Ben-Zion Orgad (originally Büschel) is among Israel's most prominent and frequently performed composers. He has also lectured extensively on contemporary Israeli music, both in Israel and abroad. Orgad pursued his musical education both in his adopted country and in the United States, including studies with Aaron Copland at Tanglewood. In 1952 he won the International Koussevitsky Competition for his biblical cantata, The Story of the Spies. Orgad served in the Israel Ministry of Education and Culture for more than thirty years as Supervisor of Music Education, heading this division from 1975 until his retirement in 1988. In recent years he has published articles, pedagogical publications, poetry (including translations of poems by the late Paul Celan), and a book of prose. In 1990 he was awarded the General Federation of Labor [Histadrut] Prize for Music.

Orgad's compositional palette is quite varied. Yohanan Boehm regarded him as a composer who "employed a modern technique without neglecting Israeli melos." Much of Orgad's music is slow, lacking a perceivable meter, and employs both sustained dissonances and dense polyphonic textures. Repeated figures are frequently encountered, and other rhythmic treatments are reminiscent of Stravinsky. Many works emphasize soloistic passages in both unison and heterophonic textures, and Orgad's melodic lines often suggest the "creeping chromaticism" that Alexander Ringer has associated with the music of
Bartók. Another salient feature of Orgad's music is the accumulation of dense textures within which one may detect discrete, disparate, and sometimes discordant components. In a number of works, Orgad has also employed spatial relationships, positioning musicians in different locations within the performance space. The antiphonal-responsorial textures effected between groups of performers in such works are also related to Orgad's use of simultaneity, both of textures and texts.

Orgad's interest in "cantillation and prosody of the Hebrew language" as a compositional resource, observed by Ringer more than three decades ago, remains the central focus for this composer. These influences are closely linked to the emphasis on soloistic and monophonic texture that Ringer observed to be a common trait among Israeli composers. Although raised in a "non-religious home," Orgad has long been preoccupied with biblical texts, and, even in compositions of purely instrumental music, the linguistic basis remains of fundamental importance. The composer provided a succinct explanation for this focus in the opening paragraph of an article published in 1975: "I have been asked why, although I am a secular composer, I make so much use of traditional religious texts and materials in my works. It seems to me that you cannot be born into a group of people who are fated to wage a continual battle for survival, without being very much a part of it, unless you deliberately set yourself apart. At times when our very existence is at stake, the sense of mutuality and belonging sweeps even those of us who in more tranquil times feel quite alienated from the great 'togetherness.'”

I interviewed Ben-Zion Orgad at his home in Tel Aviv, where he introduced me to composer Arik Shapira, who also appears in this volume. Orgad expressed himself slowly and deliberately, taking care in choosing his words. Subsequent to the meeting documented in this interview, I returned for a further discussion of temporal and spatial relationships in music.

I was born in Germany in 1926. I came here to Tel Aviv in 1933 when the Nazis took over. I started to play the violin, and I just loved to play, sing, and listen to music, mainly classical. I think I started to compose very early, I must have been about nine years old. And then I took a course in the theory of music, and things connected. And then later on, I think it was when I was about fourteen, I became a pupil of Paul Ben-Haim. I stayed with him until almost 1945. If you
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know the years 1940 to 1945, these were very crucial years around the world. I went on studying violin with a very good teacher who was a concertmaster of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Rudolf Bergman. And then in 1946 I went to Jerusalem, where I studied at the Jerusalem Academy with Josef Tal. And right after that, in 1947, I went to Europe and spent half a year helping Jewish refugees. I came back, right into the war. I was immediately mobilized, as a veteran of the Palmach, the special forces of the underground, the Hagganah. That was my extramusical career.

Then came the war. During the war I won a scholarship to go, in 1949, to Tanglewood, and I became a pupil of Aaron Copland. I think I was one of those lucky persons who got some private lessons. I stayed there about half a year and then I returned to Israel, where I got a position at the Ministry of Culture and Education as Supervisor of Music Education. In 1952 I won the UNESCO Koussevitsky Prize, and I went again to the United States to further my studies with Copland. Then in 1960 I went to Brandeis University, where I got my Master of Fine Arts degree. I was a student of Irving Fine and Harold Shapero.

My two earlier teachers, Ben-Haim and Josef Tal, represented two extremes: Ben-Haim, an impressionist; Tal, an expressionist. It seems that I have had a tendency toward pluralism, to which my studies in the U.S., exposing me to a variety of styles and musical thought, were a real asset. I must admit that I'm not conscious about my own stylistic changes. I'm not bothered with it at all. There is an enormous influence of cantillation in my music, in the *Vigil in Jerusalem*, too, I think. The biblical cantillation has an enormous influence, it's part of my musical language. It's mainly a melodic influence that can be traced in the harmonic textures, leaning on certain kinds of modal structures. This work is subtitled “The Third Watch,” a reference to the night watches of the Old Temple, which were divided into four periods. It's part of a cycle that includes three “Watches,” *Songs of an Early Morning*, and *Hallel*.

For me, being an Israeli composer enables a certain tendency. As one who intends to be part of the very definite Hebrew culture, I declare “I belong.” Now, what's the meaning of belonging? It demands, first of all, an acknowledgment of a tradition, of collective memory, which manifests itself in behaviors. Belonging means the language, because the language is different from any other language, and as such it serves as a bridge to tradition and its origins. Not only as spoken, but as a “tonescape.” And, of course, you have the
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panorama, the landscape, with all of the emotional layers and history that it bears. And then, the people, which, as you must have noticed, are enormously varied. It's a real heterogeneous society, whose real common denominator is the language, so strongly connected to the Bible, and to the book of prayers that all congregations use many times a day. This kind of spiritual common denominator serves like a territory. On these I did elaborate in my essay, which deals with the musical potentialities of the Hebrew language, as far as intonations and rhythmic structures are concerned, which are very specific to the Hebrew language.

My work is not as direct a translation of the Hebrew language into music as it is with a friend of mine, a composer by the name of François-Bernard Mâche, one of Messiaen's pupils, a wonderful composer who really tries to depict the sound qualities of language in music. But not only languages—he also does it with birdsongs.6

I draw rhythms from the essence of Hebrew. Yes, and some other qualities that must have been influenced, let's say, by the biblical cantillation of the different types that we have; they are different yet connected to the same words, the same language, to a similar way of pronunciation. It's not only microtones and ornamentation. It's also very definite melodic structures and very definite accentuations and stresses: phonemic structures that have a definite meaning. I can't hear it from the outside. I'm part of it.

I'm not sure whether entirely, but I think I did escape Western influence. I'm not writing Eastern music. I'm using the Western way of staging the music, Western instruments and notation. I deal with words too. In the last five years I've been writing poetry, so words for me—in their meanings and sounds—are part of my expression; it's a way I communicate, though I think I still prefer music. Yes, I do.

I use conventional notation even when I tend to simultaneity. There are pieces where I do what [Charles] Ives did. I place different groups in the hall to play from different corners. Yes, it started with Mizmorim, and later, in 1971, in my Ballad for orchestra, which was written for Lukas Foss: six of the brass players leave the stage, while the orchestra goes on playing, and move to the balconies, and then join in an antiphonal playing with the whole orchestra. I like this very much. In a more recent piece, Individuations, which is a concerto for chamber orchestra and clarinet solo, I have two wind trios on both sides and a trumpet in the back of the hall. That kind of interplaying,
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the kinetic experience of sounds moving around, interests me very much.

I used to be a reconnaissance man, so I used to be outside in the open a lot. I know this country intimately, know it with my feet. Sounds in nature don't come from one angle, they move from all around. It's the way the sounds are coming to you, relate to you moving toward them, that is important to me, especially now when I feel that most of the audiences tend to be very passive. They sit and wait for music to come to them without necessarily feeling a need toward it. I am trying to change that by provoking at least one question: "Where does the sound come from?" It's not obvious. And then the extra magic that you get, for example, when you have a trumpet in the back, and a trumpet onstage, and they're playing one against the other. Something happens, the sound waves, you can really feel them. And for me this is really magic. And in a way, it is as if I'm trying to resist the recordings, because these things you can't record—it's impossible—not yet.

I feel myself as if I'm always on a search. I came close to the poetry of Paul Celan, a Jewish poet from Chernowitz who went through the Holocaust and ended up as a professor in Paris. He is considered one of the great poets in German, at least in the second half of this century. He committed suicide in 1970. I was reading his poetry in German, and noticed how he succeeded in dealing with the time element. His poetry actually forms its own time. When I read poetry, I hear it in my ears. The awareness of the way he captures time and molds it with contents has not only been a guide and sensor to my translations of some of his poems into Hebrew, but has been serving me, quite consciously, in my composing.

I feel that one of the problems of what is done in contemporary music is the relation to what Susanne Langer calls "the articulated form," which enables you to relate simultaneously to the whole and to the particles in that whole—while achieving the right balance between the materials and duration. What happens to most music that has been, and is being, composed in our century is that the particles tend to be so strong that they stick out from the overall articulated form. The events—the moments—are more important than the captivity of time. My trying to find that kind of balance started with the poetry of Paul Celan, yes, and with his voice, too. I have a recording of a recital he gave in 1968 in Jerusalem. Listen to it, it's very interesting, the music of it. It has nothing to do with the understanding of the meaning of the words. It's the meaning of the sound that really prevails.

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It's very strange. One evening I was reading this poetry. In the morning, when I woke up, I heard a whole poem of his as if it was conceived in Hebrew, and I wrote it down. It's the accentuations, you see, it's basically iambic meter, always with the stress toward the end. He uses the German in the same manner, and he combines words, too, to get a similar effect. And that line of that poem he has, which started like "Du sei wie du, immer"—for me, in Hebrew, is "Ha'yi asher tehi, tamid"—the very same. He knew Hebrew, he grew up with Hebrew. He was a multilingual like many Jews in Chernowitz. The way he reads stresses it even more.

Now let me dwell a little on the captivity of time, which in our instance relates to volume of time, to intensity of time, to qualities of time and to the ability of sounding text to form them. Almost any start arouses expectations—it evokes many possibilities to be anticipated. And when slowly, slowly, the number of anticipations narrows until you are left with one only, that should be the end. This overall shape, as perceived, with the connection to its comprised moments, can be found in Bach's music, and the way he deals with these elements is an ideal I long for. I don't have to tell you how difficult it is to work on moments, and while you do it bear the overall shape in your mind.

Hindemith believed that one could perceive a symphony of Brahms the way he perceives a city's skyline in one second of lightning. But it is not the one second that counts to me. No, for me it's more the approach of Hume or the Hindu, for whom time is a succession of moments. This interests me; this and simultaneity.

I reached simultaneity long after knowing [Charles) Ives's music. I think it started with Mizmorim, in which I allowed different texts from different psalms to run together. They complemented or contradicted each other quite dramatically, thus enabling me to establish tensions and releases that suited my approach to the familiar, often-used chants. By joining various sound layers into one musical expression, I have tried to achieve a certain plenitude. That was my way to simultaneity in music.

A friend of mine guides tours in Jerusalem—"sound tours." On Friday they go to the Muslims, on Saturday to the Jews, on Sunday to the Christians, to listen to the various ethnic and liturgical musics. At the end of the tour, while still in the Old City—she takes them, before sunrise, at three in the morning—the "third watch"—onto a roof, where she plays a recording of my Vigil in Jerusalem. I receive reports that the sounds of my music intermingle quite naturally with
cocks’ crows, church bells, as well as with resoundings of previous experiences. A sensation quite gratifying for me.

Ben-Zion Orgad’s music is widely performed. Since 1990 his works have been heard in Israel, Lithuania, Spain, Germany, and throughout the United States. Ensembles that have performed Orgad’s music during this period include the Cameran Singers, the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, the Kibbutz Chamber Orchestra, the Rishon LeZion Symphony Orchestra, and the New York Debut and Premiere Orchestra. Orgad’s music has been heard frequently in the United States, where he attended several performances in the early 1990s. In 1993, Orgad’s Reshuyoth for piano (1978), commissioned by the Tel Aviv Foundation for Literature and the Arts, was heard in Los Angeles and San Diego. In 1994 the composer attended performances of his Shaar, Shaar (text: Abba Kovner) in New York and Washington, D.C., by the Cantilena Piano Quartet with vocalist Mira Zakai. Ms. Zakai also performed one of Orgad’s Three Songs for alto solo, settings of poems by Paul Celan.