

Report COZ 3, 7 July 2020 Jehoash Hirshberg and Tzvi Avni by Malcolm Miller

	<p style="text-align: center;">Tuesday 07 July 2020</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Prof Jehoash Hirshberg Emeritus professor at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Major fields opera, Israeli Art Music,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Israeli Composer Tzvi Avni One of Israel's most prominent composers and a Professor Emeritus of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance</p> <p style="text-align: center;">They will look at Tzvi Avni's (b 1927) long creative career with examples of his music</p>	
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A very special and even historic 'Conversation on Zoom' (COZ) took place on 7 July 2020, featured two leading experts and exponents of modern Israeli music, the eminent author and scholar Professor **Jehoash Hirshberg** and the distinguished award-winning composer **Tzvi Avni**, together with Israeli musicologists Dr. **Rakefet Bar-Sadeh**, Dr. **Yossi Goldenberg** and Dr. **Liron Gurkiewicz**.

The event, organised by the recently formed International Forum for Jewish Music Studies co-hosted by Professors **Mark Kligman** (UCLA) and **Sarah Ross** (European Centre for Jewish Music, Hannover University), attracted some sixty 'zoom' participants from all over the world, including many scholars, composers, performers, colleagues and friends. As Tzvi Avni, now 93, observed during the session, focused listening to contemporary music is not an everyday event. Indeed, the special occasion here, as Hirshberg explained, was the immanent publication of a new multi-author book about Avni, the manuscript for which he had just handed to the publishers with contributions by the scholars mentioned above, from whom we would later hear.

Jehoash Hirshberg's excellently clear presentation tracked Avni's life and career through a choice selection of extracts of works shared to all courtesy of zoom, interlaced with Avni's own spontaneous commentary about the music and context. He began with a whistlestop tour of the history of Israeli art music, from the émigré generation of the 1930s to the generation of Avni, who came as a child from Germany in 1935 and who studied with Abel Ehrlich, Paul Ben-Haim, and at Tel-Aviv University with Mordecai Seter. To illustrate the first Israeli period, we heard a movement of the Wind Quintet (1959), delightfully artful and interlaced with middle-easternisms, melismatic ornaments and rhythmic syncopations. It is a work which has achieved great popularity, and which received a superb UK premiere in 2009 at the Purcell Room by the London Myriad Quintet, who won the 2008 Israeli Music Competition held in London, organised by Sagi Hartov (<http://www.mvdaily.com/articles/2009/12/jmi.htm>).

Avni's trip to the USA in the 1960s brought a radical style change as a result of exposure to the avant garde. Avni described the sense of emerging from a fairly isolated musical culture in Israel to the New York scene, where he stayed in 1962 with his late wife Pnina,

and the excitement of hearing Stockhausen and Boulez, and electronic music, and his meetings with Copland in Tanglewood in 1963 and 1965. To illustrate the period we heard *Meditations on a Drama* (1966), which Hirshberg introduced with listening guide, outlining the narrative of dramatic confrontations, from the initial drum stroke through textural contrasts culminating with an extended sustained pitch which he noted, suggested a shofar, a Jewish element. It was an aspect one would have liked to explore further, in relation to the ability to balance different stylistic tendencies and identities.

As a further example of the synthesis of Israeli and contemporary styles, we heard *Mizmor* (1988), an eight-minute work which features **Persian Santur with western orchestra**, commissioned by the Israeli Radio (IBA) and written for the santurist Menashe Sasson. Avni explained how they decided together on a 'modus' to suit Sasson's particular requirements. The work opens with a middle eastern improvised taksim leading to Sasson's own aleatoric cadenza, leading to a final rhythmic dance section, also with its own improvised cadenza. (2013 Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5a84ZLilws>)

One noticed in *Mizmor* a radical **synthesis between a Modernist serial idiom** with more modal oriental element, grace notes in flutes, dovetailing between brass and santur, all of which made the synthesis of elements even more compelling. Sasson's cadenza opened with brooding meditations on semitonal motifs yet expanded into virtuoso textures, spanning the entire range of the instrument, with some polyphonic effects and doublings. One wondered whether the cadenzas would be different each time, and how; to what extent were Sasson's use of registral extremes idiomatic in Santur music, and were there specific Persian elements at play, even if, as Avni stressed, there were no direct quotations at all. As Hirshberg emphasised, *Mizmor* represented a true meeting place for the East in Israeli music.

One of the contributors to the new Avni book, **Dr. Rakefet Bar-Sadeh**, highlighted the importance of kibbutz choirs in Israeli music, and the many settings of biblical texts including Psalms in the development of Israeli music, as part of a culture based on revival of Hebrew. What were **Avni's motivation and approach for his choral settings**, she asked? Avni responded by underlining the musicality of Biblical texts, for instance the evocative opening verses of 'Bereshit' (Genesis), and especially the Psalm texts, their rhythms embedded within the text, which accounted for the attraction for composers. We heard an example of this in his setting of 'Kol ha'amim tiku Kaf' (O clap your hands, all people), in a recording conducted by Avner Itai, a work which Hirshberg observed utilizes the choral textures in an almost percussive way. Indeed the work is full of syncopation, and arresting textural contrasts, bursting forth after the single line sectional phrases into a fully harmonized chordal texture, again contrasted with lively imitations at the words 'Sapru Lelohim'. I wondered what exactly were the choral influences on to Avni's work.

One of the surprises for me was to learn of Tzvi Avni's **early talent as an artist**, as shown in his paintings from the 1940s, an example of which Hirshberg presented, a beautiful landscape with sea view over the Carmel, from 1949. And whilst Avni chose music as a career, art remained a potent inspiration as his works with specific allusions to paintings demonstrated. Avni spoke about his *Apropos Klee*, for choral orchestral songs based on Paul Klee, and the *Five Pantomimes*, 1968, based on paintings by different artists, including 'Picasso's Guernica', chosen as our next musical example. Other examples include *Mirage* (2004), for piano quartet, based on Miro.

'**Picasso's Guernica**' conveys the harrowing atmosphere of the village torn asunder during the Spanish Civil War and WWII through turbulent tutti, shrieking orchestral outbursts, waves of intensity falling to silence before a new wave rises, finally giving way to veiled flute

lines emerging, as if a survivor from chaos and destruction, over delicate pitch percussion. Especially thought-provoking for me was the apparent dislocation between the title *Pantomimes*, usually reserved for comedic entertainment, and the seriousness of the subject matter, and the expressionism of the music.

A highlight of the session was the chance to see a video of Avni's own worthy performance of his *Dedication* (2016), a miniature for piano composed as a centenary tribute to his erstwhile mentor **Mordecai Seter** (1916-1994), and recently recorded by the pianist Kolja Lessing on a CD of Piano Works by Israeli Composers (Cpo: 555294-2). Avni's performance conveyed the emotional colours of the work's dark, even brooding chromatic textures, later shot through with flashes of light, concluding with resonant low resonances like tolling bells. Jehoash Hirshberg felt the work was true to his recollection of Seter's personality, intimate, in a kind of 'enclosed seclusion'. Avni reminded us how Seter, a pupil of Boulanger in Paris, had developed a personal way of thinking and composing; he had a deep love of literature and art, and Avni particularly admired his response as a composer of both Israeli and contemporary music, a synthesis also striking in Avni's own artistic identity.

Two of the co-authors of the book outlined their approaches, firstly Yossi Goldenberg who focused on the **synthesis of avant garde and 'Mediterranean style'** in the 2nd piano sonata 'Epitaph' and Liran Gurkiewicz who explored Avni's **multi-layers of identity**, including use of Jewish elements.

As his final example Hirshberg introduced the finale of **Avni's Piano Concerto (2010)** one of three late concertos, together with those for bassoon (2001), and horn (*Don Quixote*, 2015). The movement is highly syncopated and full of energy, which prompted **Ronit Seter**, the eminent musicologist, to discuss Avni's attitude towards 'Hora'. Was the finale a nostalgic allusion and reflection on the use of hora in Israeli music? Avni answered by underlining that he was not consciously evoking Hora but perhaps it has been absorbed unconsciously; but he agreed that it could be read as nostalgic.

The discussion raised some interesting possibilities of reading unconscious processes. In that connection, Avni spoke about living in Haifa and hearing the sounds of the middle east in his daily life, memories which also coloured the experiences of some of his contemporaries. Other questions ensued, covering the aspects of Jewish elements or middle eastern maqam.

Indeed, one of the bonuses of COZ are the opportunities for Q & A and discussion, and here we had a lively session, which led to more informal recollections of visits to London for both speakers. We recalled how in **2008 JMI had presented Tzvi Avni's work at a South Bank Day**, with performances of his *Prayer*, whilst Daniel Cohen had conducted the Primo Levi settings *Se Questo E Un Uomo (If This is a Man)* (1998), with soprano Sharon Rostorf-Zamir at the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

One hopes that we may continue to share impressions of Avni's music and await with eager anticipation the **appearance of the new book** about Tzvi Avni edited by Jehoash Hirshberg. The COZ series continues to enable fascinating online encounters, stimulated by the necessities of lockdown, yet clearly offering innovative possibilities when lockdown is no longer necessary.

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