**Chapter 5**

**The Formation of Yehezkel Braun’s Compositional Approach**

Jehoash Hirshberg

Yehezkel Braun died on August 26, 2014 at the age of 92, marking the end of over half a century of prolific artistic output. He started his career as a composer in the mid-1950s and composed his last piece, *Wind Quintet* (Y. Braun 235), in 2012, at ninety. His impressive corpus encompasses every classical genre, with the exception of opera.

Braun was part of a second generation of Israeli art music composers. The ‘founding fathers’ had been a group of composers who acquired their musical education and professional training in Europe – primarily in Germany and Austria – and who fled to Palestine between 1931-1939 as National Socialism rose to power. In her study, Irit Jungermann[[1]](#footnote-1) notes that 57% of the professional composers who settled in Palestine in the 1930s (49 in total) came from Germany and Austria. What is more, those coming from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, and Latvia had been trained in a predominantly German-influenced environment. Riga-born composer Marc Lavry studied and worked in Berlin until National Socialism took power, and a German influence dominated in the prestigious music academy in Budapest.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second generation is made up of composers born in Germany in the 1920s who immigrated to Palestine with their parents as children and developed under the mentorship of the ‘founding fathers’: Yehezkel Braun (1922-2014), Ben-Zion Orgad (b. Büschel, 1926-2006), and Tzvi Avni (b. 1927).

Braun developed his own unique compositional approach, whose significance must be understood against the social-musical climate of the 1950s in which he began his artistic development. Braun began composing (see chapter 2) in his 30s. During this time, conflicting pressures on young Israeli composers were particularly intense, coming from teachers, friends, thinkers, and music critics, as well as the composers’ own inner deliberations. On the one hand, there was pressure to establish a school of ‘Israeli music’ – a term that emerged following the foundation of the state. 1953 saw the publication of an influential treatise by Alexander U. Boskovich (1907-1968), who was Braun’s only teacher and later his senior colleague at the Tel Aviv Academy.[[3]](#footnote-3) This article was the culmination of a decade of advocacy in public lectures and in the press. An avid supporter of Boskovich’s convictions was the reputable critic and author Max Brod (1884-1968), who was also a composer. Boskovich had given rise to the term ‘Semitic music’ with his seminal *Semitic Suite* (1945). He called upon Israeli composers to turn eastward, primarily to Arabic music. Boskovich and Brod introduced the notion of ‘Mediterranean music’ as the appropriate Israeli style; Peter Immanuel Gradenwitz later coined the more specific ‘Eastern Mediterranean school.’[[4]](#footnote-4) Boskovich considered it the duty of Israeli composers to act as ‘public representatives’ and give expression to the cultural yearning of the people in Eretz Israel for a unique style of their own, distinct from the European style and from Jewish music in the diaspora. According to Boskovich’s approach, the composer must give voice and provide guidance to the collective community, consciously avoiding the personal expression of his or her inner world in the music. In this respect, Boskovich adopted a markedly anti-Romantic approach. In Braun’s particular case, the expectation to serve as the representative of a community was felt all the more acutely during his time as a soldier and Kibbutz member, this at a time when collective ideals in the Kibbutz were at their most pronounced. An important element in the music of first-generation composers in the 1950s was folklorism – the incorporation of stylistic elements from folk dances. This includes all of Marc Lavry’s works, Hanoch (Heinrich) Jacoby’s *King David’s Lyre* (1948), Haim Alexander’s *Israeli Dances* (1951), Paul Ben-Haim’s (1897-1984) *Fanfare to Israel* (1950)and *From Israel* (1951), Menahem Avidom’s *Mediterranean Sinfonietta* (1952), and Boskovich’s *Little Suite* (1954).

On the other hand, Braun began composing at the height of the European avant-garde. An oft-discussed topic among Israeli composers was the 12-tone, or serial technique. Arnold Schönberg had already developed the method in the 1920s, both conceptually and practically. As pointed out by Klara Móricz,[[5]](#footnote-5) Schönberg, with his strong, prophetically inclined personality, saw the 12-tone technique as the only way forward for Western art music. Schönberg’s approach and charisma won him the admiration of many composers and performing musicians in Israel, especially in light of his defiant return to Judaism in response to the rise of National Socialism. Prominent among them were Josef Tal (Grünthal, 1910-2008); Ödön Pártos (1907-1977) in his later works; the publisher Peter Immanuel Gradenwitz (1910-2002), who strengthened and maintained the ties between the Israeli milieu and the International Composers’ Guild; the multi-instrumentalist Frank Pelleg (Pollak, 1910-1968), who contributed greatly to the performance of contemporary pieces in Israel, particularly Schönberg’s; Erich Walter Sternberg (1891-1976), who chaired the Society for Contemporary Music in Israel for many years; and more. A summer chamber music seminar held annually in Zikhron Ya’akov as of 1957 at the initiative of Zvi Propes – director of the tourism ministry and an avid music lover – brought two of the most renowned performers from Schönberg’s close circle to Israel; Rudolf Kolisch and Eduard Steuermann. The young conductor Gary Bertini organized a chamber music concert series at the end of the 1950s that featured several avant-garde works, including Schönberg’s *Pierrot lunaire* and Pierre Boulez’s *Sonatine for Flute and Piano*. Israeli audiences were far from receptive to this music (referred to pejoratively as “modern music”). Nonetheless, successful performances of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* and Bartók’s *Concerto for Orchestra* by the Israeli Philharmonic opened up early 20th century masterpieces to wider audiences. In those days, the younger generation of the European avant-garde gained the support and encouragement of the establishment, most notably in the annual festival in Darmstadt, Germany, and in concert series of contemporary music in Paris and Milan. Around this time, a young Pierre Boulez boldly declared that “Anyone who has not felt… the necessity of the 12-tone language is SUPERFLUOUS.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Boskovich tried to bridge between the urgency to compose “Mediterranean music” for the nation and the allure he felt toward the European avant-garde by applying the serial method in his *Concerto Da Camera* from 1960 and in *Be-Adiim* (“adorned in Jewelry”), his last work, composed shortly before his premature death in 1964. Boskovich constantly expressed his admiration for the serial method as a teacher at the academy and argued a connection between the Arabic Maqam and serialism. Haim Alexander (1915-2011) participated a number of times in the summer courses held in Darmstadt on contemporary music, which prompted him to change course for a few years and compose in the 12-tone style. Examples include his song cycle *In this World*, with poems by Natan Zach, and most pronouncedly the German song cycle *My Blue Piano* (the setting of a poem by Else Lasker-Schüler, 1990).[[7]](#footnote-7) In an interview on his piece *Illuminations to the Book of Ruth* (Y. Braun 65), Braun noted: “I write for instruments and instrumentalists, I don’t use instruments and instrumentalists to express a certain idea. Most of my works are for a solo instrument, or a dialogue between solo instruments. My musical taste is similarly inclined. Regarding Mahler, I do not for a moment doubt his greatness, but I personally don’t have the patience to listen to a Mahler piece in its entirety… I gave up on two things: thinking about music, thinking about what to write and how, to compose while thinking. It caused me no end of distress and torment. One day I just said to myself: damn it, I write what I hear. The second thing – my hopes to make use of the 12-tone technique and serialism – which were feeble [to begin with] – were disappointed. I made a few attempts, some nice things came of it, but it always turned out to be melodic and harmonic, it was never purely in the 12-tone style. I came to the conclusion: I have no need for this… I started experimenting with ascending and descending scales. Diatonic, and also sequences of ascending and descending thirds. But here too, never systematically, if something came out nice, I wrote it down. If something came out not as nice, I simply continued to dream up melodies. But the principle remained, and I did not deviate from it – to think in sounds. Not in concepts, not in emotions, not in ideas. I hear, I invent melodies in my head, and consider what seems a better fit, what doesn’t work as well, what should be included and in what order. All this talk is just a scant attempt to describe what’s going on in my head. It’s never conceptualized. So much so, that in any given moment when I’m composing, I have no idea, nor do I care to know, what key I’m in, what modus, what chord. I hear, I write…”[[8]](#footnote-8)

A central feature of Braun’s compositional approach was the highly divergent musical environment in which he found himself. “I absorbed a concoction of Hasidic melodies, German songs my mother would sing, among them Schubert and Haydn and Brahms, Arabic music. In the [Moshava] Rehovot there was a café when I was in Kindergarten, and they would only hear Arabic music. I liked that. There were no records of Hebrew songs. I would sing Puccini, my parents loved Puccini. I would sing arias from *La bohème* and *Madama Butterfly* in the balcony. There were also the songs of the Yemenis from Sha’arayim and I really liked their melodies… Bartók, I felt this was my language. His *Concerto for Orchestra* left me in awe.” Braun traveled especially from the Kibbutz to a music shop in Haifa to buy all six volumes of the *Mikrokosmos*[[9]](#footnote-9)and the score of *Concerto for Orchestra*. He played the *Mikrokosmos* for his own benefitin its entirety.

The romantic composer most close to his heart was Brahms. As an autodidact, he meticulously analyzed his 4th symphony.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Braun wrote Rotem Luz on the compositional approach he adopted following his radical decision:

“As I have no *credo*, I will try to define the character of my music in more technical terms.

I think the foundation of my musical thought… is movement toward a destination. This movement is mostly linear and mostly in progressions of seconds. Often, it is pentatonic. Intervals tend to be counterbalanced by progressions in the opposite direction, similarly to Renaissance music. In this sense, my music is traditional. It has a close affinity to Gregorian chants and to the ancient Jewish melos, far more than to later traditions. It is far removed, in any case, from the 12-tone tradition (which is today already a century old!).”

“It seems to me that not only the melodies, but all the parameters in my music are subject to the same principle of movement toward a destination – this destination is not necessarily the “tonic” or the “dominant” and is generally difficult to define in such traditional terms. The destination itself is in perpetual motion, but its progressions cannot be justified as “modulations,” because my harmony is subject to voice leading and not to a sequence of functional chords.” That being said, Braun did not turn his back entirely on tonal music, which he described as follows: “For me, real tonal music has two things: the relational fifth and the leading tone. My harmonies are based mostly on triads, combinations of thirds. I see this as an analogy to the melodic progressions I use in my melodies. In both cases the principle is that of efficiency. The use of a small number of elements (tones, intervals) allows me to significantly expand my domain (new tones, dissonant intervals). The rhythms I use are subject to the same principles of movement and efficiency. A flowing rhythm, marked by a clear beat and a limited number of durations enables me to explore unusual, bolder melodic progressions and harmonies without losing clarity and a sense of direction… Form in my music is something that springs of its own accord from the compositional process. It is difficult to avoid some variation or other of the sonata form when thinking in large structures. But why do so – sonata form is the most complex musical form, the most clever, multifaceted, and expressive ever to be produced by human ingenuity.

Tempo and dynamics are, in fact, the sole responsibility of the performer. This was the custom in the good old times of Bach, together with adding ornamentations and filling in the chords above the figured bass. But knowing my colleagues well, I try my best to assist them with metronome markings and performance instructions.” Rotem Luz observed that “Yehezkel Braun stands out in the amount of freedom he leaves the performer. His scores are lean, keeping markings to a minimum. This interesting phenomenon can be seen as antithetical to the approach of studio composers who completely disconnected themselves from the performer. Braun was a performers’ composer, he composed for them and was in constant dialogue with them, sometimes even arguing with them in order to maintain the principle of interpretive freedom. In his piano work *Game for Two* (Y. Braun 45), written in 1962, he left out any indication whatsoever of dynamics and articulation.”

Braun’s candid, systematic description of his compositional approach reflects the dual nature of his personality. As a composer, he notated what he heard in his mind’s ear. As a teacher of music theory, he conducted after the fact a systematic analysis of his own works, identifying common elements.

The term “mind’s ear” warrants clarification. Any music lover is familiar with the phenomenon of a well-known piece playing in one’s mind, whether in the form of disparate motifs or melodies, or as the complete reconstruction of long passages. This faculty is especially important for performing musicians, who make use of it in order to better prepare for a performance: they are able to replay an entire piece from memory in their mind so as to ensure that they know it by heart. This can be likened to someone who, preparing to travel to a certain destination, can reconstruct vividly in their mind’s eye all stages of the journey. In the case of a composer, the mind’s ear is also creative: auditory memory of different kinds of music processes this accumulated material to produce a new, original work. Yehezkel Braun would put what he heard in his mind’s ear on paper, omitting any further critical or ideological intervention.

Thus, Braun was deliberately absent from the arena of ideological contestation in Israeli music, which I have outlined in four broad trends:

* Collectivist nationalism, whose most obvious representative was Alexander U. Boskovich (1907-1964).
* Individualistic nationalism, whose central representatives were Erich Walter Sternberg (1891-1974) and Josef Tal (1910-2008).
* Popular nationalism, represented by Marc Lavry (1903-1967).
* Cosmopolitanism – a trend that gained momentum in the 1960s among composers who distanced themselves from the national ideology and preferred to position themselves within the global artistic trend that emerged in the West in the postwar era. The first to adopt this approach was Yizhak Sadai (b. 1935).[[11]](#footnote-11)

In his refusal to adopt any ideology, Yehezkel Braun developed his own, entirely personal approach. His place within the musical developments of the latter half of the 20th century, along with his aversion to the ideology of the European avant-garde, positioned Braun, through no intention of his own, within the growing pluralist trend, defined by Leonard Meyer as a turning point in the interpretation of music in the 20th century.[[12]](#footnote-12) Meyer established that composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, and Luciano Berio – prominent representatives of the avant-garde in Germany, France, and Italy – were unsuccessful in their attempt to portray themselves as ushering in the future of music. Notwithstanding their importance, these composers did not represent what was happening in parallel to them – for example, the tonal-communicative style of Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) or Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953). Meyer described the state of music halfway through the 20th century as one of “stasis,” whose most appropriate lexical definition in our case is “a fluctuating and dynamic steady-state.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Pertaining most directly to Yehezkel Braun’s approach is Meyer’s statement, “what does it mean to say that Beethoven is in the past? His music is just as readily heard as that of Boulez- more so!”[[14]](#footnote-14) From Braun’s perspective, the past is as much a part of his present as a composer as the actual present. He lived among Haydn, Brahms, and Bartók, and was light years away from Schönberg (who died when Braun was 29) or Pierre Boulez (three years Braun’s junior). Braun rejected the romantic approach, which posited that the composer progresses through his or her career from the simple to the complex and profound. This approach was disputed in a wide array of studies about numerous composers, which will not be detailed here. For example, referring to Beethoven’s op. 18 as his “early string quartets” implies that these were youthful, unfledged works of a lesser quality than that of the Rasumovsky string quartets (op. 59) – when in fact, the earlier quartets are no less complex and profound. Arnold Schönberg regarded his serial pieces as the only solution for the future of music,[[15]](#footnote-15) but is there any justification to classify the monumental, rich and imaginative 1900 *Gurre Lieder* as an “early” work in the negative sense of the word?

Braun remarked that “with me, there’s no early or late,”[[16]](#footnote-16) by which he meant that in his early works, written before he arrived at the approach discussed here, he made use of complex chromatic methods and even of the 12-tone technique, while his later works were composed in a much simpler, tonal-modal and diatonic style (see chapter 8, “Chamber Music”). The reason for this was that his early works had been composed under the influence of the prevailing view among composers and critics that regarded the history of music as a narrative of progress. Only later did he liberate himself from contemplating his approach as a composer, giving free reign to his mind’s ear and to his spontaneous response to the music he heard and loved.

1. Irit Jungermann, *Behipus ahar zehut hadasha: malhinim yotz’ei eyropa bayishuv hayehudi uvashanim harishonot limdinat Israel, 1933-1955* (*The Search for a New Identity: European-born Composers in the Yishuv and in the First Years of the State of Israel, 1933-1955*), doctoral dissertation, the Hebrew University, 2013, chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jehoash Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine 1880-1948* (Oxford University Press, 1995) Chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Orlogin 9* (1953), pp. 285-294. The article was reprinted in Herzl Shmueli and Jehoash Hirshberg’s *Alexander Uriah Boskovich, Hayav, yetzirato, haguto* (*Alexander Uriah Boskovich, Life, Works, and Thought*, Jerusalem, 1995), pp. 193-210. Boskovich developed this article into a book, *Hamusika ha’isra’elit hale’umit* (*National Israeli Music*), whose completion was cut short by his untimely death. The existing manuscript was edited by Herzl Schmueli and included in the book mentioned above. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Emanuel Gradenwitz, *Music and musicians in Israel* (Tel Aviv, 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Klara Móricz, *Jewish Identities* (Berkeley, 2008), pp. 201 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Harold Schonberg, *Very Big Man of Avant-Garde*, New York Times, May 9, 1965, quoted in Leonard Meyer, *Music, the Arts and Ideas* (Chicago, 1967), p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mein blaues Klavier. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Interview, 12/25/2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The six *Mikrokosmos* volumes were Bartók’s monumental contribution to the pedagogical piano literature of the 20th century. They accompany the first steps of a child at the piano all the way to graduation from music school and were also the result of Bartók’s extensive research on Hungarian and Balkan (as well as North African) folk music. In the 1950s, *Mikrokosmos* was widely used as teaching material by piano teachers in Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See chapter 10 of *Hexagon* (Y. Braun 180). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jehoash Hirshberg, “Hazon hamizrah nul moreshet hama’arav: zramim idiologim bamusika bitkufat hayishuv vehashpa’atam al hamusika ha’israelit bishnei ha’asorim ha’aharonim” (“Visions of the East and Traditions of the West: Ideological Musical Currents in the Yishuv and their Influence on Israeli Music over the First Two Decades”), *Iyunim bitkumat Israel*, 14 (2004), pp. 1-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Leonard Meyer, *Music, the Arts and Ideas* (Chicago, 1967). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Meyer, pp. 98, and 134 ff. for a more detailed discussion that fall outside the scope of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., pp. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a detailed discussion of Schönberg’s approach, see Klȧra Móricz, Jewish Identities (Berkeley, 2008)

    pp. 204, 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Interview 10/31/2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)