Among Israel's second-generation composers, Maayani has been most indebted to the Eastern Mediterranean style of his teacher Paul Ben-Haim. He has received the Engel Prize (1963) and commissions from the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, and the Tel Aviv Foundation for Literature and the Arts. Consistent with the influence of French impressionism on Ben-Haim, Maayani once identified himself "as part of the French school." Maayani's Symphony No. 3 (Hebrew Requiem), composed in 1977, prompted one reviewer to note: "The essence of the Middle East is clearly there but the work also engenders a more universal language." According to Laya Harbater Silber, who has studied Maayani's vocal music:

He makes use of Near Eastern elements such as the formal, modal, and rhythmic aspects of Arabic music, coupled with classical European forms and French impressionistic orchestration. His use of variation, ornamentation, and short passages or fragments of melody, clearly associates him with the composers of the East. He often develops a recurring rhythmic unit, employing occasional alterations according to the Arab folk tradition. Although he does not clearly state Arabic maqāmāt in this song cycle, he creates sound which may be closely associated with their tetrachordal structure. Other progressions of semitones create the microtonal impressions so often heard in Oriental music.
Maayani cites, in addition to himself, Noam Sheriff, Tzvi Avni, Ben-Zion Orgad, and André Hajdu as having "striven for a synthesis of such diverging and yet related elements," and he identifies some of the features characterizing the work of these composers: "Liturgical chant and freely elaborated cantillations, open forms of Near-Eastern music, and interwoven rhythms and sounds heard in the East echo in their music. Florid ornamentation is abundant in order to underline the improvisatory character of the melodic invention."4

I interviewed Ami Maayani at the Samuel Rubin Israel Academy of Music in Tel Aviv on July 9, 1986.

I was born in Israel in 1936. I'm second generation in this country. Incidentally, Ami means "my people," and Maayani means "my fountain" or "my spring." It's a very pretentious name. My family is Russian-descended, from white Russia. My mother was born here, and my father came here quite young. He graduated from the Technion, which I also graduated from. He was a civil engineer, construction. I was born into the Hebrew language. The time was quite something. I had my courses in architecture here at the Technion and then took my master's degree at Columbia University. I also had some courses in electronic music with Ussachevsky at the time, as extra credit for my program in the School of Architecture. I did both since I started with architecture, and for ten years after that I was practicing architecture and doing composition.

My major training in music was done in Israel, I would say all of it. And I started as an instrumentalist—I played violin, viola, and then I added trumpet and percussion. I played all of them in professional orchestras, I was a very good musician at the time. I gave up because of the army, and then I went into conducting. Finally I went into composition, but that was some sort of joint project while I was a student at the Technion. I studied, and then my first work actually came when I graduated. I got into the School of Music before I went to the army, at the age of seventeen. So the army was a crucial point for me to make up my mind as to whether I would keep on with music and be a performing artist. This created a problem, because during the time of the army I stopped playing, I could not. So going back into playing was a difficult thing to do. While I'm not sorry about that, at the time I also realized that to be a performing artist I had to practice so many hours every day, and I had so many other things
in life that I wanted to do. So I gave it up, which actually was not conscious.

After the army, I worked as a professional architect. I had my own office. I wrote music, and further on I started my graduate studies in philosophy. It's not finished, but I went to be an M.A. and I'm lecturing on philosophy as well. I'm quite involved with that. My project now is a book on Wagner in Hebrew that would deal with his prose work, the influence he got from other philosophers at the time, talking about symbolism, melos, myths, and music symbols. Maybe some kind of psychological analysis of his character, and his images, and the art he created.

I didn't have many opportunities for the first building at the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem—there are two buildings there. But we just renovated the main building, so I didn't have too much to do with the spaces that are there. That's a building that exists twenty years, and I just sort of adjusted it as far as I could to the facilities that we would need for studying mainly, not for performing. But the other building, the performing building, has materialized to be very nice, this new building—with facilities like an opera hall, offices, stage, recital hall, and dance studios.

I teach at both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem academies, I was appointed by both of them. This is a very peculiar year. We had many people at Tel Aviv University who went for sabbatical, and one of our teachers died. So I had to take that course even without getting paid for it. I teach theoretical courses such as harmony and counterpoint to instrumentalists, not to theory majors. And I like to work with the instrumentalists. After all, they play. I've found them more attuned to music. Their knowledge is far wider than the theory majors, and each of them at least knows the repertoire for their instrument, which is already an advantage these days. I teach orchestration and music notation. And in Jerusalem I teach in the dance department, which I like very much. I work with choreographers and give lectures in music and music theory and form, analysis, and so on—so a dancer may be able to use some sheet music and do something out of it.

I teach Israeli music one semester, a course consisting of twelve lectures. There are three assignments: to attend the lectures, to perform an Israeli work with my instruction, and to write a paper on one of the subjects that I would deal with in my lectures—to enlarge it and go a little deeper than I would be able to go in the lecture itself. Some people would write on the Israeli folk songs. We go through
the history also. I give some kind of background in the history of the Jews and Jewish music, so that goes back to the Bible. We touch on certain periods like the Renaissance, Jewish music of the synagogue and out of the synagogue, then in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Then the Hasidic music, cantillations of the Bible, the different tribes, and the nationalist movement, the Petersburg school that was formed by a few Jewish composers, mainly to find out the origin of Jewish music. They went back and investigated the communities, mainly in Caucasia, and they saw that those are the most traditional and most preserved. One of them, the top one, was Yoel Engel, who you might know from the music of The Dybbuk, this most impressive work of Jewish theater.

It's a shame that you don't have in America the Jewish theater you used to have. It's not the factor it used to be. Anyhow, Achron belonged to that school—he went to the United States. Milner and Rosowsky and some others, Gnessin. So they were the first composers that trained properly under the Russian school, with great Russian composers at the time. With the transnationalism, they decided to do something with Jewish music. And it was the beginning, part of which we sort of continued here in Israel. So the course continues up to date. We have in the class some performers who do their own music, student composers. I focus mainly on the Near Eastern kind of music, the Mediterranean school that was formed here and includes the majority of composers. It's a very interesting trend, I think the most interesting one we have. But this is my personal opinion, not everybody will agree with me. It was very prominent here in the thirties and forties, but it went right up to the beginning of the sixties, and there are some composers who are still writing like this, from the old days. They developed it, they became more sophisticated with the material. They got more involved with that clash of Eastern and Western ideas. But they suggested some solution to the kind of difficulties and problems raised out of different kinds of mentalities.

If we talk about East and West, we don't mean Russia or America. I mean for us, West is Central Europe—including the United States. It's a major school these days, but not fifty years ago. I'm talking about East as being the Russian school, Eastern Europe. What we call East is the music of the Orient, not the Far East but the Mediterranean. For Jews here, we have a sort of European-Western culture, and when we say East we mean Near East, the Jews who came from
Muslim countries, that's the difference. In the States when you say “oriental,” it means the Far East, because they are not aware of the Near Eastern culture, which is also oriental. The Orient Express goes up to Turkey.

But anyhow, the most interesting thing is the different mentality. The Western culture really maintained the individuality of the great composers. They have the traditional and strong use of forms, harmony, very rigid. You can work as an individual and then break away from it, you build your own solid style. What we call Eastern is a culture that goes from generation to generation. It is more a static kind, there is not much development. The individual is not important, it's more oriented toward a folklore that goes with the people. They don't use the rigid forms of the Western school—sonata form or lied form—everything is more improvisational and fantasy-like. They have flexible things, and they don't use harmonic functions, the major aspects of the Western school. They work in modes and there is no leading tone, it's not minor and major. There is no traditional school. The music is of the primitive tribes, it's not that much developed. There are beautiful tunes, beautiful rhythmic patterns. But there is nothing like what we would call a classical tradition developed, mainly because of lacking the individual focus, where the individual creates something. Take Wagner, for example. You can like his music or not like his music, but he is an individual who creates something that influenced or did not influence others.

The Arabic maqâm, even the ancient modes or the scales that we use in our music, is completely different from anything we can compare to the Western approach. So this is a real clash, and as a composer you can do it or you don't. Many people say that you cannot bring those things in, and I'm not talking about the colors of microtones or oriental color, or what we call the European color. Some people tried to imitate it. You take a work like Islamey by [Mily] Balakirev, where he tried to imitate Islamic music. Or the arabesque to a certain extent. So it is a great problem because it's a clash between completely different mentalities. I don't know if I resolve it. The problem is—and I represented it in a few of my works—if someone can actually take an oriental theme, for example, and treat it in sonata form. It's against the structure or the essence of the Eastern tune, it cannot function with the harmonic tradition. Well, it might go better with a modal theme, or there are many other things to do, maybe in a contrapuntal way using pure fourths and fifths.
Another major problem here is the Hebrew language. It's a revival of an archaic language that is a thing by itself, yet it brings some problems. I myself could not write anything in Hebrew, because of these problematic things—I mean, where you infuse the Hebrew language into all this mixture of Eastern and Western mentalities. My song cycles are in the Yiddish language, two song cycles in Yiddish, and why? Because where I'm standing is a mixture of the very strong traditional school of Central Europe, which is concerned with musical form. I write in the big forms—symphonies, operas, song cycles, concerti—all these kinds of monumental things. It reminds me of the romantic era as well. My orchestrations and colors go to the French school, impressionism. And the music material is mainly Jewish, in which I refer to all different kinds of tribes and traditions.

In my last symphony each movement is based on a different folklore—the first movement on the Yemenite, the second on the Sephardic, the third is Eastern European—like the klezmer tunes, and the last one is a Persian Jewish style. And I tried to use Western musical forms like sonata form in the first movement, variation form in the second, scherzo in the third, and a sonata rondo, something like that, in the fourth movement. It's a very difficult thing to do. There is a little difference, a little gap between what I would think in a philosophical and very rationalistic way, and when it comes to practice. I mean, it's necessarily like fitting a glove to a hand. And sometimes you become more aware of your feeling and sensitivity in order to solve certain problems that cannot be done by thinking with our way of thinking. So my other works represented that exactly, the combinations.

As an Israeli composer, of course, I do believe that music that comes from Israel has to represent something special and unique that comes from this zone. It should reflect the culture. It should not reflect the problem, it should reflect the culture. It should show something, that it's a different heritage, that there is something that is tied to our chain of being, our history. I strongly believe in history, not only in the philosophical way. I hate the word "roots," but I use the tradition, and I think that we have to—since I believe we do have a different mentality as Jews. Our music or what we do in the arts should be different.

I'm not saying that we should use religious elements or certain things or symbols, but the most important thing is that I get what I want, also in the reactions of people from all over the world. I did a
lecture tour all over the United States, and in Madison, Wisconsin, someone said, “Well, I cannot exactly define where this school belongs, but it's completely different, there is something different in it.” You know, I might think it's a German lied or I might think it's French—it's not that. There is something in the air of that kind of thing that all evaporates when you realize that there is a state like Israel and that particular state should represent that particular culture, a particular type of man or, as I'm saying, a different mentality. It doesn't mean that we are inferior. I mean most of my music was written in the United States, and every piece of mine is different.

I wrote a lot of music in the United States because I stayed there for a long time, altogether about seven years. I started in 1961 for one year and then 1963 or 1964 I came for another year, and after that I was coming and going. Nothing there changed my approach, I believe. I never even tried any different kind of styles then, or ideas. I feel so strongly about that, and I became stronger and stronger while I listened to a lot of people's works. I mean I could care less if a piece that came from Japan sounds like it is from the West Coast of the United States. I would like to be able to identify the Japanese piece immediately.

You might live all your life long somewhere else far away, but your mentality and your tradition, if there is something like that, this is important. There is only one way that you expose it, in your own language. I believe that was the reason that nationalistic music became so strong and is still so strong. For example, I think there is a very strong American school. I'm not talking about academic music these days, I am talking about American style. I love the music that accompanies the western—I used to look at that and enjoy it tremendously, from all different composers. I think it's the country's music, and some people used that—like Barber and Copland. Well, some American music these days does go back to the style of those composers. Like the idea of trying to build what I would call American music in our time. The old generation did a marvelous job, with Leonard Bernstein to a certain extent, George Gershwin and the others, all great composers. And in what's going on today, you lose your identity. I don't believe in the international style.

It's hard to predict what the future will be, but the problem with the present is that it's very fast becoming a part of the past already—you cannot even talk about it. You know, Israel has this spectrum of composers, which might be true with many nations. Although I
don't see a possibility that much in the Far East, because there it is sort of a combination with Japanese music of traditional music and the Western culture. What I mean is you take some kind that is very problematic, it's more problematic—what we call the Mediterranean Orient. It's complicated because first of all with the pentatonic system and the tradition of the instruments, it's very hard to transfer this sound into the European orchestra. If you take the traditional oboe from any tribe here, you can use it—it's a huge sound. But what can you do with the koto or shamisen in the orchestra? It's a very problematic thing. They try to imitate the sound, or they use the instruments with amplification as I did in my guitar concerto. It cannot work otherwise, so it's a major problem.

I think we have different trends in Israel. And it's becoming very difficult to define it exactly. My major concern, and it's a part of our civilization in general, is what I do believe is a lack of talent in the arts. There is a lack of technical facility in writing. There is a lack of patience needed to work on a piece of artwork—it's ready and it's done—to perfect it. There is a lack of understanding exactly for what you write or for whom you write—when you write a piece for clarinet and it could be very easily good for the flute, or it does not use the instrument as it should. There is a lack of professionalism. So it's very hard to predict what will happen. I have the feeling that there is a tremendous decline in arts projects. I cannot tell you—I mean it's very hard. I am almost in the process of quitting music. I am not going to write anymore. I have written enough, I believe.

I just have the feeling that if they are not considering seriously the use of Jewish music or Jewish history whatsoever, that might cause us problems—to assimilate completely. I don't want to see myself assimilated. Assimilation is once you lose your own mentality and you start things without controls. All the world is sort of drowned by this kind of influence. I cannot think that way, I am part of an Eastern mentality or civilization. I would keep on very strongly the idea of the individual and what he has to do in combining all of this in art—or to mentalities, some way of thinking. So I'm not that pleased. We have lots of problems in Israel. Our students start composing quite late. First of all they have to go to the army, and once they are out it takes them a while to get into something. And then they finish education at the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven. Our young composers are past thirty already a long time. I guess our youngest composer in the League of Composers is now thirty-three years old. So that's a problem.
Ami Maayani

My major resistance for teaching composition is that I think you should start composing once you are at the end of your studies. In other words, you study, you have your instruments, you've gone to school, you've earned your B.A., your M.A., and then—when you've played in an orchestra, played music a lot, played chamber music, conducted—then you compose. That's the most important thing. People start composing when they have absolutely no idea about music. I can show you immediately when I look at a score if the person has absolutely no idea about music, never heard Beethoven's symphonies. I'm sure about what I am saying, I've examined them. And it's complicated. I wouldn't dare to predict what's going to happen. But the scenery, as it is, is very depressing as far as I'm concerned. Even major composers don't spend enough time for a piece. They just get a commission, they write fast, and they don't spend the time to go over and over it again.

You know, the process of revising is because you didn't work carefully in the first place or you don't have enough talent to work it out. I never revise a piece of mine. I work very carefully on each note, each bar, each page—to make sure I know what I am writing. I have nothing against revisions or revised editions. I did do revised editions because I wanted to change the publisher. We had some problems with publishers, but that's the only reason I did some revised editions of my music. But most of the composers don't even know what a piece is going to sound like, and everybody wants to be a composer. I think there is something glamorous about it. They don't know what a big mistake they have made. Well, everybody learns from his own experience, I believe.

My process and development in the arts was very careful, very consistent, starting from an early age through playing music and playing chamber music, playing band in the School of Music. And going to the Academy and finishing that, and going into conducting and playing with the orchestra, playing in the opera and playing and playing and playing. And listening to music and trying to learn scores by heart, to learn some other people's music, before I even touched paper to write music. Because people have no respect for what other people are doing. How often do they go to concerts? Do you see your students at concerts? Rarely you see them. And they couldn't care less about what their teachers are doing. I don't understand that, no respect for other people's work. They only think of themselves, that's terrible.
TWENTY ISRAELI COMPOSERS

Wagner was such an egocentric, there is nothing to compare to it. He knew only one thing in life, and all the rest, whether it could be in his orbit or not, he’d throw out. He denied everyone who would not agree with him. Schoenberg was another person like that. But Wagner conducted lots of music, and he knew lots of music he performed himself. He was a lousy pianist. Take Schoenberg, how much this man knew about it. What’s going on these days? They know nothing, just want to get their music played. They want to be considered composers, and the rest is not important. And you cannot produce any good piece of music or piece of art unless you know what happened before you and may be able to predict what will be in the future.

I present one idea, I’m not obsessed by it. I wouldn’t press or strongly maintain my ideas. Joseph Dorfman, his perspective is wider than mine. He thinks when we have a competition, it’s only for very avant-garde music. I don’t impose my opinion, even on our concerts. But you can see right away, we have about three or four concerts a year that our League of Composers sponsors, and we usually try to program music that was written during that period. But very few composers come to listen to their colleagues to begin with. And then the public makes right away the selections. There’s no other way to close this competition—what the public thinks of your music. And if you don’t care about that, if you think you write—I don’t know for who—for God and his angels, you are in trouble. And there are some who couldn’t care less. Art is supposed to be a tool of communication, and if you are not taking this into consideration, then what is the reason of your wasting time?

I don’t know how much Ives was involved in music in general. I guess he knew music and he heard music. He was kind of a unique person. At least he wrote the music for the pleasure of writing. He said he did not think what he was doing was important. It’s almost like the story with Kafka, who asked Max Brod to burn all his writings. Once he read it, of course, he could not, because he saw it was a tremendous body of literature, what this man did in his life. I mean, you can say Ives wasn’t sure of what he was doing, he didn’t have to make a living out of it, but he was a very worthy man. I know the story that Bernstein invited him to come to the New York Philharmonic, to play for him, and he refused. Maybe he didn’t appreciate his own music. There are still people who don’t like his music, but I had an opportunity to play sonatas for a while on the piano, and I thought it was good work. You cannot judge on geniuses. Our century is full of idiots, mediocrity is
Ami Maayani

all over. I don’t understand how someone wakes up in the morning and says to himself, “I’d like to be a composer,” and he starts. Think of that—I mean, what kind of music is that? Hegel said it already in 1820, when he gave his lecture on aesthetics.

Maayani’s works have been heard both in Israel and abroad, with the composer conducting some orchestral performances. Performances of Maayani’s music have taken place in Hungary, Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Germany, and the United States. In 1992, Maayani’s Sinfonietta on Popular Hebraic Themes for chamber orchestra (1982) was performed in Israel by the Symphonette Orchestra Raanana, and in Vilnius, Lithuania, by the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, the latter performance during the First International Festival of Jewish Art Music. Maayani conducted the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra in live broadcast performances of the Interlude from The Legend of Three and Four (1978) and his Yiddische Lieder (Song Cycle No. 2) for alto and orchestra (1974). His Concerto No. 1 for Harp and Orchestra (1960) was also performed in a live concert broadcast by the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra.

Since 1993, Maayani has served as head of the Samuel Rubin Israel Academy of Music at Tel Aviv University. His study of Richard Wagner was published in 1995. The same year, he announced that he had ceased his activities as a composer.