Oded Zehavi, the youngest composer in this book, was, at the time of these interviews, completing his studies at the Jerusalem Rubin Academy. He subsequently earned a master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania, and a doctorate at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He regards as his principal teachers the Israeli composer André Hajdu (in Israel) and George Crumb.\(^1\)

I interviewed Oded Zehavi on June 29, 1986, at Mishkenot Sha'ananim. Among the works discussed is a score composed for the Kibbutz Dance Company premiered at the Israel Festival on May 28.

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I was born in Israel in 1961. I'm finishing my studies at the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem. And I will go to the University of Pennsylvania this coming year. There is one thing you should know. While calculating our age according to our education, one should understand that we serve for three years in the army, a time when we are not able to make any formal studies. It was really a bad thing for me since I was a tank commander in the army, took part in the last war, and so on.

But in a way it has some benefits—for example, the fact that we come to the Academy for our studies a bit older, and have some very
personal ideas about life, about what we want to say. When I saw the graduate students at Penn while I was visiting there, I got the impression that, really, they are just kids. And to compare us to them, it is strange. You know, one cannot say it is good or it is bad, you cannot judge it this way. This is the way we are here. But you know, it is really strange sometimes. I know it, for myself, from the opposite side, when speaking to young composers from other countries. They ask me, “What is your degree?” and I say, “I am a graduating senior.” They ask, “How old are you?” So I just want to make it clear in a way. In a way I think it affects my music, it affects my attitude toward life. I don’t think one can make a complete separation between our biographies and our music, of course not. But on the other side, I think most young Israeli composers are rather naive or cynical, because it is really difficult to leave behind such an experience like the army. And it’s really strange, but I think every one of us up to the age of thirty-five has experienced war, a real war, and most of us have really fought in the first battle line. And it turns us into one of two extremes—either very naive and belief in God and people, and really wanting to build a new life in our young country—or the other way, out of Israel really.

I think this is one of the reasons, not the main one, that many of us try to find a way out of the country. Just the fact that you must do a reserve army duty for sixty days a year is really something. Most of us use the opportunity to learn, to complete, or to have some training abroad—and while studying abroad, we needn’t do the reserve duty. And it is important to us also to see some other sorts of things. For me, it’s a total benefit to be in Philadelphia, I just won’t see the tanks. It affects.

I think we are the first generation of composers that served in the army. The old ones came to Israel too old to do it, or lived in the time that they needn’t do it. I think, of the older composers who were born in Israel, the only one who served in the army was Tzvi Avni. And maybe this is the reason I asked myself while working in the radio: Why is it that there are so few works that deal directly with our situation, with the way we live here? Especially, I mean, wars, immigration, all physical difficulties. And I came to the conclusion that most of the people who came as immigrants tried to regard Israel as an ideal place—not to deal with the real situation that was here, but tried to build some utopian life—and that was the reason why they spoke so much about ideology.
I don't know if you know about the oriental group, the oriental stream that was here in the first years of the country. For us, who were really born into the country, into the wars, into the army and into this situation—I think we are the first generation that could be regarded as real Israeli composers. And to compare my works to those of my friends, my young colleagues who are a bit older, to the age of forty, I can see that there are many things in common in a way. Now, while we are as young as I am, our works are a bit violent, I must say, not very introverted. But feeling, I think, the language of pain or sorrow, they become more and more introverted as the years pass. You learn how to express things in better ways.

But I think the main thing in common to our composers, and comparing it to other groups of young composers—I'm not very aware of what is going on in the States, but I'm very aware of what's going on in Europe—I think that we're a bit different, since I think there are very few works in Israel that you can say are decorative works. In every piece that I know—most of them, there are some exceptions—you can regard the fact that the composer has something very personal to say.

I can compare it most easily to some groups in the north countries—in Finland, in Iceland. I've got some new records of young composers from these countries, and I don't know—I didn't visit there—I cannot see much in common. But maybe there is, or maybe, after all, music is an international language. I don't know, I don't really believe it.

The best contrast I think is between our composers and the English composers. A work of mine was performed in London, and I used this opportunity to hear some concerts of young graduate students of the Royal Academy of Music. And you know, you can just imagine them with the nice eyes, blond hair, going to their nice houses, and there are some servants for you, and every five o'clock there is nice tea. I wouldn't regard them as little boxes, but they're very nice, educated, warm house composers. Maybe some of them are punks, I don't know. Maybe some of them are even not English, but it was so easy-going, very decorative. You know, the fact that the British now admire Tippett and almost ignore Britten says something about their priorities, and I must say they are very different than mine. Not that I have something against Tippett, but I think Britten was a much greater composer. It is interesting to compare. I know now that in Italy there are very fine composers. I do like to hear some of their
work, especially the students of Berio and Donatoni—but again, I
don't feel any similarity, personally, to this kind of music.

I think my idea of being a composer here is different from the
music of people of my age in other parts of the world. What is it? I
must say that this way of life is the only thing that I know. For example,
the first time I was in New York, I had three nights of nightmares,
just seeing these masses of people going this side and the other side
and in front of me, like a Woody Allen movie. And for this reason,
maybe—to be very, very nonsophisticated—you can say that there are
so many empty spaces in my works. To turn it to the other side, one
can understand Philip Glass's minimalism just while seeing people in
New York, as I did in my nightmares, go da-da-da-da-da-da-da, no
space—and in a way it is less emotional, less personal. And to be here
means to be involved in everything emotionally—very, very highly.
In Israel the composer, most of the time, is also the producer and the
manager and the conductor and the parts copier and everything—and
you are involved. And everyone has a great deal of knowledge about
politics here, everyone argues. We are very personally involved, and
in such a way we cannot create a Philip Glass piece—none of us,
really—we just cannot. We can admire this kind of aesthetic, but it is
difficult for us.

Now, I don't think there is a special oriental language that we
developed here. It is mainly because we don't know—culturally—
who we are, really. And I can say that this opinion is very similar to
the opinions of most of the composers and artists who live here. On
one side, we have pretensions to be Europeans. On the other side,
our climate, our neighbors—let's say, our natural culture—is oriental,
Levantine.

I don't know the real situation now in Greece, but some—maybe
one regards them as popular composers—like Mikis Theodorakis,
seem to be very close to the aesthetic language that had already
developed here, that some of the less talented composers here tried to
build with the decorative style elements of the oriental melos, like the
quarter tones, and so on—all the quasi-Arabic music. I don't accept
it, mainly because for me it is much more important to understand
the context and not the output. Really, the output has a very strong
linkage to the cultural life, and for me it is much more important,
rather, to understand the cultural life or the habits in the Middle East.

Or what seems to be much more natural, to try to create something
that will be an output of my cultural life. And if you ask me, "What is
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your cultural life?"—it is very complicated. From one side, I'm going to concerts—the other side, my neighbors hear some oriental music. And it is like in food, you can eat here gefilte fish and schnitzel, or the Arabs' food. It is just the same problem here, you know, in my stomach—there is something that might be regarded as unique—and the same in my head.

I cannot go into details, I cannot make the connection between—well, since I was born in Jerusalem, I use a lot of minor chords and the Phrygian cadence. Mentally, of course, I belong to the Western stream. We were educated to regard music according to [Heinrich] Schenker, [Charles] Rosen, and [Donald Francis] Tovey, all of these—it was classical music. I came from a very educated home, and I was playing the piano since the age of six. And then at the age of sixteen I became a composition student of Mark Kopytman. I'm speaking especially about the formal education. I don't think the Rubin Academy was the changing point in my life, it was a natural continuation of the way I worked before. But it was something formal, one should pass it. Here they are very nonflexible. You cannot finish your studies before the four years, maybe because they have so very few students and they want our money to be paid to them for the four years, I don't know.

But as I said before, most of us are very cynical, and I include myself in this group, not that I'm very happy about it. Sometimes I see my colleagues from other countries speaking about the protests they are making against air pollution and I say, OK, I wish I would come to their country, where my main problem would be air pollution. Of course, but we haven't the luxury to die from the pollution. We are dying in the wars, not at the age of eighty or ninety. The problem for us is not to die at the age of twenty-one. And it affects, maybe, the way we compose. And again, maybe this is one of the reasons that young composers here have so many problems with form. Maybe we are used to saying what we have to say, to come to the main idea and that's all—because we have no time, you know? We really don't have any time, not as young kids who know that they might die at the age of eighteen. For this reason I think that sex relations begin here much earlier than in other countries. That's the reason why we don't have much time, really, to be educated. Everything is very fast, very quick. Our colleges are very, very quick, and the first degree, the B.A., is very quick.

That's maybe one of the reasons that you can hear so many works—I hear many works of pupils—and say, OK, I could have developed these materials for another two hours. And sometimes,
while hearing my pieces, it's just the same. The piece that you just heard now is A and B and C and D and E and F and—what kind of form is it after all? And now, just three months after hearing it, I know everything that is wrong with it—and I know that in a way it is something that is very, very much like me, to do the one thing after the other, after the other, to build it. OK, in the very foreground, it is well built, there are three parts, and so on. Inside, I could have used much of this material, much more. And I think that this is the thing that belongs to the way we are used to thinking here. It disturbs me to admire Messiaen and Debussy and all the French scores—really Messiaen, Vingt regards [sur l'enfant-Jésus], two or three chords for five minutes, and I enjoyed every minute of it. But I think that if Messiaen had happened to be Israeli, he couldn't do it, he couldn't afford to.

I don't know why I'm still in the position that I feel that my greatest piece is the next one. I hope I will have power to combine the things that I know and the things that I feel. And I think that the oriental temperament with the European knowledge can bring something, can create something very, very good—on the one side, not to lose my spontaneous way of thinking from here, and on the other, to learn every tool and everything that Western culture knows about how to design music, how to work in large and small forms.

And I think that it is just like small kids that sometimes become aware of what they are doing. They switch from the un-knowledge, from doing things intuitively, to doing things while knowing what they are doing. Playing is the main, really the most important point in the life of a composer, if you don't lose your temperament and start to create some Babbitt-like music—or in Israel, I call it Shambadalike music—music with the highly mathematical ideas, with really no emotional meanings. And not to be just throwing on the paper the notes.

Well, there are some colleagues of mine who really succeeded in doing it, and I really admire them and hope they will continue composing in this way. Jan Radzynski is one of them. I think he's the most important young composer who works here in Israel. As a matter of fact, he is at Yale. And Betty Olivero is another very, very talented composer, and I really do like her works. She is very special. She is one who created a very special language, and it is very interesting for me that she chose to train in another Mediterranean country, in Italy. I think she created something very interesting. She is really a very good composer.
And other young composers in Israel—I think that, in a way, Nami [Yinam Leef] and Haim [Permont] are in a stage that one should see what is going to be out of them. I expect a great future, but it will be in the future. From the other young composers—there are not many that I am very curious to hear from. There are some good pieces that are created here.

The composers whose music I really admire, most of them are either communists or coming from very, very active situations—like Penderecki, the Polish composer; Berio, who is really involved in everything that goes on in the work emotionally; and Lutosławski, who again is Polish.

From the Americas, I think that I mostly admire George Crumb's music, but one must understand that in Israel we are not really aware of what is going on in the States. I don't know why, probably because our record connections are mainly in Europe. We have every Deutsche Grammophon record, EMI, Clavecin, and so on—even the contemporary records. But we don't know much about what is going on in the States. I think we are not that important to the record companies in the U.S., and that's the reason why. In my short visits in the States, I was really amazed to hear about many composers that I didn't know, and much good music that I wasn't aware of.

Again, I admire Messiaen. His religious music, his organ music. The Catalog of Birds is something really unique, and touches me. I have some difficulty with Boulez and this group, but I think that Maderna and Nono in a way, and Blacher in a way—some of the works I know are quite close to me, I can feel a lot of sympathy toward them. I think, in a way, what is common to these works is that it's emotional music. Emotional music, I think, is a very wide definition, but in a way I can feel very good with it. Because I regard also Bartók's music as emotional music, and also Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex as emotional music.

But there is so much music that keeps you away in our century—and OK, for sometimes it is very good to be kept away. I can imagine a radio program that includes Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet, and then a Schumann piano concerto, and then unemotional—I don't know whom, but some unemotional music—and I'll feel very good. Like you sometimes eat those tasteless ice creams—I don't know the English names—just to clean your mouth for the next course. It has some practical uses, but sometimes to hear this very extreme minimalism, or very non-emotional music, or those catalog effects of using the
trombone—I'm not speaking now about Globokar, but his imitators who just “see what I can make out of the trombone,” make it sound like an oboe. OK, for this reason just use the oboe. And all this aleatoric music that sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t—and you can mainly be suspicious toward them—and all these electronic systems.

There's so many bad works in the century that really I think one of the most important people in our century is the radio editor, the lector, really. Hans Keller was, I think, much more important to the musical life in our century than some of the most important composers. He was the Esterházy, in a way, of our time, because he made the first selection for the amateurs, and kept them away from all the garbage. You know, in a way, it is very dangerous also, because there are many good works that Hans Keller didn’t like personally.

But in a way, I think every one of us should work in the media, so I plan my future as a composer and as a lector in the media. Because I think the only way to educate, and to bring a new audience to the concert halls of modern music, is to make the very unpleasant separation between good music and bad music. Just because one should be in the position to think about the whole picture, and not the personal and emotional relations.

And since we are so non–grown up here, mostly because you feel sorry for the people you do like, it’s one of the reasons there are so many garbage works that are broadcasted and recorded and performed here. And I think the main thing Israel needs now is a good lector—a brave man, one who is very open minded and who would be able to produce or to broadcast also things that personally he wouldn’t have written, but to make the real separation between good and bad music.

I am working at Kol Israel, but I don’t put myself yet in the position to make the very sharp decisions, though the fact is I can do it because I am one of the two people who deal with Israeli music. The other one is in Tel Aviv, Joan Franks Williams. She is also a composer, a very good one, by the way. I don’t feel myself yet baked enough to deal with it in the total meaning, just to cut. But I try, in a way, to promote the works I do appreciate, and there are some works I broadcast at least once every month, just so people will get used to it.

And I think that Gary Bertini, the musical director of the radio orchestra [Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra], was very brave in a way, to perform eight times, works by Kopytman, until the audience and orchestra got used to it. And now the last concert was really a great one, it was a great performance. It really, really shocked the audience,
as it should. And if they wouldn't have wasted their time and money
and power on another twelve unimportant works in the year, they
could make such a benefit to many other works.

For me, it's the ideal thing I would like to see everywhere in
the world. I want to see it as a world of lectors—of good, educated
lectors. As a composer, I would be very glad to deal with lectors,
with the audience, and with critics. In Israel we have no lectors,
no audience for modern music. We have some critics, but they are
not that important, their position here is not that important. I'll be
very glad to deal with here Harold Schonberg, George Bernard Shaw,
may he rest in paradise, and I don't know—the audience of the Penn
Contemporary Music Players. I'd be very glad to deal with them in
every work of mine, and if they would say that it is garbage, I'll go
home and write another one. But I would like to be in a position that
there is something I can trust, and not because of political things, or
something—manipulations.

I think my works are good, but I would be very glad to be in a
position or a situation where there would be a lector who will tell
me, "Young man, it is not that good, please wait another two years." Nowdays, I think I don't trust most of the people who are acting
like lectors here. I know for sure that some of them don't know how
to read contemporary music. And I know for sure that some of them
don't read at all the scores that they do have. And for this reason, there
are a lot of problems. But in spite of these problems I'm very glad to
say that there are some good performances of good Israeli works—for
example, the Seter works, some Maayani works, some Avni works.
Really, we have some records of good music here. But it's a matter of
luck—we are lucky.

And this work of mine that was performed by the orchestra, and
some works of mine were performed abroad by Israeli groups. Yes, I
was lucky. In a way, I know how to sell my works, and it's probably
because I'm young, and people want to discover the next great com­
poser. And probably because my music, in a way, is communicative—
and I do believe in communicative music. And maybe it is because of
this, maybe it was just good fortune, I don't know. I just hope it will
continue. I wish myself all the best.

Well, there are three works that are directly connected to the
war. One of them is a quintet for flute, piano, and string trio called
Prophet, which really deals with my feelings toward the war. It was
much more of a psychiatric treatment than of creating music, just
to deal with all these materials again. But it was interesting. It never imitates noises from the war—you cannot hear the bombs, and so on—but it deals with my personal feeling toward it in the time of pressure. It was something like going to a psychiatrist. I don't have one, but I'm writing music instead of it.

The other one is a piano sonata, which I wrote during the war itself. It was composed in the tank. And there you can find my idée fixe of those church bells ringing, you can hear the chimes—most of the work is based on it. We fought in Lebanon, and we attacked some churches. Though we fought for the Christians, it was a battle in a Christian country, and it was so strange for me. Really, my main memory of sounds is those of the churches there. We fought nearby the beach there—Tzor, Tzidon, Damur, and Beirut. There are a lot of churches, small and big, and every one has its special bells, and it really becomes such a kind of a musical idée fixe. It was interesting, and you can find it very much in my piano sonata.

And then there is a work of mine for children's choir, which is going to be performed next year, based on a medieval poem that is an elegy for the sponsor of the poet, who died. And for me, I reacted to it very, very emotionally and I composed it in memory of one of my friends—we were fighting together. He died and I stayed alive, and I dedicated it to his memory. I hope it is going to be performed. This is my best work, I think, and not performed here.

In the dance piece, the choreographer and I tried to deal a bit with some very primitive feelings, emotions. Everything there is around the accelerando and the ritardando, and the crescendo and the descrescendo—the melos is less important—and the density and space and all these things. And we tried to imitate something that's going on inside the head of one who is attacking or being attacked, or something like this. In a way, it was a bit aggressive.

The practical thing that they did onstage was not connected very much to the first ideas. The dance itself is decorative, there is something that is nice. There are handsome dancers and nice females with nice bodies, and you can really ignore everything that you don't want. It helps every one of your protective mechanisms, to protect you. You can enjoy the light, the bodies—you can even feel something erotic in it.

For this reason I much prefer it to be performed as a concert piece, and I think it is going to be performed here live next year. It will be very interesting to me, I'll be very curious to see the reactions of the
people toward this work. They will have to see the conductor and the players—just the music, without dance. And I am very curious to see what reaction is going to be coming out of it.

I made a third version that is a bit shorter, a concert version—I’m very curious to see it. It was originally commissioned by the dance group. I took the opportunity to write a piece that I felt good with, and they cut it again. We all knew that it was going to work this way, that I would do my piece and they would dance my piece in their way.

The flute piece you heard was just a thing, something to write. I feel very bad about it, we’d better leave it. It’s something that I thought was going to work in some other way. Suddenly, I really didn’t feel good with it, and I left it. It shouldn’t have been performed, maybe in some other way. I’m going to do some materials of it. The idea is good—to take one line, one bunch, and to separate it. I called it a composed folk music, which is another thing. I wrote it in two hours. It’s really something that one shouldn’t do.

The music of Oded Zehavi has been performed in Israel, Germany, France, Luxembourg, Belgium, and the United States. Zehavi’s orchestral works have been performed by the Israel Philharmonic under Leonard Slatkin, the Israel Chamber Orchestra under Shlomo Mintz, the Curtis Orchestra under Richard Wernick, the Rishon LeZion Symphony Orchestra under Noam Sheriff, and the Haifa Symphony under Stanley Sperber. Noted soloists who have performed his music include flutists Samuel Baron and Eugenia Zukerman.

Zehavi was founder and director of the composition department at Rodman Regional College at Tel Hai from 1992 to 1994, and currently heads the music division at the University of Haifa. In 1993 he was appointed composer-in-residence with the Haifa Symphony Orchestra, the first position of its kind in Israel. In 1994, Zehavi received the ACUM Prize for chamber music. In 1995 he was one of three composers to receive the Prime Minister’s Prize and was also awarded the Engel Prize. In 1996 Zehavi received a Barlow Foundation commission and an ACUM award for his Violin Concerto.