

The Jewish Week

Defining Israeli Music

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Leon Botstein, music director of the American Symphony Orchestra, laments that music composed by Israelis is not played often in Israel. Botstein has also directed the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra for the past six years. Richard Termine

by George Robinson
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If the Jewish people are 4,000 years old, the debate over the true nature of “Jewish music” must be nearly the same age. Of course, in 1948 with the creation of a Jewish state, a new factor entered the discussion. What, pundits, critics and academics ask, is Israeli music? And how does it differ from Jewish music?

Leon Botstein, music director of the American Symphony Orchestra, isn’t convinced that there is such a thing as “Israeli music,” and he’s willing to test that theory publicly by conducting a concert, “Composing a Nation: Israel’s Musical Patriarchs,” on May 31. The program, which includes three U.S. premieres, features works by European-born Israeli composers: Mordecai Seter, Paul Ben-Haim, Ödön Pártos and Joseph Tal, key figures in the first generation of Israeli classical music.

“We think Aaron Copland has an American sound,” Botstein says, “but there are many other American composers and each represents the American experience musically. I resist the idea that there is some essential American or Israeli or French or Russian music.”

What really interests Botstein about the four men whose work will be performed on this program is another, more complex, question.

“I’ve been music director of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra for six years,” Botstein says, “and I’ve noticed that when you are in a country not your own you become familiar with the compositional tradition of that nation. I became interested in the history of how a new nation tries to develop a language, a way of writing music, that speaks to the question of what the nation is or wants to be. So on one level, this concert is about the situation of composers in a new nation, how they reflect that change.”

At the same time, that question is complicated by the fact that the “pioneer” generation of Israeli composers largely was European-educated.

“We’re looking at the pioneer generation, trying to figure out the ways in which they retained their European past and the ways in which they moved forward,” Botstein explains.

Joseph Tal is a fascinating example of a composer who moved forwards by looking backwards to Europe. A product of the Berlin Academy, he was a disciple of Heinz Tiessen, one of a small school of radical followers of Arnold Schoenberg; like his teacher, Tal was an adherent of the 12-tone method of composition. Yet once he had settled in the Yishuv in 1934, fleeing the Third Reich, his writing also incorporated some of the sounds he heard in his adopted country.

For example, in an interview with composer Robert Fleisher in Fleisher’s 1997 book, “Twenty Israeli Composers: Voices of a Culture” (Wayne State University Press), Tal said, “[M]y Second Piano Concerto was written on an old Jewish-Persian lamentation that I found extremely interesting as a piece of music — not at all old-fashioned, quite modern.”

For Botstein, Tal's music is fine example of "how Israeli composers dealt with the claims of international modernism," while still recognizing "the facts on the ground." He adds, "They're not in Europe [anymore], they're living in their own state. There is a whole Middle Eastern tradition, a different tradition totally from the ones they knew from Europe, and that is the hallmark of where [they] now were living. So the question is how these European composers dealt with transplanting a European tradition into a new country."

By and large, some of them managed to do so quite ably, as the works in the program testify. The only problem is that there are so few opportunities to hear these works, as indicated by the presence of three U.S. premieres on the program. Even Botstein admits that he was a little surprised by that figure.

"[Leonard] Bernstein did a lot of Ben-Haim with the Israeli Philharmonic," he notes. "But the truth is that these works are not done much in Israel anymore. Tal has had some traction, Ben-Haim a little bit, but I don't think any Israeli composer has made it into the 20th-century canon. Of course, they've only had a half a century. But there's a lot of talent out there now that should be heard more."

But that lament goes to the heart of the dilemma facing anyone programming a contemporary orchestra these days. As Botstein puts it, "On the one hand, people complain about hearing the same repertory all the time. 'Oh, another round of Mahler symphonies.'"

Yet audiences aren't receptive to the unfamiliar, especially if its "difficult" music.

But great, underperformed music is out there, and some of it comes from Israel.

"The ASO functions as advocates for reclaiming our understanding of music history," Botstein says of his orchestra. "There's a lot of talent out there now that should be heard more."

And what, by the way, is Israeli music? Perhaps Josef Tal should have the last word: "If you put me down to examples, show me — 'Here on page 23, bar 56, you have Israeli music — that you cannot do.'"

The concert program "Composing a Nation: Israel's Musical Patriarchs" will be performed by the American Symphony Orchestra, led by Leon Botstein, on Sunday, May 31 at 3 p.m. at Avery Fisher Hall (65th Street and Columbus Avenue). The program includes the U.S. premieres of Mordecai Seter's "Midnight Vigil," Odon Partos's "Ein Gev, a Symphonic Fantasy" and Paul Ben-Haim's Symphony No. 2, as well as Josef Tal's Symphony No. 2. The concert will be preceded by a pre-concert talk by Botstein at 1:45 p.m. For information or tickets, phone (212) 868-9276 or go to www.americansymphony.org.