

Report COZ 21: Nov 17, 2020. Ofer Ben-Amots and Rakefet Bar-Sadeh

Music Composition as Midrash



Ofer Ben-Amots (Israeli-American composer, Colorado College).

COZ 21: Tuesday 17 November

Ofer Ben-Amots

(Colorado, USA)

Professor of Music Composition and Theory, Colorado College, in dialogue with

Rakefet Bar-Sadeh

(Jerusalem)

Head, music division at the Israel Ministry of Culture and Education, Jerusalem and visiting professor, Colorado College, Co-writer of books on Israeli composers: Yechezkel Braun and Tzvi Avni

"Music Composition as Midrash

the concept of Jewish musical creativity through the lens of Talmudic interpretation and the role of the composer in permeating Jewish and Israeli culture.



Rakefet Bar-Sadeh (Jerusalem) Musicologist and a researcher of Israeli art music,

This session can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXWueOMq-66z0vM2F5BxOug>

17 November – COZ 21: ‘Composer in focus’ Ofer Ben-Amots with Rakefet Bar-Sadeh
"Music Composition as Midrash"

Report by Professor Jehoash Hirshberg, Jerusalem.

This was a far-reaching illustration of the global reach of the programme: Rakefet Bar-Sadeh from Jerusalem (Head of the Music Division at the Ministry of Culture) interviewed Ofer Ben-Amots (Israeli composer and, Chair of the Music Department at Colorado College, USA) in a zoom meeting initiated by Geraldine Auerbach in London, with 40 participants world-wide.

The topic was **Music Composition as Midrash** - the concept of Jewish musical creativity through the lens of Talmudic interpretation and the role of the composer in permeating Jewish and Israeli culture. In the COZ Ben-Amots (b. 1955) said that he was much influenced by Prof. Eliyahu Schleifer's course on Jewish music history, by his studies with Joseph Dorfman, Mordechai Seter, and by Tzvi Avni.

Midrash is the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature constituting an anthology and compilation of Jewish thought, as well as *Aggadot* or halakhot. The name Midrash derives from the root d.r.sh. (דרש), which means "to seek" or "to investigate". Ben-Amots makes an analogy between Midrash and music composition, both of which he considers as 'commentary'. The COZ included discussion and sections from six of his works, illustrating the diversity of sources and influences that turned his composition into a commentary on Jewish musical traditions:

Celestial Dialogue, for voice, clarinet, strings and percussion, 1994: Klezmer commentary to cantorial singing

Shtetl Songs - For voice and piano, 1985-6: arrangements of Yiddish songs

Psalm no. 81 - For mixed choir and percussion, 1989, based on the rhythm of biblical Hebrew

Concertino - for clarinet, mandolin, and orchestra, 2011: energetic instrumental interpretation of the rhythm of the reading of Psalm 148.

La Serena: Ben-Amots' family origins are Bulgarian, that is, Sephardi, and he remained very close to the rich tradition of Ladino songs. **La Serena** is an arrangement of a popular Ladino song, which Paul ben-Haim quoted as the third of his **Songs without Words** (1952).

The Dybbuk, an Opera: Ansky's play **The Dybbuk** has deep roots in Jewish theatre. The **Habima** theatre immigrated to Palestine with this play which it continued to produce for years, mostly with the legendary actress Hana Rovina. Ben-Amots commented that in the original play the leading protagonist, Lea, barely talks at all herself and most of her text is that of the Dybbuk, and her young groom dies early in the play. Ben-Amots enriched their parts, whereas the Rabbi uses *Ta'amei Hamikra* in his vocal part, especially when releasing her from the Dybbuk.

The dialogue between Rakefet Bar-Sadeh and Ofer Ben-Amots led to a lively discussion, which again showed the importance of participation of composers in the COZ discussions.

Report by Professor Jehoash Hirshberg, Jerusalem

Ofer Ben-Amots biography
Professor of Music Composition
Chair of the Music Department
Colorado College

Professor, Chair

Born in Haifa, in 1955, Israel, Ofer Ben-Amots gave his first piano concert at age nine and at age sixteen was awarded first prize in the Chet Piano Competition. Later, following composition studies with Joseph Dorfman at Tel Aviv University, he was invited to study at the Conservatoire de Musique in Geneva, Switzerland. There he studied with Pierre Wismer and privately with Alberto Ginastera. Ben-Amots is an alumnus of the Hochschule für Musik in Detmold, Germany, where he studied with Martin C. Redel and Dietrich Manicke and graduated with degrees in composition, music theory, and piano. Upon his arrival in the United States in 1987, Ben-Amots studied with George Crumb at the University of Pennsylvania where he received his Ph.D. in music composition. Currently on the faculty of Colorado College, Dr. Ben-Amots is a Professor of music composition and theory.

Ofer Ben-Amots' compositions are performed regularly in concert halls and festivals Worldwide. His music has been performed by such orchestras as the Munich Philharmonic, ÖRF - Austrian Radio Orchestra, Bruckner Orchestra, Zürich Philharmonic, Brooklyn Philharmonic, Moscow Camerata, Heidelberg, Erfurt, Brandenburg, the Filarmonici di Sicili, the Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia, Milano Chamber Orchestra, Portland Chamber Orchestra, and the Colorado Springs Symphony among others. His compositions have been professionally recorded by the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig, the Munich Chamber Orchestra, the Barcelona Symphony, the BBC Singers, and the renowned Czech choir Permonik. Ben-Amots has received commissions and grants from the MacArthur Foundation, Fulbright Foundation, Maurice Amado

Foundation, Schleswig-Holstein Musikfestival, Fuji International Music Festival in Japan, Delta Ensemble from Amsterdam, Assisi Musiche Festival, and many others.

Ofer Ben-Amots is the winner of the 1994 Vienna International Competition for Composers. His chamber opera, Fool's Paradise, was premiered in Vienna during the 1994 festival Wien modern and has become subsequently part of the 1994/95 season of Opernhaus Zürich. He is recipient of the 1988 Kavannah Prize for his composition Fanfare for Orchestra and the Gold Award at South Africa's 1993 Roodepoort International Competition for Choral Composition. His Avis Urbanus for amplified flute was awarded First Prize at the 1991 Kobe International Competition for Flute Composition in Japan, and a required composition at the 1993 Kobe Flute Performance Competition. In 1999, Ben-Amots was awarded the Aaron Copland Award and the Music Composition Artist Fellowship by the Colorado Council on the Arts. In 2004 he won the Festiladino, an international contest for Judeo-Spanish songs, a part of the Israel Festival in Jerusalem. Dr. Ben-Amots is a member of the Advisory Board and the Editorial Board of the Milken Foundation American-Jewish Music Archive. In addition, he is a Jerusalem Fellow of the Center for Jewish Culture and Creativity and its Artistic Director for North America since 1997.

Ofer Ben-Amots' works have been repeatedly recognized for their emotional and highly personal expression. The interweaving of folk elements with contemporary textures, along with his unique imaginative orchestration, creates the haunting dynamic tension that permeates and defines Mr. Ben-Amots' musical language. His music has been published by Baerenreiter, Kallisti Music Press, Muramatsu Inc., Dorn, and Tara Publications. It can be heard on Naxos, Vantage, Plæne, Stylton, and Music Sources recording labels.

For more information on Ben-Amots, visit www.oferbenamots.com.

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Dr. Rakefet Bar-Sadeh (comments from a student at Colorado)

Week 1: The Class of Three Making Mistakes

- 23rd February 2019 -
- Posted by [Charmie](#) in [Block 6](#), [MU150](#)

Have you ever had a class fewer than five students? Well, our Music in Western Culture course (MU150) this block consists of only two students including myself! At the beginning of the first week, I was a little intimidated by the class size. A class this small means that class discussions are fuelled by only three of us. Now, this isn't a terrible thing at all but a dollop of shyness can make daily class conversations petrifying. What if I say something wrong? What if I offend them? What do I do if they look me in the eye? Hence, on the first day, I was hesitant to even offer a modern pop song for the beginning of class. How hard was that? Difficult.

"Make mistakes!" as our professor, Dr. Rakefet Bar-Sadeh, would exclaim for the first few days. She urges that we can only grow and discover ourselves -our limits and potentials- if we are brave enough to make mistakes. It is a fierce reminder that few things should get in the way of our education and self-discovery. The rest of the week demanded even more dialogue and by Friday, I was speaking out at least twice a day as I grew comfortable with my classmate and teacher. My gradual confidence to speak every day may seem small, but it's a huge step for me and a rewarding one. I encourage every student to speak up at least once in the classroom and build your confidence from there.

In addition, Dr. Rakefet Bar-Sadeh strives in creating an **interdisciplinary education**. With a B.A. in Mathematics and Physics and her Ph.D. in Musicology, she believes that learning should draw knowledge from all academic disciplines to consider new ideas and reason across boundaries. For instance, she insisted that I write my final paper relating to Western music and the biological

sciences since I intend to be a molecular biology major. Thus, the notion of my paper discusses the anatomy of the birds' respiratory-vocal system and the use of bird vocalization in Western music! Dr. Rakefet Bar-Sadeh uses the advantages of a small class setting to create a more personalized and interdisciplinary education for her students.

Dr. Rakefet Bar-Sadeh is a visiting professor from Israel who is teaching two blocks for Spring 2019. She has contributed to academic works regarding Israeli composers born before the declaration of the state of Israel and educated in Europe and their impact on new movements of contemporary music in Israel. Dr. Rakefet Bar-Sadeh is a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and also works as a consultant for the Canada Royal Conservatory. She is married and a proud mother of two children. Her next block is Jewish Music (MU224) so be sure to take the class with her!

Overall, I am excited for what the next few weeks have to offer. Here's a selfie of our class!

