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| Israeli Art Music |
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| Israeli Art Music concerns the study of art music penned in the Jewish community of mandatory Palestine, which since 14 May 1948 is the State of Israel. Having emerged before the year of statehood, the term “Israeli art music” is therefore a misnomer — the result of a national historical back shadowing attesting to its post-statehood coinage. Indeed, from a cultural-historical perspective, the emergence of art music in mandatory Palestine and later Israel involves larger confluences: the rise of Zionism, the political achievements of the Jewish community in Palestine, the Nazis ascent to power in the 1930s, and the various musical schools dislocated to Palestine during the different waves of immigrations to the country. Thus, the story of Israeli art music begins from the middle: it opens in the 1930s with the arrival of a critical mass of emigrant composers whose importations of a variety of twentieth-century compositional approaches triggered vast cultural chain reactions beyond the earmarks of a nationalistic style. The home of more than seventy nationalities, Israel’s most important cultural asset is its ethnic proximities. Using the melodic and harmonic characteristics of mostly non-western Jewish and non-Jewish oral musical traditions available in this region, composers have been able to re-localize universal compositional devices and create new musical hybrids that resist a fixed musical definition. Indeed, the constant proliferation of styles suggests that perhaps the procedure of local hybridization itself, beyond specific folkish or liturgical citations, is the very definition of Israeli art music. |
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Thus, the story of Israeli art music begins from the middle: it opens in the 1930s with the arrival of a critical mass of emigrant composers whose importations of a variety of twentieth-century compositional approaches triggered vast cultural chain reactions beyond the earmarks of a nationalistic style. The home of more than seventy nationalities, Israel’s most important cultural asset is its ethnic proximities. Using the melodic and harmonic characteristics of mostly non-western Jewish and non-Jewish oral musical traditions available in this region, composers have been able to re-localize universal compositional devices and create new musical hybrids that resist a fixed musical definition. Indeed, the constant proliferation of styles suggests that perhaps the procedure of local hybridization itself, beyond specific folkish or liturgical citations, is the very definition of Israeli art music.  The institutionalization of Israeli art music was made possible in the 1930s following the Nazi rise to power. A critical mass of composers, instrumentalists, critics, musicologists, and audiences arrived in Mandatory Palestine and infused its musical life. Not unconnectedly, the Palestine Orchestra (later, The Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra) and the Palestine Broadcast Service were both established in 1936, with the latter transmitting most of its music live by studio players who in 1938 expanded to become the Palestine Broadcast Service Orchestra. Coming from different European schools, a cluster of emigrant composers formed a group of individuals from the very emergence of what is now considered Israeli art music. Consequently, the variety of styles did not mirror any shared aesthetic or ideological goals as much as they reflected composers’ relative degrees of isolation from or interaction from the Zionist Project. Composers like Paul Ben-Haim and Marc Lavry, whose music had probably been the most accessible in the Jewish community of Palestine, relied on citations of identifiable folksongs or Jewish liturgical music which they filtered through their European musical vocabulary. Whereas Ben-Haim’s exotic portrayals resembled post-impressionist styles (*Piano Pieces*, 1943), Lavry advocated melodiousness that at once promoted Zionist symbols of collectivism and secularized biblical motifs, and blurred the demarcation between art and folk music (*Emek*, 1938). For some composers, Eurocentric exoticism and folkish allusions were considered an anachronistic insufficient portrayal of the east they had encountered in Palestine. Trying to locate common melodic and textural properties of Arab or non-western Jewish musical traditions they imitated Arab melodic scales which they translated into melodic cells (Stefan Wolpe, *Dance in the Form of Chaconne*, 1938) or experimented with two-part thin heterophonic textures in lieu of western vertical harmony (Alexander Boskovich, *Semitic Suite*, 1945). More often than not, however, what seemed to be syntactically as avant-garde remained attentive to the texts and sounds produced in mandatory Palestine: Josef Tal, who studied under Hindemith at the Staatliche Akademische Hochschule für Musik, set poems by the national poetesses Rachel Bluwstein to music (*On the Way*, 1936) and reharmonized an extremely popular folksong which originally had been a setting of one of Rachel’s poems (*Piano Sonata*, 1950). Rather than focusing on Tal’s atonal syntax or his reading of cell harmony, such compositions should be seen as commentaries on the aesthetic confines of Eurocentric national music as well as an alternative to composers’ quoting of liturgical and paraliturgical melodies from Arab Jewish musical traditions as mere ornaments grafted on a tonal infrastructure.  After statehood, Orphic and otherworldly symbolisms had been gradually rejected in favor of anti-romanticist messages that reached a climax in the late 1950s. A growing disillusionment with romanticist Zionism had been recorded in the works of both emigrant composers and the first emerging cohort of native Israeli composers as pre-statehood socialist ideals became a utopian rhetoric, while Statism became the core of national inspiration. The massive immigration of Jews from Arab countries had interfered the cultural space in which the veteran society and its governmental institutions had existed and consolidated, and post-statehood neo-decadent poetry had been anti romantic in its attitude to political nationalism, gradually severing art from its national and social functions. Already in the early 1950s Israeli composers had realized that local art music must be freed from German spiritual colonialism if it wants to articulate its present. With the dissemination of post-World War II compositional devices, composers turned to the properties of non-western Jewish liturgical music rather than the melodies that in pre-statehood ewsulted in western metaphors of the east. As a result, heterophonic textures and melodic layering became the most important poetic emphases as they converged with the linear properties of a wide range of serial compositional approaches from Schoenberg to Boulez (Josef Tal, Symphony no. 1, 1951;Abel Ehrlich, *Bashrav*,1953; Mordecai Seter, *Ricercar*, 1953-62; Alexander Boskovich, *Ornaments*, 1964)*.*  The deconstruction of various Jewish musical traditions paved the road toward a dialectic return to musical Judaism in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Composers have attempted to address wider Jewish topoi that transcended the national allegory through a reintroduction of eastern European Jewish music, which had been considered exilic during earlier pre- and early post-statehood years. Such ghostly voices were now filtered through contemporary compositional practices imported by those who left for graduate schools in the USA or Europe during the 60s. Tzvi Avni, for example, cited the opening of the Yiddish song “Die alte kasche,” while projecting it through eastern European aleatoricism à la Lutosławski (*Five Pantomimes*, 1968). By the mid 1970s, having consolidated his musical language, Avni constructed a synthesized mode in which eastern European Jewish musical markers were embedded; this mode was then used for his Second Piano Sonata (*Epitaph*, 1974-9) which he composed after one of Rabbi Nachman’s tales. Mark Kopytman, who immigrated to Israel in 1972 from the Soviet Union, introduced principles of Yemenite heterophony into his scores through compositional devices influenced by Polish and Russian avant-garde music. In his *About an Old Tune* (1977) he used heterophonic principles drawn on Yemenites liturgy to steer allusions to eastern European Jewish melody-types. Concomitantly, Kopytman channeled his approach to politically comment on the aftermath of the Yom-Kippur War (*October Sun*, 1974) while Tal was revisiting Zionist myths such as a story of Masadain what was the first electronic opera to be written in the country (*Massada 967*, 1972).  With the permeation of postmodernist trends since the 1980s Israeli composers have furthered the above listed compositional attitudes, attempting at the same time to write nationally indifferent music. In addition to those who remained active throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a young cohort of native composers who received their graduate education in the USA and Europe were now consciously addressing international audiences in additional to the Israeli one. Mixing political commentaries, Jewish musical traditions, setting recent Hebrew literary and poetic texts to music, reviving (and simultaneously revising) older national styles, and criticizing contemporary Israeli society, this cohort had produced a staggering display of musical styles. Betty Olivero (b. 1954), for example, imbibes from the textures, sounds, and timbers of European, Near Eastern, and North-African Jewish musical traditions; she dissolves these sonorities through revised tonal tools and creates a solution of musical syntaxes that intertwine the histories of western art music and non-western liturgical Jewish musics. By dissolving different musical styles, Olivero displaces national or historical associations and undermines the validity of stereotypes associated with Jewish music (*Bakash'ot*, 1996; *Krio't*, 2008). Toward the turn of the twentieth century Ron Weidberg completed a cycle of twenty four preludes and fugues for piano solo (*Voyage to the End of the Millennium*, 1997-8) in which neo-tonality was used as a homage to Bach, Shostakovich, as well as other composers whose works are alluded to through particular keys and textures associated with their works. Among these various references to a polyphony of musical styles (passacaglias, chorales, a boogie-woogie fugue, and an abundance of baroquian instrumental figurations), Weidberg’s themes tend to reproduce the melodic and modal character of pre-statehood folk and popular Israeli music; rather than cite any particular sources, however, these references appear as faded cultural allusions submerged by opulent polyphonic neo-tonal textures. Other resurfacing pasts juxtaposed German music with the holocaust. In his electronic work, *Schneewittchen und die vier Bären* (2007), Arik Shapira, a second-generation holocaust survivor, has synthesized and distorted motifs from Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, Bruckner’s Fourth Symphony, Brahms’ *German Requiem*, and Karl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* in an attempt to both ridicule what he perceives as the core of German culture and commemorate his parental grandparents who were murdered at the Ninth Fort in Kaunas, Lithuania.  Numerous other examples penned by older and younger cohorts continue to demonstrate that diversity, relocalization, and the country’s ethnic proximities have always been at the foundations of Israeli art music. |
| Further reading:  (Alexander)  (Avni)  (P. V. Bohlman)  (P. V. Bohlman)  (Boskovich)  (Brod)  (Fleisher)  (Gradenwitz)  (Hirshberg, A Modernist Composer in an Immigrant Community : The Quest for Status and National Ideology)  (Hirshberg, Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine 1880-1948: A Social History)  (Keren)  (Kreinin)  (Ringer)  (Seroussi)  (Shelleg)  (Tal and Eckhardt)  (Tischler) |