Paul Ben-Haim 1897–1984

Symphony no. 1, Op. 25 (1940)

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Gila Flam

The first symphony ever written in the Land of Israel was by an immigrant composer.

Munich-born Paul Frankenburger (1897–1984) studied music and became a conductor at the Augsburg Opera House. Dismissed from his position when the Nazis assumed power, he visited Palestine in 1933 to examine opportunities as a musician and met the violinist Simon Bakman. Bakman asked him to join his concert tour around Palestine as a piano accompanist, but Frankenburger declined the offer due to having no work permit. Bakman suggested overcoming this obstacle by Frankenburger presenting himself with a Hebrew surname. Frankenburger chose the name Ben-Haim (lit. the son of Haim) based on the first letter of his father, Heinrich's, name. Several months later, Frankenburger, now Ben-Haim, immigrated to Palestine with his wife.

The new immigrant Paul Ben-Haim continued his musical career as a teacher, pianist, and composer. Under the encouragement of Leo Kestenberg, the musical director of the Palestine Philharmonic Orchestra, Ben-Haim started composing a symphony in August 1939. He completed it on June 20, 1940 against a backdrop of events such as the outbreak of World War II, the bombing of Tel Aviv, and the death of his father.

Although his name change occurred several years earlier, the front cover of the original manuscript shows that the name Frankenburger was written first, then erased with black ink, and replaced by Ben-Haim in both Hebrew and English. Likewise, on the title page, Ben-Haim erased his German name and added the dedication: "To the memory of my father."

The symphony was premiered in January 1941 by the Palestine Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Ben-Haim in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa and in a radio broadcast. Its enthusiastic reviews impacted the future direction and style of the new national Jewish music.