



Musical Life in Israel

Samuel Lewis

The land area of the State of Israel (8,019 square miles) would fit over eleven times into the area of the United Kingdom and with a population of 7,881,000 (similar to Switzerland), 75% are Jewish, 20% are Arabs, and those not identified as either, make up the remaining 5% of the population. In this small area today, one can find four full time professional symphony orchestras (one of them world renowned), three excellent professional chamber orchestras, an international opera house, a classical ballet company, three contemporary dance companies as well as many fine classical and modern ensembles. In the cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beer-Sheva and Ramat Gan there are universities with music departments that are growing rapidly. The Ministry of Education supports 41 conservatories in towns throughout the country that offer programmes for all age groups.

It was in 1882 that efforts were first made to create a corpus of music suitable for a new Jewish entity that would eventually become Israel. This was the year when the first wave of immigrants came to build a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. As there were no songs or music as yet written for this national movement, Zionist youth movements in Germany and elsewhere published song books, using

traditional folk melodies with new words written in the Hebrew language. An example of this is the song that became Israel's National Anthem "Hatikvah". The words by the Hebrew poet Naftali Herz Imber, express the longing of the Jewish people to return to the land of Zion. The melody is based on a popular Eastern European folk melody – not to be mistaken for Smetana's "Vltava". In 1895 settlers established the first western style orchestra in Palestine. It was a wind band located in the town of Rishon LeZion and entertained its listeners with light classics and marches.

Avraham Zvi Idelsohn, a trained cantor and musicologist from Russia settled in Jerusalem in 1906 with the objective of studying and documenting the music of the various Jewish communities of Yemenites, Hassids, Syrians and other ethnic groups living there. He meticulously documented the songs and musical idioms of these groups and made the first efforts to bring these songs to the attention of all the settlers aiming to create a new Jewish musical genre. Idelsohn was later joined in Palestine by a few more classically trained musicians and ethnomusicologists who worked to disseminate traditional ethnic tunes and styles to the general public of Palestine.

It was in the 1930s and the rise of Nazism in Europe that forced Jewish

musicians to leave their homelands and many of these musicians came to what was then still Palestine. The immigration consisted of some of the leading classical musicians of Europe including the concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, the composer Oedoen Partos, opera conductor and composer Paul Ben-Haim and composer Alexander Boskovitz. Just as writers of popular music sought a new Hebrew style, many classical composers looked for new modes of composition that would give expression to their new national identity. "One cannot continue in this country writing works which are based on purely western concepts" wrote music critic David Rosolio. "The landscape, the lifestyle, the environment, all require a change and fundamentally different approach". Boskovitz in his "Semitic Suite" for piano writes in a homophonic style with a drone accompaniment and repeated notes, imitating the sound of the Arabic oud and kanun. Ben-Haim wrote "Sonata A Tre" for cembalo, mandolin and guitar, which also has a distinctly Middle Eastern sound.

By 1935, Jewish musicians in Nazi Germany were faced with dismissal, persecution and expulsion. To meet the pressing need to rescue these musicians, concert violinist Bronislaw Huberman decided to form a symphony orchestra in Palestine – both as a safe haven and as a unique musical endeavour. Huberman recruited Jewish musicians from Europe's leading orchestras and the newly formed Palestine Philharmonic Orchestra made its debut in Tel Aviv in December 1936 under the baton of Arturo Toscanini who was one of several conductors who refused to perform under German or Italian Fascism. Re-named the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra in 1948, it has become a leading force in Israeli music and culture. Debuting many works by Israeli composers, it has





also helped launch the careers of numerous Israeli musicians. It was in December 1960 that the Israel Philharmonic embarked on its first tour of the United States and has since played a number of concerts that have had historic significance for Israel. In 1967, immediately after the Six Day War, the late Leonard Bernstein led the orchestra on a tour to the Sinai desert, the sight of fighting only days before. They also performed on the Lebanese border in the 1980s playing to an audience of mixed Lebanese and Israelis who gathered on both sides of the border fence to listen. Zubin Mehta who has been the Musical Director of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra for over 40 years is now the IPO's conductor for life. Regularly, the orchestra travels the globe appearing at the most prestigious festivals and venues, and Maestro Mehta ensures that the world's leading conductors and soloists are invited to work with his orchestra. The IPO's permanent home is the Frederic Mann Auditorium in the centre of Tel Aviv which was opened in 1957 when Leonard Bernstein conducted the inaugural concert with Arthur Rubinstein as soloist. The stage is equipped with a hydraulic lift which raises and lowers the piano on and off the concert platform and each one of the 2,760 seats offers a full and clear view of the stage. The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra is "self governing", the General Secretary is Avi Shoshani and it enjoys the support of 26,000 subscribers in Israel as well as many "Friends of the Orchestra" throughout the world.

The Six Day War in June 1967 marked an important turning point in Israeli culture. In the words of Viennese born historian Amos (Sternbach) Alon who emigrated to Mandate Palestine in 1933, "Because of the Six Day War of 1967, the people of Israel came of age. It marked the transition from adolescence to maturity". The period

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after the war saw a burgeoning of cultural activity. Within a few years the number of art galleries increased by a third and theatres doubled. Economic growth went from 1% per annum before the war to 13% the following year. The Israeli music scene opened up to the rest of the world. Rock music, which prior to the war had almost no audience was hardly ever play-



Henry Crown Hall

ed on the State Radio. Israeli musicians began to perform abroad with increasing frequency and European and American artists came to Israel to perform. All the latest popular Broadway Musicals with their songs and words translated into the modern Hebrew language were staged at the Alhambra Theatre in Tel Aviv-Jaffo. In this growth of diversification, much Israeli music lost its national flavour and became largely inspired by international styles. Nonetheless, many Israeli musicians, both classical and popular, continued to be concerned with defining a distinctly national identity in their music. Although geographically not in Europe, Israel is within the European Broadcasting Area and a member of the European Broadcasting Union. ACUM (the equivalent to the Performing Rights Society in the United Kingdom) represents the interests of Israeli composers, authors and artists.

Jerusalem, Israel's capital with a population of over three quarters of a million is home to Israel's largest auditorium, the Ussishkin Auditorium at the International Conference Centre with 3,000 seats. When the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra pays their monthly visit to the capital, they perform at this very large venue. The Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, which in fact is Israel's Radio Orchestra, performs weekly at the 850 seat Henry Crown Hall and all their concerts are relayed "live" to the nation on Israel Radio's "Voice of Music" station. Their present musical director is the French conductor Frederic Chaslin who shares the podium with guest conductors from both Israel and abroad. Cantorial and liturgical music is programmed for both the Jewish Festivals as well as for the Easter and Christmas period. Jerusalem of course is home to many different ethnic groups comprising of a large Arab community and the Ultra Orthodox Jewish (Hasidim) comm- ▶

Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center



unity so an effort is made to please as many as possible. The Israel Camerata Jerusalem, an outstanding chamber orchestra, is one of Jerusalem's jewels with a very fine international reputation. It was founded in 1983 by Avner Biron who has been its musical director and permanent conductor ever since. They give more than a hundred concerts a year both in Israel and abroad and their repertoire ranges from Baroque to Contemporary Music. John Tavener was recently commissioned to write his "Prayer for Jerusalem" for the Camerata. In Tavener's words, "My Prayer for Jerusalem is an Invocation to the one God of Islam, Judaism and Christianity – Allah, Adonai, Kyrie". There are two other very important musical institutions in Israel's capital city that must be mentioned. They are the Jerusalem Academy of Music & Dance which is situated on the campus of the Hebrew University and the Jerusalem Music Centre. Since its opening in 1973, The Jerusalem Music Centre (whose president is the pianist Murray Perahia) has been providing music education to communities all over Israel with the services of a world-class national resource centre, dedicated to encouraging the country's finest talents, bridging the distance between Israel and the rest of the music world, and initiating and implementing much needed programmes and projects that the education and culture establishment cannot provide. The JMC operates to some extent as a laboratory. Free from the rule of rating and bureaucracy, they can afford to explore and experiment. But at the same time they cooperate regularly with practically all the leading organisations of music and music education in Israel – the Music Academies, Orchestras, the Israeli Opera and the Ministry of Education & Culture. They pay special attention to areas of music that are neglected or marginalised by mainstream

establishments: a-cappella choirs, Arabic music and early music.

The story and history of Opera in Israel began in 1923 when a Russian "opera buff" from Moscow named Mordechai Golinkin arrived in Palestine. His ambition was to create an opera company in pre-state Israel and in the same year he arrived, succeeded in putting together a group of singers for a performance of Verdi's *La Traviata*. As no opera house was in existence at that time in Tel Aviv and which was still partly sand dunes, Golinkin's Palestine Opera had to perform on the small stage of a cinema accompanied by an old Bechstein upright. In 1940, the composer Marc Lavry and conductor George Singer established the Palestine Folk Opera and by 1945 they had succeeded in staging sixteen productions, among them the first opera ever to be written in the Hebrew language, *Dan the Guard* by Marc Lavry. A major change came in 1945 when American soprano Edis de Philippe came to make her home in pre-state Israel. She built her very own company which was to become in 1948 the Israel National Opera. De Philippe's company performed nightly all over the country in halls large and small, good and bad – as long as the public could have the opportunity of listening to, in her words, "The Wonderful World of Opera". Her company was so successful that she was able to attract young and rising international stars to spend time working for her. One Spanish tenor spent three years here in the 1960s. It was in Tel Aviv that he learned the basic tenor repertoire before embarking on an outstanding international career. His name? ... Placido Domingo. Tel Aviv today now has a state-of-the-art opera house at the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center which opened in 1994. Led by General Director Hanna Munitz and its Artistic Administrator Michael Ajzenstadt, it now enjoys the support of almost 20,000 subscribers and mounts an average of nine productions each season featuring great artists from all over the world together with leading Israeli artists. All Israeli Opera productions are sung in their original language with Hebrew and English surtitles. The present musical director of the Israeli Opera is David Stern, the son of the late violin virtuoso Isaac Stern. Daniel Oren, one of Israel's most successful international opera conductors is a regular



and most welcome guest conductor. This coming season 2012-2013, their repertoire includes Berg's *Wozzeck*, Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. Moscow's Bolshoi Opera with its Soloists, Orchestra & Chorus will be coming to Israel for the first time in 2013 to give twelve performances of Tchaikovsky's *Yevgeni Onegin*. The Israeli Opera's resident orchestra, the Israel Symphony Orchestra also give a series of symphony concerts both at the Tel Aviv Opera House and at the Municipal Auditorium in the city of Rishon LeZion, their home base.

The question of staging a Wagner opera or performing his music in Israel arises time and time again. The public is able to purchase CDs, DVDs and can subscribe to the French Culture TV Channel "Mezzo" that regularly relays Wagner's music. The Israeli Opera does not plan to stage any Wagner works at this present moment of time. One must understand that there are still people living today in Israel who managed to survive the Nazi Holocaust but who have both vivid and horrific memories of having to listen to his music while their kith and kin were being murdered. But Richard Strauss's music is now regularly performed and broadcast today. Strauss was head of the German State Music Bureau for several years under the Third Reich but it was later revealed that he detested the Nazis and only conformed to help protect his Jewish daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

To anyone reading this article who has heard the following "joke" before, I do beg your indulgence but I simply can't resist repeating it. The year is 1990 and the scene is Ben-Gurion International Airport near Tel Aviv after yet another plane has just landed from the former Soviet Union. As the passengers disembark from the aircraft onto the tarmac, a member of the

airport ground staff shouts to his fellow workers:- "Look lads, that chap over there must be a pianist. He's not carrying a violin or a cello case". The statistics aren't that one-sided, but they are striking. Of the 600,000 Russians who have come to live in Israel since 1989, 3% described themselves as artists and 65% said they were musicians. They did not enter into an entirely alien system, because in Israel the Government is the main agency that helps émigré musicians find jobs. About 500 Russian musicians have been placed in orchestras by the Absorption Ministry and the Ministry of Arts & Culture, 350 were placed in semi-professional ensembles and 800, after attending the government's intensive Hebrew language schools called "Ulpanim", were given music teaching posts. These are indeed large numbers for such a small population. The reason why so many chose to immigrate to Israel is because the United States changed its policy of treating Soviet Jews as refugees and allowing unlimited immigration, whereas Israel was willing to receive them unconditionally. Until the United States closed their gates in the 1980s, some 600,000 Soviet Jews immigrated there.

The Israel Chamber Orchestra which is based in Tel Aviv-Jaffo is primarily funded by the Tel Aviv Municipality and the Ministry of Education. Founded back in 1965, the late Romanian born conductor Gary Bertini was its musical director for ten years. Since Bertini's death, Luciano Berio, Rudolf Barshai, Yoav Talmi, Noam Sheriff and Shlomo Mintz have all led the orchestra. Philippe Entremont, the French pianist/conductor was musical director from 1995 to 1998 and remains the ICO's conductor laureate. Italy's Roberto Paternostro is now the ICO's musical advisor and chief conductor. Many of the ICO musicians are Israeli born and are joined by some fine instrumentalists who left the former Soviet Union in the 90s.

The Israel Contemporary Players was established in 1991 with the aim of performing the best 20th century classical chamber ensemble repertoire – most of which had never been performed in Israel before. The Artistic Director is the Israeli composer Dan Yuhas and the Hungarian, Zolt Nagy is its chief conductor. The ensemble regularly commissions works from Israeli composers and perform monthly both at the Tel Aviv Museum of

Art and the Jerusalem Music Center. Their coming season 2012-2013 repertoire includes works by Gyorgy Ligeti, Benedict Mason, John Cage and the Israeli composer Benjamin Yusupov. Hateiva (the Center for Electronic and Digital Art) is yet another very successful project of Dan Yuhas where composers can collaborate with technologists and work with the latest electronic equipment. It also brings together different kinds of artists and composers from all over the world. Workshops in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaborations including music, video art, and dance have established connections with important studios abroad such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris as well as studios in the Netherlands and Germany. Today, Hateiva also serves as a meeting place for different media and has a small concert hall where young composers and performers are given a chance to perform. Many young musicians and composers who return to Israel after studies overseas have a possibility to perform there and the opportunity to reconnect to musical life in Israel. The space serves also as a "laboratory" for young choreographers and composers who can work together to create new works. This is the only place in Israel where such conditions prevail.

An orchestra that was also created in 1991 as part of the programme designed to assist with the absorption of immigrant artists is the Raanana Symphonette Orchestra. Co-sponsored by the Raanana Municipality and the various government departments dealing with immigration and also very fortunate to have Orit Fogel, a first class manageress at the helm, the

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orchestra boasts 46 musicians of which two thirds are immigrants from the former Soviet Union together with young musicians who have fulfilled their compulsory military services in the orchestras of the Israel Defence Forces. In common with most orchestras throughout the world today, it is not unusual for an orchestra to give a serious classical concert one day and the following day to accompany a visiting "Pop" star on TV. Their musical director is one of Israel's outstanding young conductors Omer Wellber who shares his time with orchestras both in Florence and Valencia.

No story about Israel would be complete without mentioning the word 'Kibbutz' but I'm afraid it would require every page of the magazine *Musical Opinion* to tell the whole history. The word 'Kibbutz' means gathering (or clustering) and the word 'Kibbutzim' is the plural. It is a collective community in Israel that was traditionally based on agriculture but today, farming has been partly supplanted by other economic branches including industrial plants and hi-tech enterprises. Kibbutzim began as utopian communities, a combination of socialism and Zionism, but in recent decades the Kibbutzim have been privatized and enormous changes have been made in their communal lifestyle. It is estimated that today there are approximately 210 Kibbutzim in Israel. The Kibbutz movement also has its "musical life". It has its own orchestra, choirs and dance companies (both classical and contemporary) and many of Israel's composers, musicians, dancers, singers and writers were born and grew up on Kibbutzim. The Kibbutz Artzi (National) Choir was founded in 1958 and has earned a reputation as one of the finest choirs in Israel. Its members, selected from Kibbutzim throughout the country meet for intensive weekly rehearsals and not only perform with the Israel Kibbutz Orchestra but are invited by the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and all other orchestras when choral works are programmed. Since 1990, Yuval Ben-Ozer has been their Musical Director and their outstanding a-capella performances have taken them all over the world. To compete with the many fine orchestras in today's music scene, the Kibbutz Orchestra has been obliged to also "commercialise" and now engages top professional musicians who are not members of the Kibbutz ▶

Tel Aviv Opera House



with conductor Valerie Gergiev regularly spend the New Year at the Red Sea International Music Festival. They obviously much prefer the warm temperature in Eilat as opposed to their below zero home base of St. Petersburg.

Two prestigious International Competitions take place triennially. They are the Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition and the International Harp Contest. Young artists come from all over the world to participate before a renowned board of jurists. The winner of the most recent piano competition was the 21-year old Russian Daniil Trifonov. As a result, he can already be seen seated at the piano in front of the world's greatest orchestras.

movement. This year, the City of Netanya took them under its wing and thus it has been renamed the Netanya Kibbutz Orchestra. They perform regularly to audiences large and small in Kibbutzim throughout the country under their conductor Yaron Gottfried.

Israeli society not only celebrates religious festivals. The Israel Festival takes place annually for three weeks during the month of June in Jerusalem. Dance groups, classical and popular ensembles and solo performers are invited to appear in Jerusalem's theatres and public parks to entertain both adults and children. During the month of September, the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival takes place with various ensembles performing nightly. The Musical Director is the pianist Elena Bashkirova (a.k.a. Mrs. Daniel Barenboim) and this year their violinist son Michael will be joining her. All these concerts are broadcast "live" on Israel Radio. Masada, the ancient fortress built by King Herod the Great atop a lofty natural plateau overlooking the Dead Sea has become a most popular venue for festive occasions, opera performances and concerts during the summer months and it can accommodate a seated audience of over seven thousand. Yet another both historic and festive concert venue is the 6,500 seat Caesarea amphitheatre built 2,000 years ago. In the southern city of Eilat on the banks of the Red Sea, the Mariinsky Theatre and Orchestra together

Finally, I would like to tell you about an orchestra in the beautiful port city of Haifa in the North of the country. The Haifa Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1950 by a group of mostly German refugees. In the late 50s many Romanians took the opportunity of escaping communism to make their home here and this wave of immigration included the conductor Sergiu Comissiona. He left his position as Musical Director of Bucharest's "Romanian National Opera House" and upon his arrival in Israel was appointed the conductor of the Haifa Symphony Orchestra. Many excellent Romanian musicians were absorbed into the HSO which quickly acquired a fine reputation in the musical life of Israel. But in 1968 Comissiona was attracted to the "green pastures" of the United States where he had the opportunity of building a fine international career for himself. Back in 1960, I first visited Israel as a member of the viola section of the London Symphony Orchestra. We were on a 14 day concert tour conducted by Antal Dorati and performed in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. During our three day stay in Haifa I befriended the leader of the HSO and, as I had a free morning, was invited to join his quartet to play Mozart Quintets at his home. We remained in contact thereafter. After seven years with the LSO, I became involved in London's theatre world and also managed the orchestras of a chain of large theatres throughout the United Kingdom which had

not "yet" become Bingo Halls. In the early 70s, the Haifa Symphony Orchestra invited me to manage their orchestra which had sadly hit a bad patch. At my first meeting with its board of directors, I told these gentlemen loud and clear that the simple solution (but not so simple to be honest) to the orchestra's problems was to look for a star conductor. I got news that the conductor of the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra, Yuri Ahronovitch was in Vienna having defected from the Soviet Union after a European tour and, with the help of a former member of the Moscow Radio Orchestra now living in Israel, was able to make contact with him and thus was able to promote his first appearance in Israel. I will never forget his first rehearsal when, within minutes, he made the HSO play Beethoven's *Coriolan* Overture the way Beethoven would surely have wished. The programme for his Israel and Haifa debut included a Bach violin concerto brilliantly played by a 13-year old boy named Shlomo Mintz and Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony which left the Haifa audience spellbound. To be fair, Yuri warned me that he was looking for a European orchestra and as expected, he certainly found one. But at least he did make his permanent home in Israel and took citizenship. I am delighted to say that today the City of Haifa has a beautiful modern auditorium and indeed very fine orchestra. All thanks must go to their musical director and principal conductor Noam Sheriff, undoubtedly one of Israel's finest living composers and conductors. ■

London born Samuel Lewis, a founding member in 1951 of the London Schools Symphony Orchestra was a violin pupil of Neville Marriner at the Royal College of Music. After National Service with the Royal Artillery Orchestra, Woolwich having switched to viola, played for seven years in the London Symphony Orchestra during which time he also attended the Guildhall School of Music conducting class. Having conducted West End musicals for five years, he decided on a career in management. Today, Samuel Lewis represents in Israel most of the world's great music publishers.