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Paul Ben Haim: Western–Eastern Allusions

ABSTRACT

Background

He is considered to be a founding figure in Israeli Art Music, Paul Ben Haim immigrated from Nazi Germany to British Mandatory Palestine (Israel) in 1933, where he championed the consolidation of the Idiosyncratic Mediterranean (Israeli) musical style. Ben-Haim's work, much in accordance with the Mediterranean style as a whole, is a unique composite between the local Mediterranean topography which reflects his Jewish identity and between compositional techniques echoing and revealing his more formal German — Western heritage. As such, his work is constructed from the welding of different Middle — Eastern elements alongside Western and German post — romantic techniques of writing — as our shown, in this paper, by Mahlers' influence on Ben — Haim.

Palestine, during the 1920s and 1930s saw an ever growing influx of immigrants arriving to the country. Aestheticians and artists in Palestine called for the establishment of a national style that I will characterize the resurgence of Jewish people in their national home.

In music, the establishment of a national style was apparent by Composers' use of musical significations and devices. Many of them can be found in Ben Haim's music: for example, one of the most often used musical symbols, or motifs in Ben Haim's work consists of the intervals of the second and the third.

It can be seen clearly in the Ben Haim's last written piece in Nazi Germany — the 'Joram' Oratorio (1933) (see Example 8), but also in later Israeli works, such as in the 'Five Piano Pieces' (1943), or in the 'Sweet Psalmist of Israel' (1953).



Ex. 1. 'Psalmody Motif', in Ben Haim's 5 Piano Pieces (1943).

In my wider study of Ben Haim's music (see Gurkiewicz 2016) it becomes clear that the later Israeli works unfold in melismatic guise the full pentatonic scale from which this motif is derived in this earlier work. Hirshberg refers to it as the Psalmody motif (Hirshberg 2010, 93) since it is derived from the ancient Gregorian intonation of Psalms (Example 1). It came about through two different plausible channels of influence.

It was Zvi Idelsohn who stressed the relationship between early western music and Jewish music (Idelsohn 1924, 58). Ben Haim emphasized Idelsohn's influence on him. (Ben Haim 1972, 197).

But the same motif can also be found in Mahlers' 1909 'Das Lied von der Erde'. De la Grange, describes this motif — upon its different permutations — as the basic thematic nucleus cell

from which the entire cycle stems (Henry-Louis de La Grange, <<https://web.archive.org>>, accessed 06/06/2023). It can be seen in in the first movement — 'Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde' (see tact 40). Except that in this case it is a second and a third in a downward motion. Mahler had a lifelong influence on Ben Haim and it was already in Germany that Ben haim was acquainted and impressed with 'Das lied von der Erde' (Ben Haim interview, 1975).

Second Israeli Motifs in Ben Haim's music is the 'Turn Motif': it is consistent in Ben Haim's works — one example of many can be seen in 'To the Chief Musician' (1958). As mentioned, it has dual connotations: Western and Eastern. The contour of the motif is also congruent with biblical cantillation — similar, however not identical (Example 2).



Ex. 2. Ben Haim, 'To the chief Musician', ('Turn Motif').



Ex. 3. Biblical Cantillation: 'Talisha Ktana', (JewishEncyclopedia.com), p. 544.

This turn motif is practically identical to the one in Mahlers' 'Der Abschied', from 'Das lied von der Erde' (bars 1–6). But Mahler too was here depicting non — western connotations, and this might have been Ben Haim's point of interest.

The third Israeli motif will be here termed as the 'downward step motion'. It virtually appears in each of Ben Haim's works — to a predominant level (see above, 'Chief musician', bar 2).

Again, it has two different possible channels of influence — Middle Eastern affinities. One of the better known Hebrew folk songs at the time was 'Cannan my Homeland' (<www.zemereshet.co.il>, accessed 06/06/2023). It is actually a Bedouin theme appropriated as Israeli, and like many Arab themes relies on this form of ornamentation (Example 4).



Ex. 4. Israeli Bedouin folk theme: 'Cannan my Homeland'. Full transcription see <zemereshet.com>, accessed 06/06/2023.

But Ben Haim relies on this motif even before his immigration, in the Joram Oratorio. (It is unlikely he knew the song

prior to his immigration.) It also appears in Mahler's lied (Example 5) 'Ging heut morgens über Feld' (1885).



Ex. 5. Mahler, 'Ging heut morgens über Feld' (1885).

This suggests a crystallization of influences derived from an ideology of Jewish identity.

Harmonic — Israeli devices in Ben — Haim's music: Tonal ambiguity is another device that Ben Haim consistently relies on — modal thirds are a good example of that —, a technique that becomes quiet apparent already in the Second Symphony from 1945 (Example 6). One of its manifestations is in the motto theme for the fourth movement which relies on such modal thirds or alternating thirds.



Ex. 6. Ben Haim, 'Symphony 2', Theme: Mov. IV.

Jehoash Hirshberg explains, such alteration of thirds characterize important Hebrew folk songs, such as 'Gamal, Gamali' — 'Camel my Camel', (Hirshberg 2010, 223) from 1927 by Yedidya Gorochoy Admon, or the flute song by Mordechai Zeira. Both are considered to be important examples of the early Hebrew folk song. And we can see it in the following example: 'My Camel' is actually in C minor. And notice the duality of E \flat and E natural (Example 7).



Ex. 7. Gorochoy Admon: 'Gamal Gamali' ('Camel my Camel'), alteration of thirds. (full transcription of the song, see Hirshberg and Shumeli 1995, 123).

It is also interesting to mention that Arabic musics also have similar attributes with the Neutral third. This was Ben Haim's intention for the use of this principle.

A similar idea is expressed in Ben Haim's to the chief musician — C–B–A; C–B \flat –A; C–B–A \flat) (see Example 2), except that the dimensions are expanded.

Harmony of the fourth and the fourth as a nucleus cell: it is another important example of the Duality that exists in Israeli music.

Eastern – Western connotations: Ben Haim's interest in this interval stemmed from his interest in musical archaism, and the belief for a relationship between Gregorian music and early Hebrew music (Gurkiewicz 2013, 118–9).

The fourth has an important role in 20th century music — in Debussy or Hindemith. Both had a major influence on Ben Haim. So it is a myriad of influences.

Ben Haim relies on this technique already in the Joram Oratorio in 1933: notice that the opening phrase is a construction of fourths: C \sharp –F \sharp –B–E–A. following see the retrograde inversion of it in the F clef: E–B–F \sharp –C \sharp .



Ex. 8. Ben Haim, 'Joram' Oratorio', Vorspiel bar 1–7.

Ben-Haim's treatment of the fourth is similarly developed in the later Israeli works as it appears in a decorated melismatic nucleus cell from which the work is constructed. Notice the Fourth in this phrase from the 1953, 'Sweet Psalmist': F–B \flat –E \flat . Clearly, the later Israeli works are much more melismatic in nature (Example 9).



Ex. 9. Ben Haim, 'Sweet Psalmist of Israel', Mov III, Bars 181–2.

In conclusion, Israeli music is an amalgamation of western and eastern traditions — and Ben Haim's music clearly reflects that.

I have demonstrated both western and eastern devices in Ben Haim's music and how they coexist at the same time. I have shown how some of these devices develop in a linear chronological line to form Ben Haim's syntax.

Identifying and describing the characteristic of Ben Haim's style is indeed important — not only in order to better understand his music, but also in order to better understand Israeli Art Music — owing to his influential position. This paper will also allow for a future better understanding of his contemporaries such as Mark Lavry or Meanchem Avidom. But also his students such as Noam Sheriff, Ami Maayani, Tsvi Avni, and many others.

Israeli art music is a vast and rich canvas mostly understudied. This paper suggests a mapping out of some aspects in the work of Ben Haim — A founding figure in Israel's Art Music.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

My paper examines motivic and harmonic relations in Ben Haim's music; it shows the imbedding of Western and Eastern influences — congruent with each other. I reference the *Joram Oratorio*; *Five Piano Pieces*; *Symphony No. 1*; *Symphony No. 2*; *The Sweet Psalmist of Israel*, *To the chief musician* (1958); Gustav Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*. I describe how the later works' show a greater level of development.

Methods

I rely on a traditional analytical method: one that does not digress too far off Jan LaRues' method for style analysis. I discuss some of Ben-Haim's specific choice of motifs and harmonic procedures.

Implications

This lecture will shed light on the unique melting pot of cultures that formed in Israel (Palestine) during the 1930s. It shows how Middle Eastern and Western techniques of writing were coalesced and imbedded in Ben-Haim's work — all the more important owing to his influential position as a founding figure.

Keywords

Israeli Art Music, Music Analysis and Cultural Studies, Traditional Music, Style, Modality, Instrumentation.

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