Like other native Israeli composers, Betty Olivero received her early musical training in Israel. She later studied at Yale University. In 1982, Olivero received the Leonard Bernstein Fellowship at Tanglewood, where her teacher was Luciano Berio, with whom she continued to study in Italy through 1986. The same year, Olivero was awarded a Fromm Music Foundation commission.

Betty Olivero's music bears the imprint not only of her Jewish and Israeli upbringing, but also of Ladino, the language of her Sephardic ancestry, which she has set in several compositions. In addition to the tradition of Western art music, Olivero finds "an infinite wealth of inspiration and source of enrichment in the music of the various Jewish communities," which provide her with "a dramatic stimulus." Rather than being quoted in their original form, these elements "undergo a thorough transformation, so profound as to make their original form unrecognizable yet their spirit and dramatic potential remain untouched." In describing her work, Olivero distinguishes between compositional process and materials: "I perceive my composition as a natural continuation of the music of the past. The process of composition is quite conventional and adheres to traditional techniques (counterpoint, harmonic and structural thought), but the material I use and the content of my work are contemporary. They are inspired,
in the main, by my search for new sources of colour and by a different morphology of melody.”

I interviewed Betty Olivero on June 29, 1986, at Mishkenot Sha’ananim. Only a couple of months before our meeting, the New York Philharmonic performed her *Cantes Amargos* (*Songs of Bitterness*) during its New Horizons Festival. I was impressed with the evocative power of the recorded works Ms. Olivero played for me on that occasion, and by her colorful use of orchestration.

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I was born in 1954 in Israel. I attended a music conservatory, where I received very elementary music training, music education plus private lessons that I took with a composer here for many years. I started writing music at a very early age, so I was referred to Yizhak Sadai, with whom I was working for about ten years on composition. He also introduced me to counterpoint. I did something like eight years of Palestrina counterpoint, harmony, Bach chorales, and so on. Yizhak Sadai is a fantastic musician and a great melodist. Later, in the Tel Aviv Academy, all of us were introduced to music at a very, very high level of craft. However, we were not introduced to music from an academic point of view. When I came to the States I was amazed at how untrained I was about writing papers, research, and all that. Sadai taught me theory and composition. I also studied with León Schidlowsky, a Chilean composer who immigrated to Israel. With him I did composition at the undergraduate level; with Sadai I mainly studied theory and harmony.

Then it was very complementary to come to the States and get the other, academic side. At Yale I studied with Jacob Druckman and Gilbert Amy, and for a while with Morton Subotnick and Earle Brown, who were visiting there. When I finished school I went to Tanglewood, and there I met Luciano Berio, who invited me to come to Italy to work with him. This was the summer of 1982. That summer I decided I must come back to Jerusalem for one year. I had to do that because I felt I was too far away from my own place. And I stayed here for one year, just composing and doing small jobs to maintain myself.

Then came this grant from the Italian government together with some commissions. At that time Berio was the artistic director of the Maggio Musicale, a big festival there. I was commissioned to do a piece, a big project that we did and we performed there, so it was like a job in Italy for one year plus a grant. I worked very well with Berio, he
Betty Olivero

was very helpful. And so I decided to stay, learn some more. I've been there almost three years. By now I really don't study with him. The first year was mostly like that, but by now I just meet him whenever he can and I show him whatever I do, and he might have some kind of criticism mostly, not really teaching. But it has been very good.

The piece that was just performed at the New Horizons Festival by the New York Philharmonic was the piece that was commissioned by the Maggio Musicale. In fact, this was a piece that I had already started at Yale. I set to music texts in Ladino, which is the language of my parents, of my Spanish heritage. I collected lots of small bits of Ladino verses, from Ladino romances. I put them together and I wrote a first movement, and then the commission from Italy was in fact an extension of that first movement and became a trilogy of three movements connected to each other. And so it was performed at the New Horizons festival in New York, with mezzo-soprano Kim Wheeler, and Oliver Knussen conducted it. We didn't have much rehearsal time, but they are so good. It was strange, you know, I felt they could sight-read the piece. They are so good and they are so precise and everything is in place. But I felt there was a cultural gap that it wasn't possible to overcome in such little rehearsal time—or maybe it would never be possible to overcome. The singer was not such a problem, because I knew her for a long time and we could work together. But the orchestra was not as involved as the experience I had in Italy where Berio also conducted, I think because of cultural things. It was like there was something about this music that was much more near to people who come from Italy, from the Mediterranean, naturally. If you hear the piece you will understand immediately, but to put it in words, it's like there is a lot of oriental music in it. It's not quotation, there is nothing quoted there. It's just there, you know—where it comes from. It's not modes. It is very ornamented and it has the air of the Orient.

I felt they could play the notes and even played very musically, but the spirit was like a little bit untouched. They did it really very nicely and elegantly, but there was not this thing that I found in the performances in Italy. It was a very good experience because I'd never faced it before. It was like I always felt that what I'm writing is really perceivable immediately, naturally, and there it wasn't like that. There was so little time, and I didn't feel that I wanted to start talking. It wasn't very wise to do, and I don't think it would have good results.
But I think that if I would have to describe Israeli music today, I would say there is a lot of that in it. We all got a very Western training to start with. In our formal education we were never, never exposed to oriental music, not even on a formal level. We studied everything in the Western history of music. But the thing is that in the streets and all around us, some were more attracted or less attracted, but it was a reality that we were just there, you know. It's in the air, so it penetrated, at least in me, and I see it in lots of Israeli composers. It penetrates and it comes out in the music. On the other hand, in early works of composers who were here even before 1948, they consciously wanted to reflect oriental motives in their music. I mean there you feel a very academic and conscious effort. Somebody like Yehezkel Braun, you find it in his music, there you feel more of a conscious orientation. So it's very interesting.

I think the younger generation, at an early stage—we rebelled against it because we found in it something very pioneering, and somewhat artificial, and we were kind of saying, “Now we are part of this country, and we are not pioneers, halutzim.” As far as I am concerned, I wanted to be what I am without trying to do anything. When I came to the States, I realized that it's coming out, without even trying. It’s like it is my personal touch, and need, not an academic or scientific way of working. You heard Yinam Leef's songs. There is a passage that is very conscious, kind of a Turkish melody. It's like a metaphor.

I feel I come from here, my music very much reflects the music that is going on here, very much so. It's like a crossroad of oriental music and Western music. Once Luciano Berio was giving a lecture somewhere, and it was before a concert where a piece of mine was performed, and he put it in a very funny way. And afterward he said, “Excuse me for putting it in such a simplistic way,” because he was saying that somewhere my music symbolizes a peace, a wishful peace situation between the Arab world and the Jewish world, which is like the Western world. And it was simplifying, but I didn't have to forgive him because that was a very nice way of putting it, and very true. Of course, I wasn't conscious about that—I mean, I didn't mean to convey any political or nationalistic message, but I did feel this piece, and many other pieces of mine which I wrote later, manifested a mixture of cultures. Jewish music in itself is a mixture of so many cultures if you really think about it. Hasidic music—all kinds of Hasidic tunes, if you really listen—has Gypsy music elements in it, and at the same
time very oriental motives. These motives, as you were just saying, are oriental in a way, but it's also very Jewish.

I wouldn't be able to do it if I felt I was obliged to. I'll tell you, really, there was not a moment of choice or conscious decision when I started writing this particular music. I think there was a process of really finding that that's what I want to do, that that's what is really the music that I have inside me. Otherwise I don't see any other reason to compose. If I have to compose just from what I've learned, I don't see any reason in writing any music. But if it is to bring out something that I have inside me, the real thing, then I should do that.

It is very hard to describe, but I could, for instance, say that the thought of building up a piece of music—development, the whole conception of form—is very Western. I mean writing music in time, the conception and the way I realize it, is very Western. Maybe the time concept is Western, but it's a very complicated issue. Because content is not separable from the time conception. In general, I would say that the thought of the form and the development, or way of making decisions, is in a completely Western terminology, and the precise notation. At the same time, the harmony, the melody, the colors, the timbre—are derived from oriental music that I was surrounded by. I use a lot of heterophonic textures. I think Kopytman got it from the music that we have here. That's why you will meet a lot of people who use this and were not pupils of Kopytman, along with the use of quarter tones, ornaments, and so on. I don't mean any specific music. It's enough to walk through the Old City in Jerusalem.

I remember once on a very hot summer night, I walked with a friend somewhere around three o'clock in the morning and it was already almost sunrise, during the peak of the summer. And we went just above the Old City at a point above the quarter, the Wailing Wall. And there was a moment where from the left you heard the muezzin, when they start calling for prayer. From the other side we started hearing the voices of Jewish prayers starting to come from the quarter. This was just before Rosh Hashanah. They have a month of morning prayer, and you could clearly hear their voices. I heard the voices of the town, that is, just the animals around and the bells from the churches. All this together—that's heterophonic music, in a way, for me.

I don't think I even want to define or classify my work in the context of Israeli music. I don't yet have the perspective even of time. I feel also I'm not yet introduced in the musical scene here in Israel.
because I’ve been away for so many years, and maybe somebody else can do it. I am familiar with what the young people are writing here, but we don’t have this personal exchange with the other generations as well, unfortunately.

My Cantes Amargos are based on three Ladino texts. The second one says, “Very bitter songs I want to sing on the border of the sea. In the sea there was a tower. On top of the tower there was a window, and in the window there was a dove. Give me your hand, my dove.” And the last one says, “Oh, Mama, I have never seen a bird with such green eyes! The keys to my palace were lost in foreign seas.” You can think of many things, biblical symbols if you like, as well. In the Song of Songs there appears similar motives of the dove, representing beauty, for instance. These are excerpts from different Ladino verses that were orally transmitted from generation to generation. I just took quotations, different lines, and put them together into a structure of poetry that I thought was proper. So these verses serve like quotations. We all know them by heart because they were set to music with many different melodies, and we are very familiar with them. Some of them I knew as songs, as popular songs, some of them I just found in different anthologies. And so I thought it was nice just to take such well-known phrases from different poems and compose them into new poetry. No traditional melodies are quoted at all.

The thing that attracted me in these texts is that they carry within themselves a lot of history. They seem very naive and very beautiful, but since they were carried with the years, through history up to today, they also carry with them all the events that happened to the people who sang them. In the melodies you find there’s a lot of pain, but with kind of a dreamy nostalgia—like the pain was transformed in dream, into something very different. But for somebody who doesn’t know anything about it and just reads the text, it seems something very simplistic. I wanted to set it to music to give that other dimension. On one level, it is just very romantic verse—the usual romantic symbol of anything far away, beyond the sea, beyond the mountains. On a deeper layer, the last verse, where it says “the keys to my palace were lost in foreign water,” for me it is like a descriptive metaphor of the Diaspora, of the loss of something very old, and something that we owned, and we just lost it in foreign water (ex. 19).

There are some places where the text is very literally portrayed in the music. I was told this by many people, but I honestly did not think about it at the time. It was absolutely not a conscious choice. It
was a complete musical thought behind it but no illustration of the text, and I agree with you, because I hear that. I really did not do it consciously, it's interesting.

I found in that text, which is apparently so idyllic and peaceful, a lot of powerful moments, almost tragic. And I wanted to give the notion of that other side of it, like enlarging the meaning of it. Like opening the door into something that was there, that this text was carrying with it—that is covered, is unseen, is like a secret inside, beyond these symbols.

The title of my contrabass solo is Batnûn, which is the Hebrew word for a very old stringed instrument. Mainly, today, it is the Hebrew word for double bass, but it's a very old word, not used at all in daily spoken Hebrew.

I used to write vocal music when I was a student. I wouldn't present these pieces anymore. They are more experimental for myself. Lately I just finished a piece for ten instruments that was commissioned by the Fromm Foundation. And I wrote a piece for twelve cellos and four double basses. It's called Psalms—in Hebrew, Tehillim. And I'm going to write now a piece for violin and piano that was commissioned by the first violinist of the Maggio Musicale Orchestra.

It's hard, it's very stressful. But here I would have to work very hard teaching. It's not like in America where you can live from grant to grant, year after year. That's the impression I got meeting with young composers who really would jump from one grant to another. Here it is very hard to find any teaching jobs as well.
We’re not so few, women composers in Israel. It’s not an issue to me, never. It started being an issue when people started asking me about that. Then I thought, maybe there’s something about it, but I must say I’ve never felt there’s any particular thing about being a woman composer—never, ever. I never had any problems about it from the people I had to work with. In fact, maybe, in my case anyway, this drew attention to my music a little bit more. That’s true, because people are not used to it. We were just at the Women’s Music Festival in Beer Sheva and I heard all kinds of complaints and claims about how discriminated against we are, but I don’t believe it. I think it is self-indulgence. I think it’s an excuse for many for not admitting certain things.

I don’t think we are discriminated against in the contemporary music scene. I think contemporary music is discriminated against, and any male composer has exactly the same problems as we do. I really don’t agree with that view. And the reason why I went to Beer Sheva to participate in this panel discussion is not because I identify with the ideas of the festival, but to be able to tell what I think about it, because I thought it was important. I do think that women should get some help. The problem we have is practical, because if I wanted to have children I would have an extra job. I would have to write music and take care of a family at the same time. So if we need to get help, it’s not after we write our music, and to be promoted by different conductors, who would say, “Oh, women have to be promoted, so we will perform them more,” because I don’t think we have a problem there.

But the problem we have is that on a practical level, we have a lot of extra nonmusical work to do, which is time-consuming. I have the privilege to be able to write music. I mean, it’s hard on us financially, but we chose to do that. So I think if I were by myself, I’d have to look for a stable teaching job. I would like to teach at a certain point, not now.

I don’t know how long I’ll stay in Italy, I hope not too long. As long as I can come here so often and I have this possibility, it doesn’t really matter. I can come here whenever I like and work here. I have a home here and I have a home there.

Betty Olivero’s music has been performed by the Juilliard Ensemble, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic
Betty Olivero

Orchestra, the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Munich Philharmonic, the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra, and the London Sinfonietta, and in such festivals as the Isem World Music Days 1994 (Stockholm), the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (Florence), the Aspen Music Festival, the Gaudeamus Music Week (Amsterdam), and the Israel Festival.⁶
Ari Ben-Shabetai, photographed (1994) by Liora Ziv-Li. Used with permission.