Mordecai Seter (originally Starominsky) is among the most respected composers and celebrated figures in Israeli music. Though Seter has received numerous awards and honors, his focus has always been on the process of composition.¹ His Ricercar won the Société des Auteurs Prize in 1965 and the ACUM Prize in 1957. In 1962, the Prix d'Italia was awarded to the Jerusalem Broadcasting Service for its production of Seter's Midnight Vigil. Seter was awarded the Israel Prize in 1965, and composed nearly fifty works between 1970 and 1987.² He died on August 8, 1994.³

Alexander Ringer observed affinities between Ehrlich's Bashrav and the music of the Russian-born Seter. The latter's interest in chant and Renaissance polyphony, from his studies with Nadia Boulanger, caused him at first to focus on vocal music, and to value “purely melodic considerations” over the Eastern influences favored by some of his contemporaries. Ringer also noted, however, “the influence of oriental monophony and heterophony.”⁴ While one can hear the narrow melodies and “creeping chromaticism” described by Ringer in Seter's work, other recurring features are also present. A number of his works exhibit heavy, dark timbres, characterized by sustained, ominous sonorities in lower registers. Seter's melodies range from modal to atonal, and his textures often involve sustained dissonances,
clusters, and open space. In a 1990 retrospective article, Israel Music Institute director Paul Landau summarized Seter's role in the evolution of Israeli music:

Although he taught for almost five decades, he neither founded any school nor did he strive to have his students follow in his footsteps. He was deeply concerned with the ideological and creative movements in Israel from the end of the 30s onwards and even used materials from the Jewish-Oriental folklore. However, Seter was not a member of the group of composers working in the so-called "Mediterranean Style" affected by Ben-Haim, Boskovich and others, nor was he tempted to place his work at the service of a specific ideology or any other collective concept. True to his views that an artistic creation is essentially an act of an individual, Seter trod his own path with remarkable logic and consistency in search of a suitable mode of expression for his spiritual world.

Seter provided a succinct summary of his own compositional work: "On the one hand, my music is conservative, that is to say it preserves the essence and is not affected by the innovations of contemporary music. On the other hand, it is not academic music, since it represents self-expression within the framework of a national situation, defined by the international present." On the occasion of Seter's seventy-fifth birthday, Tzvi Avni provided the following praise for his former teacher: "As a man and as an artist he was guided, first and foremost, by his conscience and profound inner awareness of the meaning of his art. . . . He has always been for me both a symbol and an example: a man and artist of complete integrity, a profound thinker at once sensitive and sensible. His works, in my opinion, are solid evidence of a generation that knew despair and hopeful elation; suffered doubts and regained faith."

I was informed of Mordecai Seter's reluctance to grant interviews, but was also urged to be persistent. Indeed, my first telephone call to him did not result in a meeting, as he was busy supervising the recording of a string quartet. Ultimately, I enjoyed an extended conversation with Seter at his home in Ramat Aviv (near Tel Aviv) on July 7, 1986. This was shortly after the composer's seventieth birthday, which was observed by an article in the Israeli newspaper Keshet.

I was born in Russia in 1916—not the Soviet Union, but czarist Russia—one year before the revolution. In 1926, when I was ten,
I came here with my family. I went to Paris when I was sixteen and worked for one year with Paul Dukas, the last year of his life, then with Nadia Boulanger for two years. And I studied piano with Lazare Levy for three years. Here I studied only the piano because we had no one to teach music theory—theory yes, but not harmony and counterpoint. Stefan Wolpe came here. There was Sternberg, who was born at the end of the last century, and he was here from the 1930s, I think. But he spoke only German and I couldn't speak German. Musically speaking my education was in Paris. I learned counterpoint and absorbed the spirit, as I could, of Paris in these years, musically.

The most important part of my training was the study with Boulanger, especially the first year. The second year it became stifling, I couldn't support it. You see, she was extraordinary, there is nothing else to say. But she had absolute truths, and this was not good. When I first came I accepted the absolute truth, but then I discovered that she moved from the truth—the truth became relative. But then I lost the contact with her, because if you are absolute and the pupil accepts it, he believes you. When he discovers that you are capricious, it doesn't work any longer. So I finished my second year, but I felt stifled. I felt, "I can stay here no more, because it grinds me up." I couldn't suffer it anymore, and it was because of her authority—"No more absolutes!" And she was capricious because she was a woman; she was a kind of mother figure for all the young generation. It's very impressive. But I learned a lot from her. First of all it was her culture, her musical culture. It was enormous. She really knew the history of music. She really knew everything from Greek music to Hindemith and Stravinsky—it's about two thousand years of music! And she knew it very basically. She lectured about Greek music and medieval music, and we learned about the motets of early Renaissance and fifteenth century and so on. And there was Monteverdi and Gesualdo, and we sang it. And she had a madrigal ensemble—they recorded it, with five soloists, and she accompanied them on the piano. It's a nice recording, maybe on His Master's Voice. They sang chansons with her, from the sixteenth century and Monteverdi madrigals. And she played a few instruments, she played the piano and the harpsichord.

Then I learned counterpoint, strict counterpoint. But she gave the essentials of counterpoint, such as you can use in any style, the concept of counterpoint. And we learned from the chorales by Bach, and she permitted us to harmonize it freely. So it was a kind of
composition. She taught at the École Normale for twenty years, and she taught at the American Conservatory of Fontainebleau. Dukas was also at the École Normale. I studied with him from 1934 to 1935, it was really half a year. And then I began with her from the end of 1935 to the end of the school year in 1937. We learned the Gregorian chants, of course. You see, when I returned to Israel I first met with traditional chant in Idelsohn’s *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*. And I discovered that this is parallel to the Gregorian with Latin texts. Because it was a parallel situation—not in music, but in a sense. And it was quite a discovery for me. It was a traditional chant from I don’t know how many centuries ago. And it was crystallized. It was a tradition with a Hebrew text, original Hebrew text, with an authentic Hebrew pronunciation. So it immediately talked to me directly. And it was not popular song, it was from the synagogue. It was a kind of recitative.

Stutschewsky introduced me to these chants. He came in 1938. All of those musicians you heard about came when Hitler entered Prague. Then Max Brod came, and Frank Pelleg, because they had to escape. And when Hitler entered Vienna, then came Stutschewsky. And when it became a fascist government in Hungary, then Partos fled from there, and Boskovitch, who was from Transylvania. You see, when Hitler chased out the Jewish musicians from the orchestra, Huberman founded the Philharmonic Orchestra here. It’s all Hitler, you see, because it begins in 1933 when he came to power. So when I came back, Boskovitch was not yet here and Partos was not yet here. They came a little later, in 1938. Stutschewsky came also in 1938, and Pelleg was already here. Pelleg was not a real composer. He was a composer of incidental music for theater. Stutschewsky was a composer and a cellist. He performed quite a lot. He made propaganda for Jewish music. He didn’t know what it was yet because he thought of Jewish music as Hasidic music, Hasidic tunes. He was educated in that, he was from the Ukraine originally. Of course, he was a Russian Jew, but he lived most of his life in Western Europe. But he had a few volumes of Idelsohn. I didn’t know Idelsohn, but I think he died in 1939 in South Africa.

Here there was no original music, but folk songs and pseudo-folk songs. Songs by Amiran or by Zephira, it’s another generation. By Yedidya Admon [Gorochov]. They weren’t what would be called popular songs. They had their roots in a different source. For instance, Amiran is a little bit Hasidic and Zephira is more oriental. And Admon
Gorochov is more Arabic. They were inspired by popular traditions. Earlier Israeli folk music was of Russian origin. That was before the First World War, because most of the people who came in the first *aliyah* and second *aliyah* were Russians. Afterwards they came from Poland, after the First World War.

The Hebrew and oriental chants in Idelsohn's book were closely related to the Gregorian. Not in a direct way, but as an analogy. There were tropes, for instance, as you have in the Hebrew text of the Torah, of the Bible. There are small symbols above and below. These are the tropes. You have to chant it. It's melodic and grammatical. It shows where the accent is and how is it to be pronounced, and how the phrase is divided. There were signs indicating that this is the end, or half-end—full cadence and half cadence. So it's grammatical. And this was very important for me, too, because these tropes were grammatical and they were in tones—they were musical, but not personal. It was traditional, it was not the interpretation of the words as meaning, you see. It's not a lied, where you put your own interpretation to the words. It's a traditional basis that is to be clear when you transmit it, and melodically and intonationally clear in acceptance with the grammar and the color of the words, but not the meaning of the words. So it's absolutely free. Expression of the words, but not interpretation of the words.

This gave me the analogy with the text of the motets or the Mass—the Latin text, or Gregorian chant—which is not personal, but it's very expressive and grammatical. This is the analogy that I understood. It's extraordinary, it's quite a treasure. I discovered a treasure, you see. And what is more, I was the one who discovered it, because I don't know who used Idelsohn—those who were here then didn't know Hebrew. I spoke the language and I knew exactly what it means. I knew a little Hebrew even in Russia, when I was six or seven. But it wasn't new for me, you see. That's why all of those who came here at the same time as I came or earlier, like Ben-Haim, began to study Hebrew. All of them began to study, and all of them were eager to get the folk songs because this was a melody and it was the oriental character. And it was measured—the Idelsohn one is not measured because it's a chant, like a Gregorian chant. Ben-Haim and Lavry could not read them. They couldn't appreciate them. They got a complete, already closed melody with such and such periods and so on. And they went to Bracha Zephira and she sang to them, and they notated it. They're from oriental sources.

Vocal music is the basis of my work. One of the examples from
my music included in Ringer's article comes from chant. It's in my Sonata for Two Violins. It comes from chanting because it's vocal. But the root of it is vocal. And it's always melodic—not vertical, but linear, contrapuntal. I've also written for the dance. I worked with Inbal. I have written two ballets for Inbal, for Sara Levi-Tanai, the artistic director. One of these was the Midnight Vigil. It was a ballet of fourteen minutes, and it became an oratorio of forty-three. I absorbed the gesture of the dance of the Yemenites, the Yemenite dancing and the atmosphere, which is quite extraordinary. I don't use much heterophony. Yemenites sing it. In 1978, I revised my Midnight Vigil. I corrected some of the orchestration, that's all. Because it didn't satisfy me, because it was not what I wanted. I changed it several times. I also wrote two ballets for Martha Graham, and a ballet for Rina Sheinfeld, The Daughter of Jephtah. I went to the U.S. in 1979 when I had a sabbatical year. I visited music schools, I went to New York, Washington, and Boston. And then I went to Europe. But this visit had nothing to do with Martha Graham. This contact was in 1962, 1963. I wrote her two works, The Legend of Judith and then another ballet that she called Part Dream, Part Real.

There is always a change in my work, but oriental elements go inner, and less and less I may distinguish between something oriental and non-oriental. Because it became personal. Now it has become my personal style, you see, so I can't distinguish them already. It's all long ago. It began as a language, a kind of a language. It is between West and oriental, and between myself and traditional, you see? It's very mixed, I can't separate them because it's already—it's mixed, it's like a language. I can't say how it has evolved, because I am in evolution. I am involved. You see, it's like a flow of water. You can't separate water, it's a whole. You can't divide the flowing, because it's a unity. I can't separate it. I can't see myself evolved, because you are part of the evolution. You can't analyze it.

In 1937, when I returned, there was a conservatory that exists no more, and I taught theory there. And I met Stutschewsky, and he had organized a series of concerts of Jewish music in Tel Aviv in Beit Brenner. He didn't commission me, because he had no money, but I participated. I wasn't interested in the twelve-tone method, and I wasn't affected by the nationalism in music here in the 1930s and 1940s, not at all. Because they had a manner—it's superficial, a certain color. It's "Israel" Israeli music. I was not interested in color, I was interested in expression—not in songs, not in folk songs, but in
tradition and in language, and so on. I wrote motets, for instance, on psalm texts, taking the cantus firmus from Idelsohn. I worked with cantus firmus. It's another thing I learned from Nadia Boulanger.

I used serial techniques freely in my string quartet. It's not a serial work, it's not a row. I looked for something basic and not a row, because a row is not basic—it's too organized, already too organized. What I looked for was something elementary, like a mode, like tonality. But today tonality is not acceptable for me. I was never tonal, always modal. So, all my life, all my compositional life, I worked with modes, with different aspects of modes—for instance, in the *Sabbath Cantata* composed in 1940. The modes are given. They are close to Gregorian chants, the modes—I mean, Dorian, or Phrygian, and so on. But even there, one of them is not such a single mode, but it's oriental and it gives some possibility of a kind of *maqâmât*. It still has its tonic, but the mode does not have seven tones, but rather ten or eleven tones, like the Arabic. So it gives a special atmosphere, and it's not oriental in the cheap way. It's oriental in the inner way, like Indian ragas, and so on, but not songs. The songs make it cheap and vulgar. So there is the possibility of shade—shade and light modality. It gives a different illumination of things. I think I succeeded in bringing it out, harmonically. You can hear it.

As far as what it means to be an Israeli composer, I think that today the outsider sees better than those who are involved. He can tell you what the connecting links are between different personalities. The links that exist, if they do or do not, he can see them better, and he can say what makes it Israeli. Because if I speak of myself, I can't distinguish it or separate it. With all organic processes, you cannot disengage from the flowing of the process. The process is a flowing because when it stops flowing, it's dead. It must flow all the time you are living, and composing. You are in the flow, and you can't separate it. Because if you see the flow, you are there no more. You can't compose self-consciously. Being an Israeli composer is simply a fact. It's not political, it's not nationalist. All these things are exterior. You see, today you may be a nationalist, tomorrow you may be an internationalist—you can change it as you change your clothes. But I believe you can't change yourself.

Simply to be inspired by Hebrew-language rhythms, biblical stories, or Israeli sites like the Dead Sea—this is not characteristic of Israeli music, because this could be on every point of the world. It could be in Switzerland, with Bloch, who wrote psalms in Hebrew, I
think. It could be in America. The biblical language and the Hebrew language, and the liturgical chants—you could live in Honolulu or in the South. But you would not be an Israeli composer. It's a composite of very many different things, not only musical things, but mentality and the general atmosphere and general fate. All of us Israelis have a general fate, which is one—which is not a general Jewish fate, it's another fate. It's political, that's the external expression of it. But it's an inner fate that is quite different from every other Jewish community elsewhere. And all these components, plus music and personal expression, the digestion of all this—then you become, in my opinion, an Israeli composer. You want to analyze—try, try to analyze. You can't separate all this—we are built of all this.

You can be everywhere you want. But where you live, you are not a tourist. And your emotional experience, and what happens here, and not in Honolulu—in Honolulu, you can follow with your television, but not emotionally. No, it's not real. You have to experience it really. Yes, and then you can judge with this experience comparatively. You can judge what happens to Honolulu from your point of view, because you have a separate point of view—a specific point of view of the land you live in. It's very complicated, but it's very simple too. I am the roots—I am sorry to express myself in such a vulgar way. Everyone looks for his roots, but I am my roots here. That is simple. I do not know how to express it, because I can't explain it.

It's all merged, you see. I came nearly fifty years ago, returned from Paris in 1937. So during these forty-nine years, all which boiled and happened here, it happened. These fifty years are at least—I don't know—for Jews it counts in centuries, not one century. Because you can't imagine the difference of the new country and new state. It's the unique experience of the last two thousand years, you see. It's not propaganda, it's a fact. I'm part of it. Maybe I don't like the government, this government. But it's your place, it's your people, so you have to suffer. You have no other choice. No other choice and an inner choice—not choice of possibilities, no technical choice.

I don't think about my work—I compose. Since 1966, I have discovered the idea of a mode—I can show you the mode in this symphony called Jerusalem, inspired by the Six-Day War.\(^\text{12}\) It has augmented unisons—B-flat to B-sharp, and A-flat to A-sharp. There is a pentachord. It's arranged as a group of pentachords (ex. 4).

And you see, here it is used, that the mode is used—it begins with this note. It goes there to A. I write it simply here as A-sharp because
it's easier for them to sing, but it goes to A. It's free, chanting is the idea (ex. 5):

Contemporary music in Israel—before I answer this one, I want to tell you I feel, I guess other Israelis feel—those who stay here—a little bit like the Englishmen in England. They complain about the weather all the time. They complain about the fog, and the rains, but they stay there. All the same, they don't go abroad. Contemporary music in Israel is in a way a simple question and really not so simple. Because what do you call contemporary, what is composed now? There are several trends, many trends, but I think—what generation? Because there is Tal—working hard, composing operas, and he's seventy-five, yes. He always was a dodecaphonic composer, from the beginning. When he came to Israel he was already writing twelve-tone music, and then he wrote electronic music. And there is the middle generation, like Avni, and Orgad—Avni more than Orgad, because Orgad belongs to the former.

And there is the young generation, men and women of about thirty. And generally, I think, they all look at what is done abroad. To learn the latest. And they are afraid to be late, to miss it—to miss
the train and to miss the latest, what do you call it—the dernier cri [newest fashion]? And they don't understand that they are chronically late. Because when it comes here, it's already changed there. So they can't catch it, it's a train that always runs late. And when they catch the latest thing, it's already dead. But it's pretentious, it has pretensions to be modern and to be the latest fashion.

But there are musicians who are not impressed or influenced—I think Tal probably, because he developed his way as he developed, and now he enriches his work with new language or with new discoveries, and so on. Because he also stays in the mainstream. For myself, I never ran after anything. So I developed as I developed. I cannot see myself as a modern composer, because what I do is not classic, it's not romantic. I do what I feel, that's all. If I discover my way, like a way of working with different modes and material, and so on, it's my way.

There are even composers writing in a new Ben-Haim style, a renewed Ben-Haim style, and I don't know what for—what for? Maayani, he was a pupil of Ben-Haim. He still does this. I don't know why, I just don't know. Because you can't—you have to evolve, and evolution is personal. It is not that you learn different things. That's not evolution, it's the evolution of others or of general culture. But personal evolution is personal. I mean, what I write today, I could not write years ago. For instance, this one—today I would not write it. I feel it, but I feel it as an old idea. You have to evolve. But you can't evolve consciously. This is the problem. You can't say “I must evolve.” Very well, but how, how do you evolve? By using new tricks, by using tricks? It's not your evolution—evolution is personal. Composition is a personal thing. I didn't discover it—it's the truth. Absolute. You have to be yourself, and you have to evolve from yourself. There is no other who can do it for you. It's like love. Like life and like love.

The music of Mordecai Seter is frequently and widely performed. In April 1991, at a concert celebrating the composer's seventy-fifth birthday, Musica Nova performed the composer's Partita (1951) for violin and piano, Yemenite Diwan (1957) for nine players, Epigrams (1970) for flute and violoncello, and Piano Quartet No. 2 (1982), and gave premieres of Events (1974) for flute, clarinet, and bassoon, and Episode (1987) for piano. In recent years, Seter's works have been performed in Hungary, Germany, France, England, Lithuania, and the United States. Ensembles that have performed his music during
this period include Musica Nova, the Israel Sinfonietta Beer Sheva, the Israel Chamber Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (Zubin Mehta and Gary Bertini, conductors), and the National Choir Rinat. Ora Rotem has performed Seter's piano compositions on many occasions, and her interpretations of these works can be heard on two compact disk recordings issued in 1993 and 1995.