Twenty Israeli Composers
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Hanoch (originally Heinrich) Jacoby, a German-immigrant composer, conductor, teacher, and music administrator, performed for many years as a violist with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.¹ Philip Bohlman contends that as a composer, Jacoby “never fully adapted the Central European framework to the Israeli musical culture.”² The influence of Jacoby’s training was so evident in his harmonic language and use of conventional musical forms that friends suggested sending his music to Germany “to show the Germans how an Israeli preserved the German spirit of music.”³ Still, Jacoby sought to integrate his European musical heritage with the new environment of Israel, employing melodic materials he learned through his brief association with Bracha Zephira and later evoked in his own writing. Like many other Israeli composers, he employed modal melodies and inflections, as well as rhythmic formulas of the hora and other dances. But like his teacher, the German composer and musical theorist Paul Hindemith, Jacoby remained a polyphonist. He regarded his contrapuntal treatment of oriental melodies to be unique, and felt that the polyphonic potential of these melodies justified their treatment “like the Inventions of Bach.”⁴

I interviewed Hanoch Jacoby on July 1, 1986, at his home in Tel Aviv. He had ceased his activities as a composer nearly ten years earlier.⁵ This decision, as is evident from his remarks, was tied to
deeply felt emotions. I learned from Mrs. Alice Jacoby early in 1991 that the composer passed away on December 13, 1990.6

I was born in 1909 in a town that doesn't exist anymore. It was Königsberg in Prussia. It was once in East Prussia, in the northern part of Germany. Today it is Russia. In between is now Poland, then comes East Germany, West Germany—all has changed. Königsberg was destroyed in the Second World War. Today there is nobody there speaking German, no German people anymore—all in Siberia or fled to the West. It's a big town today, called Kaliningrad. It's a very important town from a strategic point of view. I left Germany in 1933 for Turkey. It was very nice there from the point of view of landscape. I liked Istanbul very much; it's one of the most beautiful cities I can imagine. But from the point of view of cultural life it was a disaster. One year in Turkey was absolutely enough. It was even too much. So when I came to Jerusalem, I felt at home. I came to Israel in 1934.

I became a member of the Jerusalem String Quartet, of which the first violinist was Emil Hauser. He was the first violinist of the first Budapest String Quartet, which he left in 1932. I heard his last concert in Frankfurt. I knew him only here in Israel; he was a very good musician. I was a member of the Jerusalem String Quartet for five years, until Hauser left for the States. I joined the Academy at the same time. In 1934 it was a very small institute, but there were some very important people on the staff.7

My early musical experience started at six years of age, when I started to play the violin. I composed already before this, but it was nothing worthwhile. I began composition lessons when I was fourteen or so. I studied with Hindemith for two and a half years at the Berlin Hochschule. I loved his music. In the last part of his life, he was very conservative, but I understood him very well. It was a reaction. Anyhow, I studied composition and viola. And for many years I was a violist, and played in different chamber music ensembles. When I left the Academy I went to the Philharmonic Orchestra, when I was fifty. It was really almost a wonder that they accepted me at this age.

First of all, I tried to find out the folklore. Then I started to write my own folklore, in the style of folklore. When I had found this style, it was not modern anymore. The hora and all these things were already forgotten in the fifties. I wrote still in this style, so I was always a little
bit late. Afterwards, but even before, I searched for Eastern oriental material. I was very interested in religious music and dance music, but mostly religious, cantillation. Also Arabic music, but mostly Yemenite, Iraq, Kurdistan. And one of my compositions, *Mutatio*, is a model.8 I'll tell you the whole story.

When I left the Philharmonic Orchestra, in retirement, I was engaged as a professor in the Haifa Technion. I was not really to teach, I was to compose a piece. I was artist-in-residence for the whole year. But that's not my style. I conducted the orchestra, I gave courses and played chamber music and did all things together. But the most important was to write a composition. Now the year before, I had a request from the Israel Music Institute to write music for three instruments—educational music, for violin pedagogy—on Jewish material. And I took this book from Haim Alexander, who did the research on that—two hundred different melodies in this book.9

So I took some ten or fifteen that I liked and I started to work them out for three instruments. You know, this music is all in principle for one voice, but I wanted to add Western ideas to this music. And I always work in a contrapuntal style. When I had all these melodies worked out, I looked them over and I was very disappointed that two of these melodies came out almost alike. I had not read the titles, because this was not important to me. When I looked over the book, I found that the two melodies had the same title. Now I compared them, and I found out that one was an Iraqi melody and the other Kurdistani, of the same prayer. I learned later that the words of the prayer were written in the thirteenth century. You see, Kurdistan, Iraq, Baghdad, are very close together. But the solution was absolutely different. One was a diatonic melody in major (ex. 1), and the other was a chromatic melody in minor (ex. 2). But the source was the same. And I was fascinated about the thing.

And when I came to Haifa, I had the idea in my head, I have to write a composition about these two melodies. All this was about twelve years ago. At the same time I conducted the orchestra in the *Art of the Fugue* of Bach. And when I played the chorale at the end, which doesn't belong to the *Art of the Fugue* but was added by his sons, suddenly I had the idea that these two melodies are based on a melody that doesn't exist anymore, but I had to find it. And I started my composition with a chorale prelude establishing this unknown melody. That was almost a musicological subject.
TWENTY ISRAELI COMPOSERS

Ex. 1

1) Kurdish - Vezin

Ex. 2

2) Be'gal - Vezin
It was written for the orchestra of the Technion, which was very special because it had one bassoon and four clarinets. I wrote it exactly for what I had. I’ll read you a program note:

*Mutatio* was commissioned by and dedicated to the Technion Symphony Orchestra, which performed it under the baton of its conductor, Dalia Atlas, on May 20, 1975. The dedication to a student orchestra meant, of course, that I had to take into account the limited technical standard of the players, and the fact that not all orchestral instruments were available, and certainly not in standard numbers. That is the reason for the odd orchestration I accepted, not as a limitation, but as a challenge.

*Mutatio* is certainly a piece of music looking to the past for inspiration. First of all, to the Jewish past. It was a chance musical and musicological experience that led me to compare two different versions of a medieval prayer for the new year, as sung today by the Jews of Kurdistan and Baghdad. There exist more versions of the same prayer, all recorded in Israel from Persian, Moroccan, Spanish, and Greek sources.10

By comparing the two aforementioned versions, I found out that they had the same melodic structure outline. This idea inspired me to the conception of a composition in three variation forms based on an unknown theme.

But *Mutatio* is not only looking at the Jewish past; it is looking back also to sources in the history of European polyphonic writing. All Near Eastern music is essentially one-line music, pure homophony,11 or heterophony, while all European music since about eight hundred years ago is essentially polyphonic. Israel is geographically and historically the ideal place to combine and unite the two contrasting principles in music. Polyphonic treatment, especially the use of free imitative counterpoint, adds new dimensions and depth to the expressive oriental, melodic line.

First, I searched for the basic unknown theme of the medieval prayer, as an archetype synthesis of the two different versions, in the way a baroque composer paraphrases in a chorale prelude. Afterwards I introduced the Kurdistan version once using stylistic trends of medieval tenor counterpoint and the second time in a soprano-oriented arrangement in later imitative style. These two sections form the first part, Andante.

Starting the second part is a variation of my own. It is constructed like the exposition of a sonata form Allegro, developing and contrasting different melodic and rhythmic motives of the basic theme, and
introducing free fugal counterpoint. As there is development in this variation, a sonata form development section is unnecessary. Instead appears the Baghdad variation, as a middle part in free imitative counterpoint.

The recapitulation of the sonata form variation follows, but in changed order, so that the fugal counterpoint section can be used as a countertheme to a fugato based on the Kurdistan version. To form the climax of the composition, a short exposition serves as a coda, corresponding to the coda of the first part. My own variation intends, of course, to express a synthesis of the style—elements of East and West—and serves as today’s commentary on the different and contrasting sources. *Mutatio*, as a whole, shows certainly where I stand in relation to Jewish ethnic music, to music of today, and to the music of Israel.¹²

I think this was printed for the performances of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. The piece was very often performed. The first performance was by the Technion Orchestra. Afterwards, it was performed by the Kol Israel Orchestra, and later it was performed very often by the Philharmonic, and in Holland, different places.

In recent years, I have not written very much. I'm fed up with contemporary music. My reaction is: if I must not write, then I will not write. If I explode, I will write. But at the moment I am very satisfied in playing chamber music. I have no complaints about the performing of my pieces. Everything I have written was performed, very often and very successfully. I always had success with the public, with the orchestras, and with the conductors. I can't stand it, the music of today. I'm not interested anymore. I don't go to concerts, I'm satisfied with the music I make myself. I almost don't hear any music.

You see, first of all, I was already angry with this Schoenberg style that was absolutely against my taste. Everybody tried it. And, you see, the serial music and all this stuff is based highly on what Schoenberg did to the music. I can't accept it. I compose tonally. I see dissonances as harmonic tensions that find their solution in relaxation, i.e., consonance. This effect of building tension through dissonance can occur only in tonal music, which in its planning provides for a direction of tension and subsequent relaxation. But this tension—and any tension, for that matter—quickly peters out, unless followed by planned relaxation. Anton Webern sensed the danger
of quickly dwindling tension, and therefore wrote very brief works, lasting only as long as the shock effect holds, and before tension can dwindle they are over.

The tonal conception of a work is the basis for its formal structure. This factor is much stronger than the building of rhythm or melodic motifs. There are some basic types of form that depend on tonality as an acoustical fact in the same manner as architecture is based on the laws of gravity. Atonal music can be compared to architecture that dispenses with gravity.

I feel an inner need to express the tensions that exist inside me, and those that exist in relation to the world I live in. These tensions are simply human and should be reflected in my music. Intentionally writing “modern” seems to me as merely following a current “mode” or fashion. At a time as progressive as ours, there is only one way to be progressive: to appear to be reactionary, and not to follow any fashion.]

Josef Tal went in a direction I never understood. I worked with Partos when he started to base his works on Jewish music. We even worked together. But I soon saw that what he did was absolutely different from my conception. I didn’t follow. I accept it, I understand it, but my way always was to adopt the oriental style and to make it Western by counterpoint.

Partos started with Bartók, and then he was really good. He got into his illusions with the dodecaphonic system. I would say Ben-Haim, Avidom, that was the Mediterranean style—Boskovitch partly. I didn’t feel a part of that at all, I was always alone. Maybe in the following generation, Yehezkel Braun is somebody who is going a little bit the way I tried. And then there was a kibbutz composer, [Theodor] Holdheim. He died two years ago. He was also going a little bit in my way, but that was the next generation. I was alone in my generation.

Jacoby’s music is heard regularly in Israel and abroad. His composition for chamber orchestra, *King David’s Lyre* (1948), was performed by the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra in 1990 and by the Symphonette Orchestra Raanana in 1993. A memorial concert presented in 1991 by Jacoby’s pupils and colleagues included the composer’s *Little Suite* (1941), which received additional performances in 1993 by the
Yad Harif Orchestra and the Aviv Chamber Orchestra, and in 1994 by the Ashdod Chamber Orchestra. In 1992, Jacoby's Seven Miniatures for piano (1944) was performed during the 27th Brno, Czechoslovakia, International Music Festival. A performance of King David's Lyre was also given in September 1995 in Prague.
Josef Tal, photographed by Herlinde Koelbl. Used with permission.