not burdened with the past yet still is consonant with earlier aesthetics, an identity which allows for folkloric influences, yet is not defined by them.

Interaction with Arab musicians in Israel is far more widespread than in earlier generations and many projects involve Arab and Jewish Israeli citizens combining their talents. Taiseer Elias is a leading Arab 'oudist and composer, Director of the Orchestra of Classical Arabic Music of Israel, Head of the Department of Eastern Music of the Jerusalem Academy of Music, and a Professor at Bar Ilan University. His work with Michael Wolpe (b.1960) and Menachem Wiesenberg (b.1950) resulted in

Third generation:

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ELLA MILCH-SHERIFF (b. 1954), wife of Noam Sheriff, has composed a string of highly powerful and successful works including an opera dealing with the Holocaust, *And the Rats Came* (2005), performed by the Cameri Theatre and Israel Chamber Orchestra.



ODED ZEHAVI (b. 1961) wrote *L.H.M.: Israeli War Requiem*, acclaimed as "a moment of truth in Israeli music", while his *Elmale* was the first Israeli work to be played in an Arab state, premiered by Valery Gergiev and the Kirov Opera Orchestra in Aqaba, Jordan in 1997.



Fourth generation: Still retain links with Jewish traditions and topics but reflect an international avant-garde.



LIOR NAVOK, born in 1971 into an Iraqi-Jewish family, was initially steeped in light music and jazz. He studied at the Tel-Aviv Reuben Academy and got a PhD in Boston.



GIL SHOCHAT was born in 1973 in Ramat Gan and made his public piano debut aged 14. He has composed many idiomatic, virtuoso works for piano and is best known for his opera *Alpha e Omega*.

several works for 'oud and Western instruments including a concertino, and a trio in memory of Prime Minister Yizhak Rabin.

Fourth generation composers in their 30s such as Gil Shohat and Lior Navok still retain links with Jewish traditions and topics, however far their music reflects an international avant-garde.

Navok's style is open to a wide range of contemporary influences and music of non-Western cultures including Indian music. His recent choral work *And the Trains Kept Coming*, on the topic of the Allies proposed bombing of the concentration camps, received an acclaimed premiere in Boston last December. As with others of his generation, Navok displays an attractive eclecticism, partly motivated, it seems, by his encounter with the pluralism of global new music.

With a conviction and energy linked to the complexity of a multi-faceted global society, Israel's musical identity is clearly in creative flux. It reflects the current concerns of composers everywhere as they juggle local and international idioms. In this, the work of Israel's composers has a world-wide and timely relevance.

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Music of the Jewish Music Institute and Associate Lecturer for the Open University.

For more information on Israeli composers see: www.jmi.org.uk and www.imi.org.il

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See JR January 2007 for Abigail Wood on *From Hora to Hip-Hop* and Tzila Ratner on *Sideways - Developments in the Israeli Novel*

YEHEZKEL BRAUN Passover Songs

MALCOLM MILLER

With Pesach on the horizon, it is time to look for new tunes for singing the Haggadah and you can do no better than to listen to Yehezkel Braun's *Fifteen Passover*



Songs, composed in 1982 and one of the works recorded on the CD *Choral Works*. This was recorded by the excellent Israel Kibbutz Choir (founded in 1955 by the folksong pioneer Yehuda Sharett) conducted by Avner Itai, one of Israel's foremost choral conductors. The performances are full of zest and élan, the works sung with precision and conviction.

The many strands of Jewish music of the Diaspora are woven into a unified work in the *Fifteen Passover Songs*. The melodies are drawn from East and West, yet there is an overarching idiom that is Braun's own, a magical meeting point of medieval and Renaissance music with oriental Jewish music. He artfully blends evocative modes and melismatic (changing notes on a single syllable) vocal decoration with polyphonic techniques such as ancient 'organum' (drone-like parallel harmonies) and 'imitation', the intertwining of similar melodic lines.

The cycle begins with the 'Kadesh u-rehats' in a lyrical Salonikan melody that sets a gently flowing tone, evocative of the past and of the distant orient. A lively rhythmic contrast follows in 'Ha lahma anya', an Iraqi Mosul melody. The buoyant imitative textures contrast with the calmer Babylonian setting of 'kol dikhfin' (Let all who are hungry...), suggesting a compassionate tone.

The Syrian traditional version of 'Ma nishtana' is charming, its simple pure melody sung by a boy treble, answered by high voices moving in beguiling harmonies above.

'Ve-hi she'amda', a familiar Chasidic tune, exemplifies Braun's masterly choral writing and contrasts with a spiky rendition of 'Elu eser makot' (The Ten Plagues), to a fascinating Constantinople melody, immediately followed by a Tunisian tune for the Psalm 'Betset Yisrael', full of textural variety and expressive word painting.

The well known 'Eliyahu hanavi' tune is eloquently harmonized, followed by an extended 'Hasal sidur Pessah', a Chasidic tune expanded to evoke the mood of the conclusion of the Seder service; 'Karev yom' and an exotic sounding 'Va-amartem zevah Pessah' to a Jerusalem Sephardic melody, complete the liturgy.

Four lighter Haggadah songs to conclude introduce refreshing tunes well worth learning: 'Ki lo na'e' has a brightly flowing Italian melody, 'Adir Hu', a beautifully mellow tune from Bucharest, 'Emunim' from the Djerban tradition and finally 'Had gadya', a sprightly tune, again from the Bucharest tradition.

Yehezkel Braun will be in London for the UK premiere of his chamber music composition *Hexagon-Divertimento* for two violins, two violas and two violoncelli at the Conway Hall, Holborn on Sunday 4 May and a talk at the Finchley Synagogue on 7 May. See WHAT'S HAPPENING page 25