6 *New Hebrew Sounds*

On April 4, 1928 the Hebrew daily *Davar* published this agitated piece:

> It's nice to stroll on the beach in the moonlight at night with a group of friends … and sing together … [except] what do we sing? Would a Russian peasant ask the same question? … Would a German woman wait to be asked [what music to play?] … And what about us? I often get together with people who want to sing together but soon give up because they can't find a song familiar to all. Someone would start a Hasidic [tune] or a folksong but would then stop because no one else knows the music. … [And then] all of a sudden, everyone would break into a stirring Russian number … but the sounds would soon die down, lost between the flat-roofed houses. … It's nice to stroll with friends in the moonlight. But something is missing. There is no singing. No sound.[1]

Coming up with a new Jewish music was a colossal challenge. The first problem was the category itself. What is "Jewish music" or any kind of so-called national music? Does ethnicity have a sound? If Jewish communities around the world developed different musical traditions throughout history, in the Yishuv many of these traditions came together in ways that eventually created all sorts of connections among them. Some of those connections were made by ideology, others happened more naturally. In time, this complex process created "Jewish," or "Hebrew," or later "Israeli" music in the same way we think of music as Brazilian, Japanese, or British. Philip Bohlman calls this an ontological moment, a moment in which a body of music is given meaning for a religious, social, or political purpose.[2] This chapter looks at the ontological moment of the creation of a "Hebrew" music.

Nathan Shaham dedicated an entire novel to this moment, his 1987 *The Rosendorf Quartet*, about members of a string quartet, refugees

[1] Quoted in Jehoash Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine, 1880–1948: A Social History*, Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 92.

[2] Philip V. Bohlman, "Ontologies of Jewish Music," in Joshua S. Walden, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Music*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 11–26.

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from Nazi Germany, whose stormy relations mirror the national fervor of the late 1930s, the rise of Nazism, the efforts to build a Jewish state in Palestine, and the challenges of creating culture under these trying conditions. At one point in the novel members of the quartet travel to perform at a remote kibbutz, where they meet Rudi, a classically trained musician from Germany. When he is not picking oranges, Rudi composes music – music that brings together European and local traditions to create a "native" Hebrew sound, as he puts it. "Every year, during the vacation he received from the kibbutz," he tells the surprised quartet members, "he toured the towns and villages of Eretz Israel and visited synagogues and mosques, writing down Yemenite, Bukharan, Spanish, Caucasian, and Arab tunes. His hope was to familiarize himself with these eastern melodies long enough to be able to discover their 'ancient Hebrew roots' that would 'make his music grow'."[3]

It was a romantic notion imported from Europe, where the high emotional resonance of music played a big role in the cultural politics of modern nationalism. Think of national anthems and the history of classical or art music in the nineteenth century. It's full of such stories, especially in the relatively newer nations of Eastern Europe, where Zionism resonated deeply. One example, Bedřich Smetana's cycle of symphonic poems, *Ma Vlast* (my country), has a special connection to Zionism. The second poem in the patriotic cycle about Czech history and folk culture, named *Vltava* after Bohemia's biggest river, is based on an old folk tune that eventually found its way into the Israeli national anthem, "Hatikvah," as well.[4]

The absence of any kind of "native" Hebrew music worried Zionists. "How sad," wrote the musician Joachim Stutschewsky, "that even our national anthem is based on a Czech tune."[5] This is one of the ironies in *The Rosendorf Quartet*, in which Rudi tries to come up with new Hebrew music based on Arab traditions. But it was exactly what Zionist musicians tried to do. Their greatest wish was to bring together Western

[3] Nathan Shaham, *The Rosendorf Quartet* (רביעיית רוזנדורף), Am Oved, 1984, p. 138.
[4] Edwin Seroussi, "Hatikva: Conceptions, Receptions and Reflections," *Yuval Online* 9 (2015), available at https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/yuval/22482. Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine*, p. 92.
[5] Joachim Stutschewsky, "Our Songs" (שירנו), *Haaretz*, July 6, 1939.

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and Eastern music and create a new local Hebrew *melos* of folk music and of concert or art music.

Inventing Folk Music

The Jews who began to settle Palestine toward the end of the nineteenth century drew on various musical traditions. Some of their early songs originated in the clubs of the Hibbat Zion (Love of Zion) movement that predated Zionism. It was mostly an Eastern European repertoire with a few original labor songs that were composed in Palestine, usually by wedding a Yiddish or Slavic tune to a few short lines in simple Hebrew. It was a marriage of convenience: the familiar tune helped the newcomers memorize the unfamiliar Hebrew words.[6] A selection of nine of those songs was published in 1895 with the lyrics only. Printers in Palestine were not set up to print notes yet, so the names of familiar tunes were added below song titles to guide singers. "Sing after the familiar tune," read the text under the title of "Hatikvah" on page 6 of the 1895 booklet, in the hope that most readers would know the reference. In his review of the songbook, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda wrote that although "some of [the tunes] have been borrowed from other nations, the Hebrew lyrics give the music a noble air."[7] It was an encouraging step, although the songbook was too patchy and too random to satisfy serious Zionists.

In fact, Joel Engel (1868–1927) came close to a useful definition of Jewish folk music. On November 30, 1900 he gave a memorable lecture in Moscow, in which he claimed that Eastern European Jewish music is distinguished by its particular emphases on borrowed elements, "distinctive vocal intonations … nuances of pitch, timbre, and instrumentation," which he termed "the modal harmonic system."[8] He demonstrated it on a Yiddish song called "How Does One Sing?" (,ווי זינגט דער חסידל דער ציגוינערל, דער איבאנקע, How do a Hassid, a Gypsie and an Ivan

[6] Yaffa Berlowitz, "From the Songs of Hibbat Zion to Motherland Songs: The Songs of the First Aliyah as a Foundation of Israeli Song" (משירת חיבת ציון לשירת מולדת, הזמר בעלייה הראשונה כמסד לזמר הישראלי), *Bikoret Ufarshanut* 44, special issue: *The Hebrew Song, Poetics, History, Music, Culture* (הזמר העברי: פואטיקה, היסטוריה, מוסיקה, תרבות), ed. Tamar Wolf-Monsohn, Bar-Ilan University, 2012, pp. 13–59.

[7] David Assaf, *Oneg Shabbat* blog (עונג שבת), December 8, 2017, available at https://onegshabbat.blogspot.com/2017/12/blog-post_25.html.

[8] James Loeffler, *The Most Musical Nation: Jews and Culture in the Late Russian Empire*, Yale University Press, 2010, p. 68.

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Sing), in which a Jew, a Romany, and a Russian sing the same tune with different intonations that mark their respective cultures. It was an inspired presentation that drew a standing ovation, but it was still not good enough for Zionists, who looked for something altogether new that would put a distance between them and Eastern Europe.

"The land of Israel sings to us, but our diasporic soul is unable yet to understand those sounds, to make sense of them," wrote someone named Michael in the newsletter of Kibbutz Usha in 1937. "Let's listen to the natural sounds of our renewing homeland … and make it into a permanent hymn."[9] The poet Yehuda Karni advised musically minded Zionists on how to achieve it. After arriving in the country, he wrote, keep quiet for a while, try and free yourself from the soundscape of the Diaspora and tune in to local sounds instead. "The wild cry at an Arab wedding [in Palestine] is more important for the future of Hebrew art than imported European tunes. The same is true of the dances of our road builders. They are more important than modern foreign dances," he wrote, encouraging readers to learn from non-Ashkenazi / European traditions.[10]

The Music of the Orient

Work on a more original Jewish or Hebrew musical tradition was aided by ethnographic trends in turn-of-the-century Europe. Those arrived in the Yishuv in 1907 with the ethnomusicologist Abraham Zvi Idelsohn (1892–1938), who came ready to prove the existence of a distinct Jewish musical tradition that spanned time and space. Like other Jewish musicians of his generation Idelsohn was a Romantic Nationalist, and like many of them he bought into the racial discourse that usually went with it. In the world of music the discourse was shadowed by Richard Wagner's famous antisemitic tract *Judaism in Music*, which created a stir toward the end of the nineteenth century. Although serious musicians dismissed Wagner's bizarre claim that Jews are congenitally incapable of composing truly artistic music, it had a peculiar resonance in the Jewish world. As odd as the assertion was, it led some Jewish musicians to try and disprove Wagner by internalizing his racial essentialism, not unlike the Zionist call for a muscular Judaism.

[9] *Hedei Usha*, September 9, 1937, p. 2.
[10] Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine*, p. 254.

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Idelsohn came to Jerusalem to find what he called the racial peculiarities of Jewish music, which were obscured by the social conditions Jews lived in, he argued. "Once we remove [the] exilic form" of Jewish music and "purify [it] from the filth of its prison, the temporary abode of its host nation … we would stand in full awe" of its original, biblical beauty. Jewish music, he wrote, has "no relation to European music, and what is more, it cannot tolerate European melody, harmony and theory."[11] To find that origin and connect the Zionist present with its biblical past, Idelsohn embarked on ambitious ethnographic research into the musical traditions of Jewish communities. "During the fifteen years I lived in Jerusalem," he wrote in a biographical sketch toward the end of his life, "I collected the synagogue music of all the known Jewish communities, including Yemenis, Babylonians, Persians, Aleppans, Dagestanis, Bukharans, Sephardis, Moroccans and various Ashkenazi and Hasidic communities. To deepen my understanding of eastern music I also collected music from Arabs, Turks, and Persians." If there was indeed a common origin to Jewish music, Idelsohn expected these diverse traditions to prove it. Such common elements, he wrote, "would be the sparks of the nation's soul – the original music of the Hebrews."[12]

One happy outcome of Idelsohn's extensive research was that, in time, it became a valuable history of different Jewish musical traditions, which



Fig. 6.1 Idelsohn suggested that musical notes be written from right to left, like Hebrew, as in this rendition of the first notes of "Hatikvah," which became Israel's national anthem. *Sefer Hashirim* (The Book of Songs), Berlin, Hevrat Ha'ezra Liyhudei Germania, 1912, National Library of Israel.

[11] Assaf Shelleg, *Jewish Contiguities and the Soundtrack of Israeli History*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 22.

[12] Idelsohn, Abraham Zvi, "My Life" (חיי), *Yuval* 5 (1986), available at https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/index.php/en/yuval/22924.

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he carefully recorded, transcribed, and then published in ten volumes between 1914 and 1933. Driven by the same desire, Idelsohn founded an Institute for Jewish Music to promote musical nationalism through a live archive, a library of local musical traditions, and a program of concerts that would showcase them. "Ye Hebrew musicians, singers, cantors, and instrumentalists!" he wrote in an official announcement in 1910, "though you be small in your own eyes, you bear the spirit [of old Israel]! … Heirs to the Levite singers … arise … come ye together in one place, unite into one great choir; and the [Western] Ashkenazi Jew shall not be put above the Persian, or the Sephardi above the Polish or the Yemeni above the Babylonian."[13]

In the summer of 1910 Idelsohn organized a concert that demonstrated the kind of cross-fertilization he had in mind. Three different choirs, Ashkenazi, Yemeni, and Syrian (Aleppan), numbering seventy singers in total, "sang together and in alteration, each group in its own style, and it all combined into a pleasant harmony," wrote Itamar Ben-Avi in his review of the concert.[14] But the Institute for Jewish Music did not survive long. It met with resistance from local Jewish religious groups, it was plagued with financial troubles, and it suffered from Idelsohn's penchant for independent work. The closure freed Idelsohn to work on his important music ethnography, which, ironically, disproved his own musical essentialism. Rather than reflecting Wagner's polemic in reverse, Idelsohn's ethnography proved the diversity and richness of the music Jews made.

It was a very challenging diversity, as singer Bracha Zefira found during her long career as one of the first and most successful native Hebrew musicians. Born to a Yemeni family in Jerusalem in 1911, Zefira was orphaned young and grew up in a succession of foster families – Yemeni, Sephardi, and Persian – where she learned a variety of musical traditions. Her education at a Zionist boarding school brought her into the orbit of Zionism and set the trajectory of her career as a popular singer in the 1930s and 1940s.

Zefira epitomized the saying about the right person in the right place at the right time. As a Yemeni she belonged to a community that was considered exotic then. Having arrived in Palestine in the 1880s, the Yemenis were less insular and less embedded in the old Jewish

[13] Unattributed translation, ibid.
[14] Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine*, p. 17.

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communities of Palestine, which they initially joined. Having no parents, she was also less bound to the community of her birth. Her education at a Zionist boarding school loosened those connections even more and exposed her to Western music. The absence of a traditional family influence probably made it easier for her to join various artistic initiatives in the Yishuv at the age of sixteen. Finally, her trip to Germany in the late 1920s to further her music education, and her marriage to the Russian-Jewish composer and pianist Nahum Nardi, led to a fruitful collaboration and several concert tours across Europe, the United States, Egypt, and Palestine.

Zefira took advantage of her unique position to become a dynamic cultural agent, a mediator between East and West and between liturgical and popular music and art music.[15] She handled the tension by modifying Eastern melodies and making them more appealing to Western ears, as in her adaptation of Bialik's love poem "Between the Tigris and Euphrates" (בין נהר פרת ונהר חידקל), where she took the music of a popular Arabic love song and modified it to fit Bialik's poem with piano accompaniments by Nardi.[16] She adapted the tune for Western ears by turning the modulations of the original Arabic performance into a series of operatic trills that were accompanied by corresponding piano embellishments.

But Zefira's attempts to create a native Hebrew school of music were not as successful as she had hoped. It was not only that her familiarity with both Eastern and Western musical traditions was unique, even if her access to them was not always direct. The fact that she was primarily a performer and not a composer limited her legacy. Musical notes stay; musical performances do not. Moreover, most of the composers Zefira worked with came from Europe, and their capacity to adopt unfamiliar melodies was limited, even if they wished to do so. It was easier and probably more comforting to adapt music that reminded the majority of immigrants of their homes in Eastern Europe.

[15] Gila Flam, "Bracha Zefira, a Case Study of Acculturation in Israeli Song," *Asian Music* 17: 2: *Music in the Ethnic Communities of Israel* (Spring–Summer 1986): 108–125.

[16] For information on the song and its adaptation history see the Internet music archive *Zemereshet*, at www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=332. See also an ethnographic recording, *A Concert and Interview with Bracha Zefira*, interview with Avner Bahat, Kfar Masaryk, 1964 (קונצרט של ברכה צפירה וראיון עמה), National Library of Israel, available at www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL990038949440205171/NLI.

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An Original Hebrew Folk Sound

Until the popularity of Mizrahi music in the 1980s, the influence of non-European musical traditions on Hebrew popular songs was limited, certainly in comparison to the influence they had on art music.[17] There were a number of reasons for it, including the growing political tension between Jews and Arabs, but demographics played the biggest role.

The majority of Zionist settlers came from the eastern parts of Europe, and many of the melodies they knew and loved came with them. Russian folk songs were favorites, not only because of cultural connections, but also because of ideological sympathies. Zionists admired the Russian socialist counterculture, especially the Narodniks, the nationalist folk movement that predated socialism and inspired it. The Narodniks, who had an anti-Czarist agenda, believed in "going to the people" as a way to promote a more egalitarian society based on peasant communal structures.

It was precisely the kind of Romantic Nationalism that attracted Zionists. There was only one problem: The closest Jewish folk culture or "people" Zionists could "go to" were the traditional Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. But since Zionists rejected that life as old-fashioned and irrelevant, Russian folk culture became a substitute for it. Many of the cultural innovations in the Yishuv were "made in Russia," from the social structure of kibbutz communities to early Zionist fashion. Music was another one. Some of the first Hebrew folk songs were imported from Russia and then translated into Hebrew or rewritten anew. The Israeli online music archive *Zemereshet* groups Israeli folk songs in categories of origin: Yiddish, 216 songs; Russian, 141 songs; Hasidic, 125 songs (Masorti or Ashkenazi traditional, 53); Yemeni, 41 songs; Sephardi, 40 songs; Arabic, 18 songs; Bukharan, 11 songs.

One of the first pioneering songs, "Hurry, Brothers" (חושו אחים, חושו) from the early 1880s, was based on a Slovenian song that became popular throughout Eastern Europe at the time.[18] The writer Yechiel Pinnes replaced the patriotic Russian words with a rousing Hebrew version and introduced it at the end of a Passover banquet in Jerusalem in 1883. It was an instant hit. Years later one of the guests who had

[17] Mizrahi, meaning "eastern" in Hebrew, designates non-Ashkenazi or non-European origin (Ashkenaz is an old Hebrew word for Germany), usually from North Africa or the Middle East.

[18] For early recordings of the song see www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=354.

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been present that night recalled how twenty young men left the party singing the song loudly in the streets of the city. "Our hearts were aglow, and our souls were astir," he wrote. "One of the more excitable fellows threw his hat to the ground … and shouted: 'O Land of Israel! For nearly two thousand years you haven't heard Hebrew spoken. We have now returned to revive you and to embrace your soil'."[19]

Russian version		**Hebrew version**	
Мы дружно на врагов,	We are together against enemies	חוּשׁוּ, אַחִים, חוּשׁוּ	Hurry, brothers, hurry,
На бой, друзья, спешим,	We are in a hurry to fight, friends,	נָרִימָה פְּעָמֵינוּ	Let's pick up our pace.
За родину, за славу,	For the homeland, for glory,	טוּשׁוּ, אַחִים, טוּשׁוּ	Fly, brothers, fly
За честь мы постоим!	We will stand for honor!	אֶל אֶרֶץ הוֹרָתֵנוּ	to our ancestral land.

A later song from 1920, "The Sky has Darkened" (קדרו פני השמיים), commemorated the death of Joseph Trumpeldor, an early Zionist martyr. The Hebrew version is based on a contemporary Russian song, "Among Dense Forests," Среди лесов дремучих, which honors the death of a popular robber, a Russian Robin Hood of sorts. The song had several Russian versions and is likely based on an earlier German song on a similar theme.[20] In the Hebrew version the name of the Russian robber was changed to that of the Zionist hero with a few place names added to place it in Palestine.

Yiddish and Hasidic music was even more popular, despite the Zionist disdain of both. But that should not be surprising, given that the majority of settlers came from traditional Jewish homes in the Yiddish-speaking Pale of Settlement, and given the emotional resonance of music. In the words of an old Aramaic saying, knowledge acquired in childhood is not easily forgotten (גרסא דינקוטא, אינה משתכחא). The early pioneering hit

[19] David Assaf, *Oneg Shabbat* blog (עונג שבת), March 17, 2017, available at http://onegshabbat.blogspot.com/2017/03/blog-post_89.html.
[20] For recordings see https://www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=1665.

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"Hava Nagila," probably the most widely recognized Israeli folk song of all time, was based on a Hasidic tune from Idelsohn's ethnographic collection. In 1918 Idelsohn and his students captured the high spirits in the Yishuv following the Balfour Declaration by adding a few words to it: "Let us cheer and rejoice / let us sing / wake, brothers, with a joyous heart." In typical Hasidic fashion, the lines are repeated over and over again as a kind of mantra that rouses the singers to ecstasy. Based on Isaiah 25:9, "Let us cheer and rejoice in the salvation of the Lord," the words of the Zionist song deliberately omit the name of God.[21]

As the poet Yaacov Orland put it, songs in the Yishuv were created by happenstance. What he meant was that songs were often written in real time as a response to all kinds of events. "As I was leading my horses back from the field one evening," wrote the composer Shalom Postolsky, "a fellow came over and told me" that a member of a neighboring kibbutz "wrote a new [harvest] song and is looking for someone who could set it to music, preferably someone familiar with field work." I was happy to oblige.[22]

But if circumstance and ideology suggested the words, music was harder to come up with, especially original music that would sound indigenous. And since no one could define that sound with clarity, folk songs in the Yishuv reflected a variety of influences that became more difficult to identify with time. The composer and educator Immanuel Amiran used to tell his students that if they thought a song sounded Russian, they should discard it. If it sounded Arabic, Hungarian, German, or like the song of any other people, they should have nothing to do with it because it was not an Israeli song. But if they found a song that sounded like nothing they had ever heard before, that would be an Israeli folksong.[23]

Most of the composers who tried to create that sound searched for different musical elements to add to their Yiddish and Slavic repertories.

[21] Idelsohn's original notes for "Hava Nagila" at the National Library of Israel, available at https://blog.nli.org.il/en/hava_nagila/. For an early recording of the song see www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=1271.

[22] In a letter to Yisrael Shalita, September 18, 1949. Yisrael Shalita file, Felicja Blumental Music Archive, Israel.

[23] Efrat Barth, "Wine from an Ancient Vineyard in an Old Bottle: The Original Songs of Immanuel Amiran" (יין מכרם עתיק בקנקן ישן – סוגת שיריו המקוריים של עמנואל עמירן), *Iyunim bitkumat yisrael* 8, special issue: *Music in Israel* (מוזיקה בישראל), ed. Michael Wolpe, Gideon Katz, and Tuvia Friling, Ben-Gurion University Press (2014): 362–376, at p. 362.

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Some of them included experimentation with older European liturgical music believed to go all the way back to the Jerusalem Temple. "There is no doubt that music from the temple in Jerusalem was transferred to the early Christian church by new Christians," wrote Mordechai Golinkin, founder of the Palestine Opera. It was only later, he continued, "that the Gregorians tried to erase all musical traces of their Jerusalem origins."[24] While it was impossible to prove such claims, some composers experimented with the Dorian or Doric mode, associated with ancient Greek harmony. Daniel Sambursky (1909–1977) used it in his music for Nathan Alterman's 1934 love song for the land, "Song of the Valley" (שיר העמק).[25]

Rest to the weary
Peace to the toiler.
A pale night falls
on the Jezreel Valley.
Dew below and moon above,
From Bet Alfa to Nahalal.*

A night like all nights.
Hush in Jezreel.
Sleep, beautiful valley,
we guard you well.

The sea of wheat ripples,
the sound of the herd rings.
This is my land and its fields,
this is the Jezreel Valley.
Bless my country, praise it,
from Bet Alfa to Nahalal.

* Names of kibbutzim

Mental images like these come up again and again in many of the folk songs that were written at the time. The idea behind them was to stress

[24] Mordechai Golinkin, *From the Temples of Japheth to the Tents of Shem* (מהיכלי יפת אל אהלי שם), Golinkin Memorial Committee, 1948, p. 171.

[25] Nathan Alterman, *Popular Songs* (פזמונים ושירי זמר), Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, vol. 2, 1979. For a recording of the song see https://www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=161.

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the Jewish connection to the land, through agricultural work, glowing descriptions of the land, and biblical associations, which here relate to the Jezreel Valley as the site of several biblical battles. The last stanza of the song stresses these sinister connections and the need for the settlers to stand on guard:

> Darkness on Mount Gilboa.
> A horse gallops in the shadows.
> A piercing cry flies high
> above the fields of Jezreel.
> Who fired a shot, who fell,
> between Bet Alfa and Nahalal?

Thinking back on his first years in Palestine, the musician Menashe Ravina (1899–1968) recalled the new Palestinian soundscape that so charmed Jewish immigrants from Europe, and which Karni referred to earlier: snatches of Arabic song in the distance, the braying of donkeys, unfamiliar prayers of local Jews. Zionist composers readily associated such sounds with the biblical past and tried to set it to music. None of it was connected to King David or King Solomon, Ravina confessed about a cultural atavism that was common at the time.[26] In "Song of the Valley" Sambursky tried to break loose from "the dictatorship of the old [European] tonal system" via old church hymns and their alleged connection to ancient Hebrew music.[27] Whether it was indigenous or not, it was a far cry from an earlier song by the same name, a 1928 number written by Kadish Yehuda Leib Silman to the music of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*.[28]

Other attempts, which focused on the Palestinian present, were just as romantic and included music that sprang from the landscape and climate of Palestine, as their composers asserted. Yedidya Admon (1894–1982), for instance, said that the oriental elements in his popular song "The Camel Song" (1927 ,שיר הגמל) were intuitive, inspired by the local Eastern Mediterranean environment:

[26] Efrat Barth, "The Meeting of Early Hebrew Songs with the East" (מפגשם של מלחיני הזמר העברי המוקדם עם המזרח), *Iyunim bitkumat yisrael* 8, special issue: *Music in Israel* (מוזיקה בישראל), ed. Michael Wolpe, Gideon Katz, and Tuvia Friling, Ben-Gurion University Press (2014): 326-343, at p. 330.

[27] Shai Burstyn, "Inventing Musical Traditions: The Case of the Hebrew (Folk) Song," *Orbis Musicae* 13 (2003): 127–136, at p. 131.

[28] For a recording see www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=672.

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Camel, my camel, camel, my camel, You are my mate in [transporting] sand. How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwellings, O Israel! (Numbers 24:5)	גַּמָּל גַּמָּלִי, גַּמָּל גַּמָּלִי, חָבֵר אַתָּה לִי בְּזִיפְזִיק. מַה טֹּובוּ אֹהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב, מִשְׁכְּנוֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל.
Camel, my camel, camel, my camel, You are my mate in [transporting] sand. Behold a people that riseth up as a great lion, and as a young lion doth it lift itself up. (Numbers 23:24)	גַּמָּל גַּמָּלִי, גַּמָּל גַּמָּלִי, חָבֵר אַתָּה לִי בְּזִיפְזִיק. הֵן עָם כְּלָבִיא יָקוּם וְכַאֲרִי יִתְנַשָּׂא.

The words bind the Mediterranean countryside – camels, sand – together with the dynamic spirit of Labor Zionism. Both were part of the Zionist project: sand for construction, camels for carrying it. The speaker addresses the camel as a fellow worker in this modernistic project, which he then sets against the ancient Israelite past and its national connotations.

Admon used the oriental aspect of the song by keeping it very simple, with short, repetitive melodic motifs that bring to mind the monotonous trudge of a camel.[29] What we have here, wrote the composer Alexander Boscovich a few decades later, is an example of New Hebrew secular liturgy. Boscovich celebrated what he termed a primitive simplicity. To his mind it was an ingenious expression of the monotony of the Near Eastern landscape that liberated Israeli music from the more layered Eastern European diasporic traditions.[30]

Other experiments included attempts to graft local Near Eastern musical elements onto the European musical stratum, Jewish as well as Arabic. Matityahu Shellem's shepherding song "A Lamb and a Kid" (שה וגדי) was based on an Ashkenazi Sabbath tune, "God Provideth" (צור משלו אכלנו), which Shellem embellished with oriental trills that mimic the sound of a Bedouin flute.

Writing in 1946 in what was intended to be a summative collection, the editors of a three-volume anthology of Hebrew folk songs noted the care they took "to include a variety of Jewish musical traditions, especially eastern Jewish music, which until recently was overlooked," but was nevertheless foundational for the new music of the Land of Israel.

[29] Burstyn, "Inventing Musical Traditions," pp. 130–131.

[30] Alexander Boscovich, "The Problems of Israeli Original Music" (בעיות המוסיקה המקורית בישראל), *Orlogin* 9 (1953): 280–294, at p. 287. For early recordings see www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=5020.

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"Eastern Jewish music is so important," they told readers, "because its character suits the landscape of Israel and because the sound of its Hebrew is precise and correct."[31] Such programmatic pronouncements were not especially accurate or useful. To this very day, admitted the composer David Zehavi in 1964, it's impossible to say what an original Israeli song is.[32] Eventually, of course, it was the very search for a native music that created it.

Composers

Music historian Jehoash Hirshberg tells us that, from the beginning of the twentieth century until the establishment of Israel halfway through it, some 4,000 folk songs were composed in the Yishuv, almost 1,000 per decade. About a thousand of those were in wide circulation. Of the nearly 200 people who composed those songs, roughly a third were teachers in kindergartens and schools, and another third were kibbutz members. That only one-third of composers were professional musicians says a lot about the ideological commitment of Yishuv society.

It was not surprising that many of these accidental composers belonged to two communities that were at the vanguard of Zionist culture. While teachers labored to devise a new curriculum that would reflect the cultural ambitions of the Yishuv, kibbutz members were eager to display the agricultural values of Zionism and its new holiday tradition. But since the traditional Jewish repertory contained no such songs, they were often written ad hoc by creative members of the Yishuv.

A common creation story involves teacher-composers such as Daniel Sambursky, who were regularly called on to supply new songs for their young charges. In 1932, two weeks after Sambursky arrived in Palestine from Germany, he became a teacher in a Ramat Gan school. Save for a few festival songs, he remembered, there were very few songs for children. Sambursky promptly sat down to write some. Another dynamic composer, Nahum Nardi, received regular requests from kindergarten teachers eager to expand their repertoire. Nardi obliged by writing songs that became household names, including "The Little Rabbit" (השפן הקטן) and "Happy New Year" (שנה טובה).

[31] Quoted in Nathan Shachar, "The *Eretz-Israeli* Song 1920–1950" (השיר הארץ-ישראלי בשנים 1920–1950 היבטים מוסיקליים וסוציומוזיקליים), PhD thesis, Hebrew University, 1989, p. 120.

[32] Fleischer, *Historical Development*, p. 320.

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The new life on the land was a rich creative source as well, especially on kibbutzim. Shepherd-poet Matityahu Shellem recounts a traumatic experience that inspired one of his well-known songs, "At Dawn" (עם צאת החמה). One morning in the late 1920s he was tending his flock when one of his sheep, which had apparently eaten a poisonous plant, began to shake violently and then collapsed and died. "I felt depressed. Some of the Bedouin shepherds who were tending their own flocks in the vicinity mocked me for taking such bad care of my sheep … I comforted myself by pouring my grief into a new poem": "At dawn / an innocent sheep / out to pasture / suddenly died / alarmed, the shepherd threw [down] his flute / and mourned his lovely sheep."[33]

By 1948 there were 217 shepherding songs circulating in the Yishuv. The occupation itself was negligible, but it had a high symbolic value for Zionists, representing the modern Jewish re-connection to the ancient land. The songs mentioned specific geographies with biblical connotations, the bond between the shepherds and their sheep, the sound of sheep's bells and the shepherd's flute, often an Arabic tune.

Other song writers admitted that the exuberance of the pioneering experience prompted them quite literally to burst into song. Moshe Bick, who came to Palestine in 1921, was inspired to compose the hit "We Shall Build our Land" (נבנה ארצנו) following his work in road construction. "Everyone felt that it was their duty … to contribute to the struggle and the vision of the Yishuv. That's what made me think of the words to a song" that promises to "build our motherland" because it is "decreed by blood and history," to put an end to the "festering bondage" of Jews, and that calls on the "fire of freedom" to lead the Jewish people "to march boldly toward freedom."[34]

"I never stopped to think what or how I write," said another composer, Marc Lavry (1903–1967). "We felt an urge to experiment, to write buoyant, hopeful songs, because the Jewish folksongs [in Eastern Europe] were sad, written in a minor key. … In Palestine, everything was different, people were different, and we wanted upbeat songs about

[33] Ibid., p. 371. On shepherding songs see Michal Sadan, "Following the Sheep" (בעקבות הצאן), *Iyunim bitkumat yisrael* 8, special issue: *Music in Israel* (מוזיקה בישראל), ed. Michael Wolpe, Gideon Katz, and Tuvia Friling, Ben-Gurion University Press (2014): 295–325. For a recording see www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=1238.

[34] Fleischer, *Historical Development*, p. 306. For early recordings, see www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=117.

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labor and the new country [we came to]."[35] Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a more extravagant song than the pioneering favorite "Our Barns Are Full of Grain." Composed by David Zehavi to lyrics by Pinhas Elad, the song conveys the high spirits of the pioneers, who wanted to express the immensity of the pioneering project and their joy at its success: "Our barns are full of grain and our wineries brim with wine / our homes are teeming with babies / and our cattle are fruitful / What else will you ask of us, motherland / that we have not given you yet?"[36]

When Yisrael Shalita (1906–1982) collected information for a comprehensive encyclopedia of Jewish music he was putting together in the 1940s he wrote to Yishuv composers asking them to specify those elements that gave their music a distinctly Jewish character. It was an essentialist question that exercised many people at the time. Shalita simply focused it on music. Perhaps he meant the Jewish *melos*, as Stutschewsky and other composers referred to it at the time, using the ancient Greek word for melody.[37] The dutiful replies Shalita received were almost identical and repeated much of what has been mentioned above about Jewish music as a mixture of old Jewish musical traditions.

Yariv Ezrahi divided the songs he composed into three groups. The first were Slavic songs. The second were Eastern European and Jewish, "although not diasporic and weepy in nature," he added. The third group was his favorite, "songs that are more biblical and Semitic in nature and that I wrote intuitively, without a guiding western hand," he noted.[38] Abel Ehrlich wrote to say that "every Hebrew text [of mine] strengthened my connections to the roots of Hebrew culture and empowered me, as if I was not composing by myself; with me were my ancestors, my people, the kings and the prophets as well as my contemporaries."[39] A. U. Boscovich described how the guttural letters of the Hebrew language "inspired me to write music for bassoon and viola,

[35] Fleischer, *Historical Development*, p. 330.
[36] For recordings see www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=578.
[37] "The various emotions [the Jewish *melos*] arouses and the layered history it carries," as well as "the variations of Jewish rhythm and its harmonies, must be placed at the center of every musical composition," Stutschewsky wrote expansively: Joachim Stutschewsky, "Jewish and *Eretz-Israeli* Music" (מוזיקה יהודית וישראלית), *Davar*, June 12, 1939.
[38] Yariv Ezrahi, letter, July 18, 1949, Y. Shalita file, Felicja Blumental Music Archive, Israel.
[39] Abel Ehrlich, letter, August 6, 1969, ibid.

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two instruments that are quintessentially made for expressing [Hebrew] tonality." He also instructed drummers to use their fingers rather than sticks to "channel their [Hebrew] vitality" more directly in imitation of the "expert agility of eastern drummers."[40]

But not everyone complied. The celebrated songster Yehuda Sharet wrote back wryly:

[Kibbutz] Yagur, 3.7.1949

To my associate Y. Shalita, greetings.

I beg your forgiveness for not replying earlier.

I am really sorry, but I am not used to such requests. After mulling it over, I am unable to provide you with an answer. I am confident, however, that no one will be the worse for it. And since I doubt an answer is even possible, I am not going to worry about it too much.

Food for thought: Are all composers made of the same cloth? They may be united by the language of music, which they use in their works, but they are made of different stuff and in different ways. Each one of them is distinct. Some may oblige and answer your question while others may not.

I never meant to disrupt your work, and I am sure my tardiness did not affect it in any way.

....

Apologetically yours,
Yehuda Sharet[41]

Circulation and Inculcation

Writing music was one thing. Getting that music out to people was another matter altogether, something individual composers could not manage or sustain on a large scale, no matter how enthusiastic they were. Effective distribution needed coordinated efforts that connected songs

[40] A. U. Boscovitch, letter, March 9, 1948, ibid.
[41] Yehuda Sharet, letter, July 3, 1949, ibid.

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with singers. Zionist organizations served that purpose by supporting the mass production of songbooks and by coordinating sing-alongs and public performances.

Songbooks were a popular way of spreading the ideas of Zionism and imagining a community of singers, even if music was secondary to ideology at first. In 1900 a festive edition of songs was prepared for the Fourth Zionist Congress in London and included a selection of texts that spanned Jewish history, from the Bible through medieval Spanish poetry to more contemporary hymns. It was part of a larger program that called on art to demonstrate the genius of Jews and their viability as a modern nation. A year later an exhibition of Jewish visual art, organized at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel, was designed with the same goal in mind.

In the following decades handier songbooks were published in the Yishuv with increasing frequency. They served the same purpose as church hymnals, providing the words and music for a growing body of folk songs and imparting ideological messages through emotional identification and the creation of a community of spirit.[42] "Musical education," wrote Binyamin Omer in the 1940s, "has an important role in providing an emotional foundation for national and socialist belief, in deepening the link with the soil, with the homeland, and with the working class, here and abroad."[43]

Musical education posed a serious challenge that required guidance and organization by professional musicians. "Yishuv members are a diverse bunch," wrote Menashe Ravina in 1927, "and it will be a long time before we become a more cohesive community" with common musical and other traditions. Ravina's advice was to organize public singing events modeled after those in Germany. During a trip he made to a folk music festival in Frankfurt in 1927, Ravina was deeply impressed by an assembly of about two thousand people who came together to learn five folk songs under the direction of Fritz Jöde. "If only we could replicate this in the Yishuv," he wrote, "and teach the immigrants from

[42] Yael Reshef, *The Early Hebrew Folksong* (הזמר העברי בראשיתו), Mossad Bialik, 2004; Shai Burstyn, "Totalitarian Tendencies in Music Education: The Israeli Case," available at https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Musicology_Today/Musicology_Today-r2010-t7/Musicology_Today-r2010-t7-s212-225/Musicology_Today-r2010-t7-s212-225.pdf.

[43] See Burstyn, "Totalitarian Tendencies," p. 220.

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Europe Yemeni and Arabic songs," it would surely go a long way toward creating a Hebrew music tradition.[44]

For a fledgling national community with few entertainment venues, songbooks were very useful. Singalongs, like folk dancing, did not require infrastructure or complex organization. They were also open to all, a fitting socialist pastime that had redeeming national values. They instill "unity, discipline, and a social aesthetic," wrote the Revisionist leader Zeev Jabotinsky, in a preface to a 1939 songbook.[45] Songbooks provided another important service by familiarizing new immigrants with the Hebrew language, expanding their vocabulary, and teaching them correct pronunciation.

At first singalongs were fairly spontaneous events, and in the small settlements of the early Yishuv they gave the young and lonely settlers an immediate sense of community. But when the number and makeup of Jewish immigrants began to grow from the 1930s onward, centrally organized singalongs and prescriptive songbooks became more common. Finally, in 1946, a definitive collection of folk songs was published in a three-volume *Book of Songs and Melodies* (ספר שירים ומנגינות). It was a popular work that circulated widely and canonized a repertoire of songs that were eventually called songs of the motherland (שירי מולדת), the name Zionists gave to the various folk songs that were written in the Yishuv.

Songbooks were one of many devices that helped to spread popular Hebrew music and educate the public about it. Musical ambassadors were another, people like composer Emanuel Zamir (1925–1962), "who travelled from one festival to another, from one musical group to another, from village to moshav to kibbutz to immigrant camp. Nowhere was too remote for spreading [the gospel] of Hebrew song," wrote Shalita about one member of a Zionist host of self-motivated cultural activists.[46]

Zionist musical education was effective in the main, though some of it bewildered Mordechai Levitas (1914–1997), who was struck by the absence of soprano voices in the choirs he trained in the 1950s (see Figure 6.2). "Teachers claimed that the voices of Israeli children are different from children's voices elsewhere and lack the soprano register," he wrote incredulously. They said it was due to the hot climate and the

[44] *Davar*, December 20, 1927, p. 8.
[45] Quoted in Shachar, "The *Eretz-Israeli* Song," p. 103.
[46] Y. Shalita, notes on Emanuel Zamir, Y. Shalita file, Felicja Blumental Music Archive, Israel.

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Fig. 6.2 Song instruction at Kibbutz Gan Shmuel, 1945. Photo: Pikiwiki.

guttural letters of the Hebrew language. Levitas thought it ridiculous. The real reason behind the "ugly and declamatory" singing in the Yishuv, he explained, was "the pioneering spirit, the spirit of heroism, and the fight against the British and other ideologies, which led to very loud singing that was best achieved through lower registers." Teachers were not instructing their students in music but in politics, he wrote. "Singing was silenced, and politics was installed instead."[47]

The politics of Hebrew music was all-consuming, and some of it stretched the limited capacities of the Yishuv. The earnest attempt to establish an opera company in Palestine was one example. Another was an ambitious program of biblical oratorios that, it was hoped, would add cultural gravitas to the fledgling Zionist project and ensure it Western, middle-class respectability.

The Palestine Opera was the darling project of Mordechai Golinkin (1875–1963), an energetic musician who gave up a successful conducting career in Russia to bring opera to Zion. Following an encouraging campaign to support the cause, Golinkin arrived in Palestine in 1923 and immediately went to work. The project attracted a lot of attention

[47] Y. Shalita, notes on Mordechai Levitas, ibid.

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at first, locally and abroad. But conditions on the ground were trying. For the first performance, Verdi's *La Traviata*, "the only opera we could stage with local talent," wrote Golinkin, he cobbled together a small orchestra of music students from a local school and a patchy group of singers. The libretto was translated into Hebrew, of course, and "everyone felt elated" and burned "with patriotic zeal."[48]

The first performances of the Palestine Opera were a great success indeed. People came to see the same show more than once, and performances around the Yishuv were well attended by European immigrants, who still longed for the culture they had left behind. In one of the shows in Haifa, remembered Golinkin, "the manager came to ask me what he should do about a young pioneer, who trekked on foot all the way from her kibbutz but had no money for a ticket. 'I can't turn her away,' he said; 'she is big, strong, and very insistent.' I immediately told him to let her in and make sure she gets a good seat. It's for people like her that opera was made, I explained."[49] But in 1927, after three eventful years, the opera company all but closed. The project was probably too big for the small Yishuv and too bourgeois to attract support from its socialist establishment.

Operas were performed in Hebrew as a matter of principle. This included both a classical repertoire and original materials, which did not work so well. Four Hebrew operas were written in the Yishuv or inspired by it, two biblical and two pioneer operas. Idelsohn completed his *Jephtah* in 1912, an ethnomusical work based on his own research, but he never managed to stage it in full. In 1921 the Russian-Jewish composer Mikhail Gnessin began a short work based on Eastern European Jewish motifs which he called *The Youth of Abraham*, but he never published it.[50] Jacob Weinberg combined Arabic labor songs with traditional Eastern European Jewish tunes in a work aptly titled *The Pioneers*. The opera was performed in Palestine in 1925 and, after winning a composition prize in Philadelphia a year later, it was staged a few more times in the USA and in Berlin shortly before the Nazis rose to power. The most successful work was Marc Lavry's kibbutz opera *Dan the Guard*. Mixing Mediterranean elements with Hasidic music and a libretto that pressed all the right Zionist buttons, the opera got

[48] Golinkin, *From the Temples of Japheth*, p. 119.
[49] Ibid., pp. 121–122.
[50] The score was rediscovered by Rita Flomenboim, who organized a small performance of it at Levinsky College in Israel in 2007.

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more traction than the other works and, after its 1945 Tel Aviv premier, it toured the Yishuv as well.[51]

Biblical oratorios were simpler to stage and were performed with more regularity under the dynamic direction of Fordhaus Ben-Tzissy (1896–1979). In 1939 Ben-Tzissy explained to readers of *Haaretz* that, since "most oratorios are based on the Hebrew Bible, they are a wonderful way to bring together the Bible as the source and foundation of [Jewish] existence with the blessings of refined music."[52] He went on to make an explicit connection between the escalating conflict with the Arabs and the staging of Handel's oratorio *Samson*, that "legendary Hebrew warrior who fights bravely for his people's freedom." Ben-Tzissy took liberties with the words and with the order of scenes and made them fit contemporary Zionist politics.[53] Since Handel's libretto "does injustice to the biblical source we were forced to change it and resurrect old glories … [we purged the text of foreign elements to] reflect our time and place more accurately," he wrote. Taking advantage of the Christian cachet of the Hebrew Bible and claiming Jewish ownership of it at the same time was a common Zionist practice. In a review of Ben-Tzissy's rendition of Haydn's *Creation*, the *Palestine Post* noted that "Haydn would probably have been delighted to hear his oratorio performed in the language of the Bible, though one is not sure what he might have thought of the [rearrangement of] some of the sections so as to maintain the Biblical sequence."[54]

Creating Hebrew Art Music

Many of the composers who wrote folk songs composed art music as well, although the challenges they faced in writing longer works were different. Writing folk songs was limited by the need to come up with

[51] The opera had a small academic revival in 2015 when parts of it were performed at the Israel National Library. See Assaf Shelleg, "From Be'er Sheva to Dan" (מבאר שבע ועד דן, לכבס הכל לבן), *Haaretz* online, May 24, 2015, available at www.haaretz.co.il/literature/study/2015-05-24/ty-article/.premium/0000017f-e2d3-df7c-a5ff-e2fb3b280000?utm_source=App_Share&utm_medium=iOS_Native&print=true.

[52] Fordhaus Ben-Tzissy, "On Shimshon" (לקראת הצגת שמשון), *Haaretz*, February 23, 1939, Fordhaus File, Felicja Blumental Music Archive, Israel.

[53] The practice itself is not new, of course. Stage performances of plays, operas, and oratorio librettos were, and still are, rewritten to suit changing agendas.

[54] C. [Fordhaus Ben-Tzissy], "The *Creation* in Hebrew," *Palestine Post*, March 1, 1942.

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catchy tunes. Art musicians had greater room for experiments. Even if the source materials were often similar, such as Eastern music and Jewish liturgical music, concert music facilitated a longer and more contemplative integration of these elements. The challenges had intriguing results.

By offering an opportunity to create a genuinely new Hebrew musical style, Zionism was uniquely positioned to soothe what musicologist Assaf Shelleg has called "the scarred concepts of musical Judaism." European Jewish composers who wished to integrate national elements into their music had a problem. What musical sources could they draw on if they wanted to stress their Jewish identity? National-Romantic composers such as Grieg, Tchaikovsky, and Smetana could claim affinity with the folk traditions in their countries in the name of nationalism. But which folk would a French or German-Jewish composer invoke? Some of those composers looked to the more traditional Jewish communities in the eastern parts of the continent. But since they were far removed from them in almost every sense, the attempts were often seen as artificial, denying both past and future, especially in the context of Wagner's slander.[55]

On the face of it, attempts to do something similar in Palestine, to create a "native" Hebrew art music by incorporating the Eastern musical traditions of Jews and non-Jews alike, seemed even more absurd. After all, Yemenis, Bukharans, and Arabs were even more removed from European composers like Rudi in *The Rosendorf Quartet*. The difference was in the words "past" and "future." Under the shadow of nationalism in Europe, both the past and the future of Jews seemed problematic at the time. In the Land of Israel, however, these ideas could be recontextualized, as Idelsohn suggested earlier, invoking the need to write historical plays and set them to music, theatricals that display the nation's past glory and bring back a vision of its past life on its ancestral soil. If Jews were to create such works about their own history and perform them in their ancestral land, they would gain a completely different meaning from the kind of biblical spectacles that had been common in Europe at least since Handel.

In some ways it was simpler to write new art music than new folk music. If Jewish folk music in Europe was not widely recognized, the Jewish middle classes were much more familiar with art music, as practitioners and as listeners. It was no surprise, then, that Jewish immigrants to Palestine tried to recreate a European musical milieu

[55] Shelleg, *Jewish Contiguities,* p. 16.

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shortly after their arrival. Several agricultural villages organized small orchestras soon after they were founded in the late 1800s. The plan for a music school in Jerusalem in 1910 and the opening of another one in Jaffa in the same year were the beginnings of what became a widespread musical education system later. As noted above, there was a Hebrew opera house in Tel Aviv between 1923 and 1927, and when tens of thousands of middle-class immigrants fled the nationalist wave in Europe prior to World War II in the 1930s, they swelled the ranks of the local bourgeoisie and brought with them musicians in search of employment and patrons eager to resume old cultural habits. Finally, the establishment of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra in 1936, which later became the Israel Philharmonic, crowned the attempts to recreate European middle-class musical culture on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

But these conditions posed two challenges for art musicians in search of new and original sounds they could call Hebrew. On the one hand, they wanted to satisfy public demand as well as their own sense of home by continuing a musical tradition they loved and cherished. At the same time, they were pressured by what Shelleg calls the "high voltage of Zionist rhetoric" and an expectation that they would write music that would ring "the bells and whistles of the Zionist project."[56] It was a tall order that few could meet and a frustration that our fictional literary composer, Rudi, admitted when he confessed to a skeptical inner voice which told him that "there is something artificial about a man whose soul is made of Schubert and Brahms but whose passion for Persian melodies" leaves him cold.[57]

Verdina Shlonsky (1905–1990) would have agreed with Rudi wholeheartedly. She was one of the only composers who resisted this trend at the time. Rather than chase an elusive idea of questionable merit, Shlonsky thought that a unique Hebrew or *Eretz-Israeli* sound should be a modernist project, not an embarrassing scheme to create some kind of orientalist Disneyland, as we would put it today. Her own Romanticism was different. She wanted to create a contemporary Jewish sound by reformulating Jewish devotional music. "Guided by religious melodies, folk songs, and the national dance [Hora]," she wrote in 1942, "the

[56] Ibid., pp. 80, 4.
[57] Shaham, *The Rosendorf Quartet*, p. 138.

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Jewish composer may unhesitatingly venture toward the creation of Jewish music."[58]

Late in her life Shlonsky was asked to reflect on the early search for an original Hebrew sound in Palestine. "All of this hysteria in search of style," she replied. "Yes, I call it hysteria! I looked for a way out when I saw that the whole thing became a power [struggle], like a [political] party ... There was a feeling that composers sought assurance in their writing: how to write? I didn't ask [myself] this question. I asked, what sort of person am I, why do I write and not how to write." And no, "I don't know what orientalism is," she said with irritation and defiance; "Tell me, what is it? Hummus?"[59]

But Shlonsky was not only a female composer – a rarity at the time – she was also woefully untrendy, a cosmopolitan artist at the height of a Jewish national revival. Most of the real-life composers who inspired Rudi's literary image continued to look for their Persian melodies, so to speak. The idea was to infuse what were essentially European musical forms with more local traditions, to express the eastern Mediterranean environment as well as the traditions of various Jewish communities to create a new Hebraic national sound. Among the most dynamic and articulate of these musicians was Alexander Uriah Boscovich (1907–1964), who eventually labeled such music Mediterranean.

Boscovich's penchant for mixing music and ideology began before he came to Palestine with a project he was involved with in his hometown of Culj in Transylvania, in the mid-1930s: an ethnographic expedition to remote Jewish villages in the Carpathian Mountains to collect and transcribe Jewish folk songs. This late iteration of a European National Romantic practice, modeled after the earlier work of Bartók and Kodály, had two important outcomes for Boscovich. It resulted in his first important compositional work, *Chansons populaires juives*, an arrangement of the Jewish folksongs he collected, and his first programmatic essay, *The Problem of Jewish Music*.[60] Based on his ethnographic experience, Boscovich planned to expand the project to the rest of Europe. But in 1938, he was unexpectedly invited to attend the premier of his

[58] Ronit Seter, "Verdina Shlonsky: The First Lady of Israeli Music," *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 7 (2007): 2007–2008.
[59] Oded Assaf, "Electronit hi lo savla" interview in *Ha'ir*, March 2, 1990, p. 70.
[60] Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine*, p. 161.

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Chansons by the Palestine Orchestra, a performance that saved his life, as he liked to say.[61]

In Palestine Boscovich continued his work on the connections between Jewish identity and sound. He thought it crucial to develop new musical sensibilities that would express the Palestinian locality with its sights and sounds, which were very different from those of Europe. Like Karni before him, he called on Hebrew composers to become attuned to the Eastern Mediterranean with its deserts, bare mountains, sands, harsh sun, and the hard sounds of its Semitic languages. At the same time, he was wary of superficial musical unions between East and West and warned against such exoticism, calling it a loveless and improper match.[62]

And yet, Boscovich was not free of the essentialism of his age. He too encouraged Israeli composers to turn their impressions of Palestine into transcendental works that would resonate with the memories of an ancient nation that was being reborn on its ancestral soil. The task of the Zionist composer, he wrote, was to find a way to convey the dramatic tension between a dormant East and the dynamism of the Jewish settlement project, to channel the subconscious memories that Eastern music arouses in Jewish composers and use them to "mend the historic continuity of the Hebrews" by coming up with a new Semitic sound that would express the Jewish reconnection to its cultural cradle.[63]

It would be inadvisable, he cautioned, to try and combine sounds that are fundamentally alien to one another. The disharmony of Eastern music, an "airier, expansive" music that rings faintly "with a Semitic sense of the desert," does not suit the piano, for instance, that harmonious and "most domestic of European musical instruments … which communicates with the outside through a parlor's window."[64] It would be better, Boscovich wrote, to replace the piano with local instruments such as the oud or the rebab. His suggestion was to reboot the Jewish

[61] Alexander Boscovich, "The Jewish Suite" (הסוויטה היהודית), *Duchan* 3 (1963): 47–51, at p. 49.
[62] Boscovich, "The Problem of Israeli Original Music," p. 290.
[63] Ibid., pp. 289–290.
[64] Ibid., p. 292. See also Jehoash Hirshberg, "Alexander U. Boscovich and the Quest for an Israeli National Musical Style," in Ezra Mendelson, ed., *Modern Jews and their Musical Agendas*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

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musical genius, so to speak, and write for it a new software made from local materials that would shape Israeli music more organically.

This approach and the music it would create was later labeled Mediterraneanism, perhaps as a way to ease the abruptness of immigration and soften the culture shock of life in the Middle East. After all, the Mediterranean Sea connected Europe and Palestine, and to invoke it meant maintaining some of these connections. It was a psychological exercise that was applied to other cultural areas, a telltale sign of the tension that inhered in Zionism between West and East.[65]

There is more than a little irony in the fact that Jews, who were seen as oriental in Europe and labeled impostors trying to pass as white by antisemites, were later accused of appropriating Eastern musical traditions when they internalized that bias and moved to Palestine. Idelsohn, for example, went as far as describing Europe as a "prison" and its influence on Jewish music as "filth." It was a violent reaction to Wagner and his like, which, initially, acted as a powerful engine of innovation. In fact, attempts by Jewish composers at what has been called auto-exoticism began in Europe long before they came to Palestine.

The celebrated Israeli composer Paul Ben-Haim (born Frankenburger) began his musical journey to the East in his native Germany. Long before his migration to Palestine in 1933, he experimented with various elements that he hoped would make his music sound more Jewish. He borrowed motifs from archaic European music as well as from the music of Eastern European Jews. It was part of a wider German-Jewish trend at the time of presenting Judaism – or, rather, Jewishness – not just as a religion but as a culture, rooted in the Semitic East. Calls to "return to the pure and ancient Jewish music" in order to be reacquainted with the "expressive monotony of the tones and melodies of the old East" were not infrequent in the German Jewish press in the first decades of the twentieth century.[66] The growing racial discourse in Germany pushed Jews toward such quests, but they were also pulled by their own search for an identity which religion could no longer provide.

Years later Ben-Haim reflected that if life in Palestine was completely new to him, the musical challenges he encountered upon arrival were not. "Eastern Jewish melodies, especially Yemeni music, was already

[65] Noam Ben-Zeev, *An Israeli Tune: Report on the Sounds of a Transformed Nation* (מנגינה ישראלית), Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 2009, p. 20.

[66] Alice Jacob-Loewenson, "Zur alten und neuen liturgische Musik," *Jüdische Rundschau*, no. 76/77, September 28, 1928, p. 546.

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ingrained in me," he said. As mentioned earlier, the belief that archaic Christian music – Gregorian chants, for instance – originated in the Near East, perhaps going as far back as the priestly singing in the Jerusalem Temple, was not uncommon at the time. In Germany this kind of historical calisthenics allowed Jews to react to German musical nationalism by reinterpreting their ancient connections to the Land of Israel through a distinctly Western musical vocabulary. In Palestine it became a convenient way to create a symbolic bridge between selective antiquity and the Zionist present, "a newfound national allegory built upon a romanticized idea," according to Shelleg.[67] Ben-Haim had used it in his oratorio *Yoram*, which he composed in Germany between 1931 and 1933, shortly before he left. After moving to Palestine, Ben-Haim became a skilled practitioner of this style.

And there was another irony still. Attempts to "ring the bells and whistles of Zionism" led many art composers to the devotional music of Eastern Jews. This was partly because religious works, unlike other kinds of local music, certainly Arabic music, used the Hebrew Bible and other old Jewish sources. The ancient provenance of these texts emphasized the nation's origin, which transcended the nagging paradoxes of modern Jewish nationalism. The irony, however, was that such references undermined the strong secular spirit of early Zionism. Consider, for example, the 1940 *Motets* for an all-male choir by Mordecai Seter, who based some of the music on Babylonian, Samaritan, and Bukharan Jewish liturgical traditions. Shelleg explains that, while the music of the work avoids exoticism, the biblical texts in the *Motets* lend religious undertones to the Zionist narrative of redemption that they chart.[68]

The *Motets* begin with Psalm 137, "By the streams of Babylon, there we sat and wept, as we remembered Zion," and end with Psalm 144, which calls on God, not man, to "rescue me, and deliver me out of many waters, out of the hand of foreigners." And although the final part of the *Motets* stops halfway through Psalm 144, the diligent reader will find that the psalm concludes with proclamations about the peace and prosperity that God will provide, announcing that our "garners are full," our "sheep increase by thousands," our "oxen are well laden." We have met a similar pioneer song before, paraphrasing these very

[67] Assaf Shelleg, "Israeli Art Music: A Reintroduction," *Israel Studies* 17: 3 (2012): 119–149, at p. 129.

[68] Assaf Shelleg, "Imploding Signifiers: Exilic Jewish Cultures in Art Music in Israel, 1966–1970," *Hebrew Studies* 60 (2019): 255–292, at p. 259.

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verses by proclaiming, "Our barns are full of grain and our wineries brim with wine / our homes are teeming with babies / and our cattle are fruitful." If the pioneers celebrated their own agency, Seter reintroduced God into the mix, a gesture that proves ever more prescient with the passage of time.

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