Twenty Israeli Composers
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Tzvi Avni (originally Steinke) is one of the most widely performed and recorded Israeli composers, and an eloquent proponent of contemporary Israeli music. Avni has written music for a wide variety of media, including ballets, films, and radio plays. A recipient of the Lieberson Prize (1970) and the Yoel Engel Prize (1973), Avni was awarded the ACUM Prize for Life’s Work in 1986.¹

Avni’s study of electronic music in the United States caused a dramatic change, steering him away from the spirit of Eastern Mediterraneanism that had characterized his previous compositions. Consequently, Avni’s earlier works are modal, neoclassical, and emphasize quartal harmonies, while later compositions are ametric and characterized by dissonant, sustained tone clusters. Typical of the folkloristic character of Avni’s earlier music is the Capriccio for piano, composed in 1955. His later works also show an interest in exploring new notational means, including graphic approaches. Whereas the stylistic basis of his early works may be found in the music of Ben-Haim, Seter, and Bartók, Avni’s later works suggest the stronger influence of Edgar(d) Varèse.

I interviewed Tzvi Avni at his home near Tel Aviv University.
I was born in Saarbrücken, Germany, in 1927 and immigrated in 1935. With our generation in general, when we studied composition here thirty years ago, it wasn’t like now. Now you have composition lessons at the Music Academy with an individual teacher, lessons that have no relation, sometimes, to what you study in harmony and counterpoint, and so on. I had here quite a few students throughout the years, in the Academy, who studied harmony and counterpoint courses, which I don’t teach now. Composition, free composition, they studied with me. At that time, actually, there was no such thing in the framework of the music academies, no such course as composition. You studied harmony and counterpoint and form, and you studied mostly with the same teacher. If you were a composer, you would show him also some of your works and hear some comments, and so on. If you were a conductor, you were working with somebody else on conducting. In my case, anyway, I really started as an autodidact, I would say, a self-taught composer, at the age of fourteen. Composing was, for me, something very natural, very basic.

I didn’t have a piano at that time. I had an accordion, a mandolin, and a recorder. I didn’t know how to write music, I didn’t know how to read music—so I invented a special script to notate these melodies that I composed. I had one for the accordion, and then the other one I invented for the mandolin—a kind of tablature, as I would notate the number of the string and the position and so forth. Only at sixteen did I start playing the piano and learning to read music. So this was really a hard beginning, which was caused by my circumstances. My father was kidnapped here by Arabs in 1938 and was never found again. I started working to earn my living at fourteen, so I didn’t have the conditions to learn music. I didn’t have, also, any serious background from home, so I came to it, somehow, by myself.

I also painted a lot at that time, and I was sometimes vacillating between painting and music. There was a time when I was sure I was going to study painting. I think that’s why I remain so much attached to tone painting, as in the Five Pantomimes, which is based upon five different paintings by Picasso, Klee, Kandinsky, Dalí, and Chagall. When I started my piano lessons, I was all the time composing. At eighteen or so, I composed a piano sonatina without actually having had one lesson in composition. I learned form from what I had read and played, and I found the harmonies just by ear. And when I started studying harmony and counterpoint, and so on, there was always a kind of parallelism. They were like two parallel lines, you know—I
was composing what I was composing, and I was studying what I was studying. I would write the fugues and motets and chorales and all these necessary things, with no connection whatsoever with the pieces I was composing at the time. But I knew these two parallel lines were going to meet someday, because I knew what I was learning was going to influence somehow my technique, my way of thinking—and to improve it.

My first serious theory teacher was Abel Ehrlich. Later I was very lucky to come to Mordecai Seter, because he was actually the person who opened my eyes and my ears to what is in that chorale that you are harmonizing, in a much wider sense than just to find the harmonies—to construct a composition from it. And this influenced very much my way of thinking later in music. I enjoyed also very much working with Ben-Haim, which we mostly did in orchestration. I studied with him, also, a bit of piano, and I showed him compositions and so on. Actually, I would say Mordecai Seter was the man who influenced me most in the way of thinking and the way of facing the problems of music. Ben-Haim was much more impressionistic, and my early works were influenced by more or less impressionistic music—let's say, somewhere between Bartók and Ravel and Debussy and Ben-Haim. And later I came under the influence of Seter. This was that group—Seter, Boskovitch, and Partos—who were more in the radical direction of Israeli music.

Today you say "Mediterranean" for everything that has some basic Middle Eastern elements like melodic elements, rhythm, and so on. But what we called at that time Mediterranean was more Ben-Haim's direction—Ben-Haim, Lavry, Avidom, and so on. But the trio—Partos, Boskovitch, Seter—looked for more radical ways of expressing these motives, these traditional elements of the Yemenites and other ethnic groups. And they too were influenced by the rhythm, and so on. But the way of thinking was more toward a radical texture, using dissonant combinations, in the Bartók direction, using also heterophonic elements. I mean the minor seconds and the smaller intervals, working with them vertically as "linear" harmonies. These were the elements that were more apparent in their music, whereas this other direction was more in the triadic tradition.

Later, Boskovitch and Partos also used Schoenberg's twelve-tone method. This was quite natural for them since they looked for a more radical texture. We had a lot of discussions, Partos and I. We were good friends. I didn't have any formal lessons with him, never. But
we used to talk, and he liked to talk to me very much. I felt a kind of special relation between us, a young composer and an older one, more experienced. He told me: "Bartók is a very great composer, but it doesn't open for you a way—it's a closed circle. Whereas Schoenberg is an opening, it can lead to many things. With Bartók you can't get anywhere else, you can get just to Bartók. With Schoenberg you can get everywhere." That was his opinion. And I think it was interesting to see his development, from his early Bartókian works via Middle East maqamāt and so on, to the techniques of twelve-tone music in his later works.

In a way, I think that Jews have a special need for melody, more than for harmony. Take, for instance, Schoenberg, who spoke about Klangfarbenmelodie, and he was the first to do it. In my mind everything was going in the direction of Webern in Schoenberg's music. But then he came to a certain point where he saw that he needed melody. And that's why, I think, he had also this obsession of going on with the classical tradition and keeping the classical forms. I think melody was very important for him and he couldn't do away with it.

And, of course, speaking about the great violinists especially, being Jewish—yes, I think it's another aspect of that and many, many other things. Maybe one day I'll write an article about it when I have the time.

I studied in the States from 1962 to 1964. And that was a time when everything was boiling there—experiments, electronic music—and you had the concerts in Hunter College with Cage and Morton Feldman. Everybody came there. Stockhausen was there at the time, he came for a concert of his works. And I was at Tanglewood in 1963 in the summer; Copland gave me a scholarship. And there were Xenakis and Gunther Schuller and Lukas Foss. By the way, I admire Lukas Foss very much, he's also a friend, and he conducted a few of my pieces. And with all those things together, I came into electronic music, advised by Varèse to do so. I actually wanted to study with him and he said, "No, you don't need any studies. If you want me to teach you new tricks, I wouldn't teach you anyway. I want to keep my tricks for myself, you find your own tricks." But he said, "I would advise very much you should go to electronic music," and he called up Otto Luening and spoke with him and said, "I have here a young man..."

Luening didn't teach at that time, but he was still around. They gave me a scholarship there for a year in the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. And these two things, electronic music with [Vladimir] Ussachevsky and that interesting summer in Tanglewood,
were very stimulating. We heard quite crazy things there, and “happenings,” and everything was going on. I got so confused. Copland told me, “You are going to get mixed up here,” and I did. And you know, you start thinking, “Where is the world, where am I, what am I doing?” I had that problem when I came back, really—“Where am I going?” I did the Vocalise in New York, an electronic piece that is on a Turnabout record. And there already I tried to find my own world in the new sound environment. And then, when I came back here it took quite a few years, somehow, to adjust and to choose what I felt was right and good for me, and sincere. And to remain myself, although I wanted very much to use new sound elements like, of course, tone clusters and tone rows and sonoristic elements and electronics and so on.

It took me a few years in which I composed works that were kind of experimental. But I reassessed myself into some way of thinking, like, perhaps the most representative piece at that time and some say still my most representative—my warhorse, Meditations on a Drama. It was issued on a record and performed by many, many conductors here in Israel and abroad, many times. It’s for chamber orchestra. Other new developments, I think, were here and there, neotonal elements. And I would say my music became more Jewish, if you can say so, in the late 1960s and 1970s. Especially in the melodic area and perhaps some kind of nostalgic elements, I cannot define it exactly. But I feel that now it’s much more important to me to know what it means to be a Jew. Let’s say in the 1950s and the 1960s I was very busy, like many others, trying to understand what it meant to be an Israeli. But now, you know, we have a kind of national identity here, and you look for the wider cultural identity much more than local nationalism, which is now perhaps already established.

In my score of Meditations on a Drama, you see textures, and various kinds of clusters. Here in the middle, it comes to a kind of aleatoric section where you get clashes of happenings and various elements are almost falling apart, but then begins a reassessment. I have the same development in that Vocalise that I did in New York—it’s the same thing, in the middle section. You have a kind of dramatic disintegration of what was before, and then there’s a kind of reassessment looking for a new sort of buildup of positive solutions.

My Five Pantomimes uses proportional notation and gives freedom to conductor and performer—choices in terms of durations, tempi, and ordering of sections. I would say what would pertain here to my
earlier life would be the connection to painting, because at that time, in the sixties, I was very much interested also in visual aspects. Like this piece that was performed in Boston at the ISCM [International Society for Contemporary Music] festival, which has a strong visual dimension to it—a kind of symmetrical structure. It's for four clarinets, *Three Aspects of Janus*. So you have the visual element of parallelism or symmetry in the score itself. Here it is also that way, from the middle, kind of three variations on the same element. And the other one is also a graphic idea, namely, a main section and two interpolations, a kind of rondo form.

And these things were very much in my mind when I was experimenting, around the 1960s. From the beginning of the 1970s, 1971 or 1972, I was looking already for a kind of synthesis of various elements. So, you can find it in more recent works. Let's say you can find—and that's what interests me, by the way—this kind of confrontation of elements—not to be on one side of the bar, you know? And in this piece, *Programme Music 1980*, “The Machine Game” is a kind of minimalistic movement of various rhythmic elements that later develops into a rich texture. This is on the record of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. And here and there, you see, the machines get somehow astray and everybody plays his own rhythm. Usually you will find in my music clearly defined elements along with some more “open” ideas. The second movement is called “The Dream of the Broken Mirror”—a kind of surrealist image. You have the background for that—you see, for instance, strings going in microtextures. And in the third movement, “Magritte—A Dilemma,” there is a quotation from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, in a kind of stream of consciousness. Here, at the end, you have again the section that is “open,” where they have slowly to fade out. The last movement, “It's a Busy Day in the Beehive,” was never performed yet. Since the movements are independent, I didn't refuse to have only the first three performed. This was composed in 1980, and it was performed also in the World Music Days here in Israel that year, that was the premiere. And then Gary Bertini conducted it on tour for Kol Israel, and the Philharmonic did it on the record with Zubin Mehta and on a tour in the United States in 1985.

I think that I'm now mature enough to find what goes with what, and what I'm really looking for, and I'm not afraid of mixing various elements. I'm not trying to be a purist, I use various things together, including sometimes neotonal elements. More abstract ideas with
more, let's say, conventional ways of thinking doesn't disturb me. I find it's a kind of integration, this whole era now. It's maybe kind of a fin de siècle, I don't know. You know, I think I can accept myself now much more than I did in the 1960s, let's say—after Tanglewood, after America. When I came back and worked on electronic music, for instance, my earlier works—I despised them, I couldn't stand them. Now I accept everything I did in its own way. I think I did some things I like very much in my early work. As Schoenberg says, I loved that work when I wrote it, and that's why I love it still now. Because, and I think I agree fully with that, I feel that I did a good job there, and I like what I did. Now I'm not committed to anything that is one-sided. And here and there, if I feel a melody comes to me that belongs, perhaps, to an earlier time of myself, I say it's still here—so it can go with my new ways of thinking because it's still me. As long as it can be worked out in the way I feel now, it is OK with me.

And as I said, together with that, I feel in a wider sense a kind of Jewishness that influences the meaning of music to me in general. This also led me to the legends of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav. This piano sonata, Epitaph, has some Jewish elements. Here too, you have various types of textures and so on, which are mainly sonorous, but these have a specific meaning. Even that starting on one tone, you know, and so on. Kind of really transcendental, like a psalm tone (ex. 6):

Ex. 6

But later on, for instance, you have this, which grew out of the same thing (ex. 7):

Ex. 7
For me it's Jewish, it says something very Jewish. It's not a quotation at all. It's kind of a "speaking" melody, you know. That's what I mean when I say Jewish melody—it has a nature of a confession or speaking, a kind of rhetoric quality. Not necessarily biblical. It can be mixed with that, too. But I mean it's not conditioned by that.

These short chordal attacks, with a "sound tail," are a more sonoristic thing. I was very much fascinated by the piano being able to sound like something that is not a piano. This tone that remains after the attack, it sounds not like a piano. The attack is kind of a percussive effect (ex. 8):

This repeating melody is like a cantillation (ex. 9):

The ending of the piece is fading out into something very lofty, I would say, standing alone, I don't know how to describe it. It should
always be very far away—disappearing, let’s say—somewhere in space (ex. 10):

Ex. 10

To me, it is a very important—this piece especially—a very important landmark as a proof of possibilities, you see, of getting something that is an amalgamation of elements. Because I have here tone clusters, and I have melodic elements at the same time. It’s free and, as you have seen, mostly without bar lines—though there are some. It’s also a kind of inner development of conception that is trying to give the feeling of freedom in time. And I mean, after all, the values are not undefined. They are defined and they are relatively clear. And it has also something to do with that legend of Rabbi Nachman that speaks about time. As you see here, in the introduction, I quoted a part of that legend.

Yes, it’s a work about time—perhaps about God, about the meaning of life, I don’t know—about everything. I think, actually, I would say it is my most personal work, this sonata. It was composed between 1974 and 1979 after a very hard personal experience. My first wife died from cancer two months after the death of my mother, and it was a very hard period of life. And, of course, it is also significant of a way of thinking that may be present in other works of mine. I think, in general, that both naturally and also consciously I am changing. I would not like to repeat the same piece for thirty years in other ways, in other variants. So whenever I see a kind of change in direction, for me it’s a sign of vitality.

And the bigger joy I have is when I find also the connection with the other things I did, you see? When you find you are changing, but you are still the same. There is that growth, slow change and continuity. I think Thomas Mann wrote something about it once. I think that’s very important, after all—like a tree, you know. It grows out of one kernel but changes shape. So that’s what is so interesting.
And after all, a person is a process, we are not a static thing. Some composers grab one thing and they stop there, and I think, after all, it's boring. At least it's sad to become a mass producer of the same idea.

Being an Israeli composer, it's a basic existential situation. To live here means to be a person who made a certain choice, yes? Of course, everyone who lives anywhere makes a choice, but I think it's a more passive choice. Because it's still a country here in a state of formation, and many keep coming here by choice. If I would like very much to go away from here, I could. I could go to America, I could go to Europe, I could return to Germany—because actually I can have German citizenship. So, I chose to be here. If you choose something, you also ask yourself sometimes the reason—why do you choose something, and what does it mean to you, after all?

I'm not a religious man, but I believe in the tradition of the Jewish nation, it means a lot to me. When I read the Bible sometimes I cry. Certain chapters—when I read the story of Joseph, or Abraham when he was going down in the Negev in Beer Sheva—I start crying. Maybe this could happen to someone who never was here. But still I feel that these are my brothers, my fathers, my ancestors—I feel differently. I feel that this is my inner world, somewhere it is there.

In general I think that Israeli composers are more committed socially and culturally, in many ways, than in other places. I mean, if you are living here, in some way you have some kind of involvement in things that are going on around you. You may not be using any kind of folkloristic or traditional elements, and so on, but still. Let's speak about Josef Tal, who is kind of a more universal composer. He doesn't consider himself—he doesn't look for Israeli elements. But he is living in an old Arab house in Jerusalem with many, many Middle Eastern elements—furniture, and so on, pictures. Take his oeuvre—it's all historical. Take his operas, everything is based on some kind of tradition. Now maybe musically he's not using certain elements, although I think here and there you find even such elements in his music, too. But still, he's committed in some way to his historical tradition. That's what I claim, that everybody here is committed in some way—more, less. One is doing it in a simplistic way by using Hasidic or Middle Eastern melodies and reshaping them or arranging them. Another absorbs such elements more “inner-ly,” in a more integrated way, or feels them subconsciously.

I feel that I have them somewhere in myself, like in the way Ernest Bloch said—I feel it comes from somewhere, I don't know
from where. Wagner spoke about a child sucking the elements of the national traditions with his mother’s milk. And you know, he said the Jews did not have that because they were all the time nomadic. They came from one place to another, so they were busy, not with having the basic elements, because they were busy learning new things. And that’s why they are so good in catching the “how,” catching the mannerism of how to do things, but not the inner meaning of them. That’s what he accused Jews of. To a certain extent there is something in that. I don’t disagree totally with it, because it manifests itself in the Jewish interrogative mind in the drive to ask questions and look for new ways. However, I disagree with his conclusions. Being occupied with the “how” does not necessarily mean that you neglect the “what”—the contents. Throughout the generations Jews have proved themselves to be profound thinkers and, both emotionally and mentally, they have experienced some of the highest human spiritual achievements.

Summing up, I believe that there is something really intrinsic, basically Jewish, in compositions of many people who are of Jewish origin. Maybe it can be learned, maybe it can be also “reproduced,” like Shostakovich took Jewish elements and motives and so on. Speaking about myself, I’ve always felt this kind of Jewish rhetoric in the music I compose. Maybe it’s in the melody and in some general “gestures” in which I express myself. You “speak” with your music sometimes. I think I have in my music outbursts of elements that are also a kind of rhetoric, as if the whole orchestra is becoming a story, a confession, or a lament.

In recent years Tzvi Avni’s music has been performed in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, Switzerland, France, Germany, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Japan, and the United States. Ensembles that have performed his music during this period include the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, the Israel Sinfonietta Beer Sheva, the Jerusalem Rubin Academy String Quartet, the Bochum Symphony Orchestra, the National Choir Rinat, the Israel Kibbutz Choir, the Herzliya Chamber Orchestra, the Israel Chamber Orchestra, the Warsaw Sinfonia, the Austrian Women’s Chamber Orchestra, the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra, and the New York Concert Singers.
TWENTY ISRAELI COMPOSERS

In 1991, Avni was awarded the Küstermeier Prize by the Israeli-German Friendship Association “for his contribution to the understanding between the people of both countries in the field of culture.” In 1993 he was elected chairman of the Israel Jeunesses Musicales. Avni’s Beyond the Curtain (text: Abba Kovner), which received performances in Israel and Russia in 1993, was performed in New York and Washington, D.C., in 1994 by the Cantilena Piano Quartet in a program that also included “The Whitest of Doves,” one of his Three Lyrical Songs (texts: Paul Celan), performed by Mira Zakai.

Tzvi Avni and his family returned to Israel in the summer of 1995, after living in the New York area for two years. During this period, many of his works received performances in the United States and abroad. Avni has now retired from his position at the Jerusalem Rubin Academy, but he resumed teaching there on a part-time basis in the fall of 1995.