

Ben-Haim’s String Quartet, Op. 21: A Programmatic Reading

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Paul Ben-Haim’s chamber music output was small but significant, produced in a steady trickle throughout his career. His first full-scale works, composed in 1919, shortly after his return from the front after World War I, were chamber music: a violin sonata (ultimately discarded), and a string quintet, the first work to bring him to the attention of the broader public.¹ This was followed by a piano quartet in 1920, an ambitious string trio in 1927, his first string quartet in 1937, and a clarinet quintet in 1941. Some of these works have received analytical attention, both in Hirshberg’s seminal biography and in Haddassah Guttman’s performance guide.² The string quartet of 1937 was Ben-Haim’s first major work after his immigration to the Land of Israel in 1933, marking the end of a four-year hiatus in composition, and bringing the first hints of his later preoccupation with creating classical music with local colors. Ben-Haim was very satisfied with the quartet, writing: “here I had written with good inspiration, and I still consider it one of my most successful pieces.”³ Its importance as one of the first significant Israeli works of classical music was recognized immediately, making it (as noted by *Ha’Aretz* critic David Rosolio, later to become Israel’s first civil service commissioner), “the first work by a composer from the Land of Israel” to be performed in the history of concerts in the [Tel Aviv] Museum.” Despite this, and despite its enduring popularity on Israeli concert stages from then until the present, the quartet has received little analytical attention.

This article will address this lacuna by presenting a brief analysis of the work, and by examining a programmatic interpretation of the quartet that has been preserved orally through Ben-Haim’s colleague Haim Alexander, and by his student Ben-Zion Orgad, with the intention both to record this interpretation for posterity, and to examine it critically.

Before his arrival in the Land of Israel in 1933, Paul Ben-Haim (then Frankenburger) had had a moderately successful career as a composer and conductor in Germany. In 1931, Frankenburger lost his position as conductor of the Augsburg Opera House, attributing both this and his subsequent failure to secure another job to anti-Semitism: “What does art have to do with religion?” he asked his father.⁴ The question might have been purely rhetorical at that moment, but Frankenburger spent the next two years exploring it in his oratorio *Joram*, described by Hirshberg as “a synthesis between Judaism and Christianity, where the characteristic element is human optimism.”⁵ The Nazi party’s ascent to power in 1933 put an end to such optimism, and Frankenburger realized that he must seek his fortune outside Germany. At first undecided where to go, he undertook an exploratory journey to Palestine. As chance would have it, he shared a cabin with an eminent violinist, who offered him the opportunity to perform during his visit. Traveling on a tourist’s visa, Frankenburger was unable

¹ See Jehoash Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim, His Life and Works* (Jerusalem: Israeli Music Institute, 2005), 30-31; Yoel Greenberg, “Drawn Up out of a Mute Wellspring: The Revival of Paul Ben-Haim’s Early String Quintet (1919),” *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 9 (2011): 25-42.

² Hadassah Guttman, *The Music of Paul Ben-Haim: A Performance Guide* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992).

³ Paul Ben-Haim, “My Immigration to Palestine,” *Tazlil* 13 (1973): 172.

⁴ Jehoash Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim, His Life and Works* (Jerusalem: Israeli Music Institute, 2005), 70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

to undertake employment of any kind, yet was reluctant to refuse. His producer, Moshe Hopenko, found a way around it: “‘Very simple,’ he declared. ‘Change your name!’ ‘But how?’ I asked. ‘What is your father’s name?’ he queried. ‘Heinrich, I replied, ‘Haim in Hebrew.’ ‘Well then,’ said Hopenko, ‘you’ll be called Ben-Haim!’”⁶

The change of name to Ben-Haim thus was triggered not by Zionism, but rather by practical considerations. Nevertheless, after his move to Israel later that year, Frankenburger changed his name permanently to Ben-Haim. Ben-Haim’s music was to be markedly different from that of Frankenburger. Although relying on much of his German compositional craft, Ben-Haim realized that new times require new measures, and that in his new surroundings many of the influences of yore, particularly Germanic ones, were no longer welcome or relevant. His first four years in Israel were dedicated to the absorption of his new cultural surroundings and to the attainment of financial stability. He composed virtually nothing new, instead performing extensively throughout Palestine, and coming into contact with the variety of musical traditions that had assembled there. It might have been the establishment of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra by Bronislav Huberman in 1936, with the resultant influx of outstanding European musicians to Palestine, that brought Ben-Haim back to instrumental composition, with the String Quartet Op. 21 in 1937 (dedicated to two brothers who were members of the newly-formed orchestra: violinist Andreas and cellist Joseph Weissgerber). He had yet to meet the woman who was to become the most significant influence on his “Israeli style,” the Yemenite singer Bracha Zefira, a pioneer of Israeli song who was orphaned at age three and whose subsequent spells of fostering under families from a variety of ethnic backgrounds made her a “walking anthology” of Israeli folk music. But even without the ability to quote directly from Israeli folk tunes, as he would later do, the Quartet bowed toward contemporary Palestinian cultural influences (whether imagined or real) and, significantly, departed from the overwhelmingly German influences evident in the String Quintet.⁷

The Quartet is composed in the traditional four-movement layout, with a sonata-form first movement followed by a ternary scherzo, a slow variations movement, and a sonata-rondo finale. Stylistically, the quartet owes more to the French tradition of Debussy and Ravel than to the German influences of Reger and Strauss that were so central to Ben-Haim’s earlier work for strings, the Quintet of 1919.⁸ Also unlike the Quintet is the clarity of form of each of the movements, coupled with subtle thematic transformations, creating inter- and intra-movemental links.

The first movement, *con moto sereno*, opens with a broad, evocative G major theme presented by the viola, heralding the central role the instrument plays within the work.⁹

⁶ Letters to his wife, Hely, from 14 May 1933, and Autobiographical Sketch: Paul Ben-Haim, “My Immigration to the Land of Israel,” *Tazlil* 11 (1971): 185 (Hebrew), quoted in Hirshberg, 101-105.

⁷ Although *Ha’Aretz* critic, David Rosolio, chose to emphasize its debt to Beethoven’s late quartets in his review of the second performance. See Hirshberg, 150.

⁸ Jehoash Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim, His Life and Works* (Jerusalem: Israeli Music Institute, 2005), 30. Yoel Greenberg, “Drawn Up out of a Mute Wellspring: The Revival of Paul Ben-Haim’s Early String Quintet (1919),” *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 9 (2011): 25-42.

⁹ All sound excerpts are taken from *Paul Ben-Haim Chamber Music*, performed by Carmel Quartet (Toccatà Classics, 0214, 2014).

Example 1: String Quartet, 1st movement, mm. 1-4 ([Audio Example](#))

The theme alternates between a flattened seventh (f natural) and the leading tone (f sharp), resulting in tension between shifting shades of dark and light, anxiety and hope and (significantly) folklorist modality and traditional Western classical sonorities. This exploration of the tension between major and minor modes (and, possibly, the hermeneutic potential in that tension), becomes a central theme of the Quartet, also exploited in the restless second theme, presented by the second violin above an ostinato cello accompaniment and sixteenth-note figurations in the viola.

Example 2: String Quartet, First movement, second theme ([Audio Example](#))

a tempo (un poco mosso)

Its opening motif, including a stepwise rising major third, followed by its minor variant, appears five times (the third is modified), raised each time by a major second, before the exposition comes to a close. The development section starts with a pastoral version of the main theme in E above pulsating harmonics in the viola and cello. The major-minor alternations continue in this section, for instance in the trills at rehearsal sign E, or the incipits of the second theme in the first violin shortly afterward. After a beautifully embellished but nonetheless formally uncomplicated recapitulation (preceded by a charming false recap), the movement ends with a G major chord with an added sixth (E) in the viola, a reminder of the development section’s prominent opening on E, and of the opening phrase’s D-E-D neighbor-note motion.

The second movement harks back to the puckish scherzos of Mendelssohn and Mahler as well as to the percussive sound world of the second movements of Debussy’s and Ravel’s quartets, with pervasive use of effects such as *pizzicato*, *col legno*, and *ponticello*. The main theme, a rising major third followed by a rising minor third, here too introduced by the viola, obviously is derived from the second theme of the first movement.

Example 3: String Quartet, Second movement, first theme ([Audio Example](#))

II

Molto vivace (♩ = 168)

The musical score is for the first theme of the second movement of a string quartet. It is in 2/4 time and marked "Molto vivace" with a tempo of 168 beats per minute. The score is divided into two systems. The first system consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The Violin I and II parts feature a rhythmic motif of eighth notes with a rising major third followed by a rising minor third. The Viola and Cello parts provide a pulsating accompaniment. Dynamics range from *f* (forte) to *mp* (mezzo-piano). Articulations include *pizz.* (pizzicato) and *dim.* (diminuendo). The second system continues the theme, with the Violin I and II parts showing a *sfz* (sforzando) dynamic. The Viola and Cello parts continue their accompaniment. The score ends with a double bar line.

The trio section, *piu tranquillo*, is a wistfully lyrical dissonant *ländler* with a *perpetuum mobile* eighth-note accompaniment.

Example 4: String Quartet, Second movement, trio ([Audio Example](#))

Più tranquillo ($\text{♩}=52$)
($\text{♩}=\text{♩}$)

pp espr.
pp
pp (senza espressione)
pp (senza espressione)

($\text{♩}=\text{♩}$)

The theme, again based on rising and falling third motifs, is framed at first above a glassy and dissonant accompaniment in the high registers of the viola and cello, suggesting a sense of distance, perhaps nostalgia.

In the third movement, a slow-paced theme and variations, Ben-Haim presents a folkloristic theme with an archaic, modal quality achieved through the use of a flattened seventh.

Example 5: String Quartet, Third movement, theme ([Audio Example](#))

III

Largo e molto sostenuto ($\text{♩}=44$)

sotto voce, espr.
sotto voce, espr.
sotto voce, espr.
sotto voce, espr.

In each of the three variations, a different instrument presents the theme: the viola, the first violin, and the cello, before dissolving into a hushed *pianississimo* at the close of the movement.

It is in the fourth movement, rondo finale, that folklorist influences come to the fore. A simple yet seductive refrain theme is presented above an *ostinato* plucked cello accompaniment, with accompanying arabesque-like figures in the inner voices.

Example 6: String Quartet, Finale, refrain ([Audio Example](#))

IV

Allegro commodo (♩=84)

The musical score for the refrain of the String Quartet, Finale, movement IV, is presented in three systems. The first system shows the first violin part with a melodic line starting on G4, marked *p cantabile*. The cello part is marked *pizz.* and *p*, playing a rhythmic accompaniment of quarter notes. The second system continues the first violin melody, which is marked *p*. The third system shows the first violin melody becoming more complex with slurs and grace notes, while the cello accompaniment remains. The tempo marking *poco rit. - a tempo* is placed above the third system. The cello part in the third system is marked *p*.

The hypnotic effect of this lilting melody is interrupted violently by the first episode, a turbulent, primitivist saber-dance, played in rhythmic unison by all four instruments, and

exploiting the harsher side of the string quartet’s timbral spectrum, such as repeated accented downbow chords, forte *pizzicato* passages, and wild *col legno* figurations.

Example 7: String Quartet, Finale, 1st episode ([Audio Example](#))

The image displays a musical score for the first episode of the String Quartet, Finale, Op. 21, by Yoel Greenberg. The score is in 3/4 time and marked "piu mosso (♩=120)". It features four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The music is characterized by repeated accented downbow chords, forte *pizzicato* passages, and wild *col legno* figurations. The score includes dynamic markings such as "f" and "molto", and a section marked "(D)".

The refrain reappears, at first with *pizzicato* fragments suggesting remnants of the violence of the first episode, and later with the addition of lyrical counterpoint, which in fact prepares the thematic material of the second episode. This episode is largely backward looking, combining materials from the first movement, first with a flageolet version of the saber dance, and next with a possible reference to Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* in the second violin and the viola. These materials alternate between moments of lush lyricism and high excitement, climactic near-orchestral outbursts, and nostalgic reminiscences of the opening theme of the Quartet. The episode as a whole carries a sense of impending disaster, which continues into the refrain, culminating in a return to the sword dance of the second episode. Gradually, the energy dissolves, with the swordsmen disappearing into the distance, leaving only the lamenting viola to play a heartrending improvisatory (*rubato e fantastico*) and cantorial cadenza, accompanied by low trills on the cello. This unusual and arresting coda, suffused with augmented thirds and other “Jewish” markers, builds up to a final anguished scream, after which the entire ensemble brings the work to a violently energetic ending.

The Quartet is one of the most popular Israeli chamber music works among performers and musicians alike, but its finale has been subject to different evaluations. Hirshberg finds fault with what he identifies as its “artificial folklorism,” resulting in “a certain hesitation and embarrassment” (Hirshberg, 152). This evaluation of the Quartet’s finale reflects a sense of insincerity, or at least of craftsmanship without heartfelt inspiration at the root of the movement. A similar indication of possibly “lightweight” qualities of the rondo finale is evident in an anonymous survey of Ben-Haim’s life and works, published by Israeli Music Publications on the occasion of the composer’s 70th birthday. This survey oddly dismisses the

movement as “a delicate rondo” (the description of the third movement as “a short, air-like Andante” is equally inadequate) (p. 20). Yet, such evaluations of the last movement appear markedly different from contemporary responses. In private interviews with composer Michael Wolpe, composer Haim Alexander recalled the intense emotional reactions of listeners during the first performance of the last movement, who identified behind it a powerfully pessimistic and moving narrative. Indeed, in its shift from a liltily sad Jewish dance at the beginning of the movement to a sense of extreme catastrophe at its end, the movement reminds modern listeners of the Finale of Shostakovich’s piano trio No. 2, composed seven years later as a response to the atrocities committed by the Nazis against the Jews in the Holocaust. Ben-Haim’s movement was composed before the Holocaust, but well after the Nazis rose to power. According to Wolpe, Ben-Zion Orgad (1926–2006), one of Ben-Haim’s students, recalled that the composer spoke of a pseudo-autobiographical program underlying the Quartet as reflecting the historical conditions under which it was composed, with the finale presenting a prophetic lament over the future of European Jewry. The broad opening theme, according to Orgad, reflects Ben-Haim’s emotional response on his arrival in “the promised land, that received him with warmth and light, free from dense harmonies, and quiet and open in its expanses.”¹⁰ In the finale, the simple refrain melody represents the *shtetl*, the thousands of small Jewish communities dotted throughout Europe, the first episode depicting their violent fate, ending in a heart-rending lament full of grief and anguish. Throughout the movement, the composer’s musical alter ego, the opening theme of the Quartet, can do little but observe from a distance, involved and sympathetic, yet remote and helpless.

Like many programmatic interpretations to seemingly abstract musical works, Orgad’s narrative has much appeal, yet it is important to remain aware of the possible motivations behind such interpretations. Following the movement’s kinship to Shostakovich, noted above, it is revealing to draw a comparison with programmatic interpretations of Shostakovich’s instrumental works, in particular the third and eighth quartets or the Seventh symphony, all of which have been offered multiple (and contradictory) programs, while still standing firmly as convincing abstract instrumental works in their own right. Such programs, whether imagined or real, have the power of politicizing what otherwise might be considered as an innocuous work, reading concealed agendas that redeem or condemn the composer. Interpreting the fourth movement of Shostakovich’s Eighth Quartet as representing a “literal evocation of the Dresden bombing”¹¹ aligns the quartet with an anti-fascist or pacifist cause that would have been general enough to be palatable by the Soviet authorities. Alternatively, interpreting it as “the knock on the door by the KGB,” as suggested by Maxim Shostakovich, permits the revisionist “post-communist” image of Shostakovich as a subversive and heroic composer¹² (MacDonald, 222; Robinson, 397-98 and 390; “Shostakovich Symposium,” *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 390). Typically, both interpretations were transmitted orally and in private and are thus impossible to verify or falsify, and they each present distinct and even contradictory images of the composer.

In common with these interpretations of Shostakovich, the programmatic interpretation of Ben-Haim’s Quartet comes also from indirect, privately transmitted oral traditions. It also has political potential, namely, acquitting Ben-Haim from an accusation frequently directed toward

¹⁰ Quotes on this subject are from a personal correspondence with Michael Wolpe.

¹¹ Christopher Norris, “Shostakovich: Politics and Musical Language,” in *Shostakovich, the Man and his Music*, ed. Christopher Norris (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984), 163-88 (p. 179).

¹² See Allan B. Ho & Dmitry Feofanov, “Shostakovich Symposium,” in *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, (London: Toccata Press, 1998), 373-99 (p. 390); Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 222.

the Jewish settlement in Israel in the late 1930s: that of indifference to the fate of fellow Jews in Europe. In one of my first performances of the Quartet, a musicologist present in the audience described it as an “autistic” work, reflecting his discomfort with the notion of composing “absolute” music in classical models at such a time. Ben-Haim’s conservative style makes his music particularly susceptible to this kind of criticism. Labeling a work or a style as conservative too easily implies a failure to keep up with and respond to the times. But this equation is obviously too simplistic.¹³ Escapism, reactionism, and nostalgia are but a few modes of looking backward in direct response to current events. For Ben-Haim, music seemed to play an escapist role, offering him consolation after his return from the front in World War I,¹⁴ at a time when many of his contemporaries were using the arts to vent their rage.¹⁵ This is not to say, however, that his music contains no traces of his emotional and physical experiences. I have already suggested elsewhere that his string quintet of 1919 may have contained echoes of his traumatic trudge back from the Belgian front to Munich.¹⁶ His first symphony, composed in 1939–40 at the behest of Leo Kestenberg, was, as Ben-Haim himself testified:

... not free from the influence of contemporary events: the horrible terror of the forces of evil has certainly left its mark on my work (at least in the first movement and to some extent in the last as well). Nevertheless, the work remains pure absolute music, and I made no attempt at concrete extra-musical depiction. If anyone considers this a contradiction, I respond with the beautiful words of Schumann, applying them to myself without too much modesty: “all contemporary events affect me: politics, literature, people; I think about everything in my usual way, and in my music it all seeks an outlet and bursts out into the open.” (Hirshberg, 192-93)

Taken at face value, the soberness of Ben-Haim’s self-testimony should make us skeptical of overly literal readings such as that of Orgad. Yet Ben-Haim’s denial of narrative content and his self-proclaimed partisanship to an ideal of musical purity through “pure absolute music,” is typical of late romantic composers, many of whom we now know to have been guided by a narrative when composing a work, only to suppress that program at the work’s completion.

In order to evaluate the potential of Orgad’s interpretation, it is necessary to closely examine the musical text, to “fill in the blanks” in the transmitted narrative. This is not to say that every note in the Quartet must correspond to an event in the narrative, but rather that the narrative amounts to more than a system of generalized labels. This is what I propose to do in the remainder of this article.

Orgad’s narrative opens with Ben-Haim’s arrival on the shores of the Land of Israel, contemplating its quietude and freedom, where he may find “a field for tranquil and fruitful endeavor,” in the words of music critic Menashe Rabinowitz in his review of Ben-Haim’s first performances in Israel (*Davar*, 2 June 1933). The first theme expresses this sense of broad, uncomplicated, and welcoming expanses in its open harmonies. It is significant that the theme is introduced by the viola. The viola, probably by virtue of its “intensely personal

¹³ For a nuanced discussion see, e.g., John Street, *Music and Politics* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

¹⁴ See Hirshberg, 24-25.

¹⁵ Erwin Schulhoff’s Dadaist works of 1919 offer a particularly stark contrast to Ben-Haim’s romanticism in the quintet of the same year. See Yoel Greenberg, “Parables of the Old Men and the Young: The Multifarious Modernisms of Erwin Schulhoff’s String Quartets,” *Music and Letters* 95, 2 (2014): 213-50.

¹⁶ Yoel Greenberg, “Drawn Up out of a Mute Wellspring: The Revival of Paul Ben-Haim’s Early String Quintet (1919),” *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 9, I (2012): 25-42.

tone,”¹⁷ has a long tradition in classical music in general—*Harold in Italy* being the most obvious example—and in the string quartet in particular—Smetana’s quartet, “From my Life” opens with an extended viola solo, and the second of Britten’s *Three Divertimenti for String Quartet*, a musical self-portrait of the composer, is entirely dedicated to the viola—as the representative of the composer’s voice, or the essence of the subjective. This corroborates Orgad’s interpretation of the work as partly autobiographical, or at least intensely personal.

Indeed, Ben-Haim’s letters from that time express a sense of wonder, curiosity, and excitement on his arrival in the Land of Israel. But hope is mixed with worry and apprehension. In a letter to his sister Dora from 13 June 1933, for instance, he writes “everything is still stuck in the most primitive beginnings and it is a big question whether anything can develop in the foreseeable future. I believe that it cannot!” only to continue “In spite of everything, when I ponder day and night on the question of settling here, the response is more and more positive.” Fluctuations between hope and despair are typical of the Quartet as a whole, and particularly the first movement, in the contrast between the broad intervals and open harmonization of the opening theme with the dense rising seconds of the second theme and its chromatically scurrying accompaniment. The second theme’s fluctuations between ascending and then falling major and minor thirds provides further effective (even if simplistic) layers, in which hope and despair are present side by side.

“Tel Aviv is impressive because of the energy invested in building a modern city,” wrote Ben-Haim on his initial encounter with the first Israeli city. “But what a city!” he continued, “An ugly pot-pourri of Berlin and Poland, Russian and American elements.” Yet it was in this city that Ben-Haim chose to make his residence, enjoying its bustling daily life, his regular morning swims in the sea, and its lively European coffee houses. It does not seem overly fanciful to hear in the frenetic second movement a musical portrait of the city, or at least a soundscape resonant with Ben-Haim’s day-to-day life there. This is supported by the nostalgic reminiscence of German coffeehouses in the *ländler*-like trio. The manner in which the theme is set in relief—high register in all instruments, *con sordino* and with a transparent texture that favors parallel motion over dense counterpoint—is typical of Ben-Haim’s handling of “imported” themes (e.g. his own setting of a Morgenstern song in the String Quintet, and the Persian song *Elohei Zidki* in the Clarinet Quintet). After a performance of the Quartet in the United States in 2005, one member of the audience identified the theme of the *ländler* as a German folk tune to the words “Ach wie lieblich,” a notion in accord with Orgad’s interpretation and Ben-Haim’s scoring, but which I have been unable to corroborate. Nevertheless, the trio is doubtlessly a *ländler*, as may be seen by its comparison with the third of Schubert’s 17 *Ländler* D. 366, and by the typically *ländler*-like flowing eighth-note figurations that become part of its accompaniment. It is also undoubtedly nostalgic in its setting, due to the muted strings, its ethereal high register (as opposed to Schubert’s earthly low one), its reduced tempo (*Piu tranquillo*), and its hushed dynamics.

¹⁷ Rebecca Clarke, “The History of the Viola in Quartet Writing,” *Music and Letters* 4, 1 (1923): 6-17, 7.

Example 8: Schubert, No. 3 from 17 Ländler D. 366; and the Trio from the second movement of Ben-Haim’s String Quartet

The image displays two musical excerpts. The top excerpt is Schubert's No. 3 from 17 Ländler D. 366, a 3/4 piece in G major. It features a piano accompaniment with a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand. The bottom excerpt is the Trio from the second movement of Ben-Haim's String Quartet, marked 'Più tranquillo' with a tempo of quarter note = 52. It is in 3/4 time and G major. The score shows four staves: Violin I (pp espr.), Violin II (pp), Viola (pp senza espressione), and Cello/Double Bass (pp senza espressione). The music is characterized by long, flowing lines with many ties and slurs, creating a sense of continuous motion.

The third movement, as observed by Hirshberg, is “the most complex stylistic synthesis in the work” (p. 150), a series of variations on a simple melody constructed as a symmetrical period, but with modal harmony that avoids cadences or leading tones. There is no obvious programmatic background to this movement, but it counts as one of Ben-Haim’s earliest attempts to embrace the challenge that faced him on arrival in the Land of Israel: to combine Eastern and Western musical traditions into a new, unified style.

The fourth movement lies at the heart of Orgad’s interpretation, and thus deserves more detailed attention than that dedicated to the first three. The identity of the refrain is elusive, at times sounding oriental in character (as some of the accompanying figures, e.g., 2nd violin in measures 13-16 or viola in measures 26-27, most certainly are), though equally comfortable as Eastern-European, hence Hirshberg’s aptly vague labeling as “folkloristic.”¹⁸

The unclear ethnic identity of the refrain detracts from Orgad’s interpretation (or, perhaps, from Ben-Haim’s realization of it), which relies heavily on the identification of the theme as Eastern European, signifying the *shtetl*. With the theme of doubtful identity, its signifying power, and consequently the power of the interpretation, is substantially diminished. The first episode is more convincingly appropriate to Orgad’s narrative, which speaks of visitations of violence upon the *shtetl*. The violence of the episode is unmistakable, with its evocation of a saber dance with its percussive rhythmic qualities and brittle effects, such as *pizzicato* and *col legno*, as well as the occasional oriental flourish.¹⁹

¹⁸ Although later (p. 348), Hirshberg compares the refrain theme with the more obviously oriental themes of the *Melody with Variations* and the Finale of the Piano Sonata.

¹⁹ What may seem like a similarity to Khachaturian’s Saber Dance is purely coincidental: *Gayane* was composed five years after Ben-Haim’s Quartet.

Example 9: Oriental flourish in 2nd violin in first episode ([Audio Example](#))

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet in 3/8 time, featuring an 'Oriental flourish' in the second violin part. The score is written for four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The Violin II part is marked with 'pizz.' and 'p' (piano). The Viola and Violoncello parts also feature 'pizz.' and 'p' markings. The music consists of quarter notes and eighth notes, with some slurs and dynamic markings.

The return of the refrain brings us back to the *shtetl*, although now with echoes of the violence of the saber dance, particularly in the *pizzicato* quarter notes, at first in the first violin and later in the viola.

The second episode presents a change of mood, turning to introvert retrospection through the recall of material from the first movement. At first, these references are subtle and scarcely recognizable: the steadily rising sequence of descending thirds, played in sixths in the high register of the first violin, recalls the use of the very same elements in the *appassionato* episode in the development section of the first movement.

Example 10: Fourth Movement, second episode ([Audio Example](#))

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet in 3/8 time, featuring the 'Fourth Movement, second episode'. The score is written for four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The Violin I part is marked with 'sfz espress.' and 'p'. The Violin II part is marked with 'pp' and 'p'. The Viola part is marked with 'sfz' and 'p'. The Violoncello part is marked with 'p' and 'f'. The music consists of quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes, with some slurs and dynamic markings. The score is divided into two systems, each with four measures.

Example 11: Appassionato episode from the development section of the first movement ([Audio Example](#))

The musical score for Example 11 consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Cello, and Viola. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4, which changes to 3/4 in the final measure. The first two staves are marked *f appassionato*. The Cello part is marked *f non legato* and features a prominent trill. The Viola part is marked *f* and features a trill-like figure. The final measure of the score is marked *ff*.

Here it is coupled with reminiscences of the saber dance in harmonics on the cello, and with a Valkyrie-like trill on the second violin. Although Wagner was not yet the icon of Nazi Germany that he is today in the Israeli consciousness, it was only one year later, in November 1938, that his music was banned from a concert of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra following the events of *Kristallnacht*. Therefore the possibility of an oblique reference to German violence toward Jews may be plausible with the trill-like figurations sustained by the second violin and the viola, the musical climaxes, which then subside into a reminiscence of the opening theme of the Quartet, first on the cello, and later on the viola.

Example 12: Return of the opening theme in the second episode of the fourth movement ([Audio Example](#))

The musical score for Example 12 consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Cello, and Viola. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first two staves are marked *pp*. The Cello part is marked *pp* and features a trilled pedal point. The Viola part is marked *p* and features a trilled pedal point. The score transitions from 4/4 to 3/4 time in the final measure.

The overall impact of this episode is extremely theatrical, with the self-reference in the recall of the opening theme of the Quartet suggesting a subjective self-consciousness, or the voice of the composer; the distant recalls of the saber dance hinting at the traumatic consequences of past violence; and the suspense added by the trilled pedal point framing the whole in an atmosphere of impending disaster. Orgad's notion of the composer concernedly following acts of violence from afar thus closely matches the musical text.

When the refrain returns, it once again carries with it remnants from the preceding episode. This time it is the suspenseful trill that becomes undulating eighth-notes in the viola. These eighth-notes become increasingly excited, eventually taking over entirely and accelerating into the third episode, a repeat of the saber dance. But now, instead of returning to the refrain, the

dance subsides and disintegrates, slowing down to a hushed trill on the cello, on which the viola plays a quasi-improvisatory recitative based on the refrain.

Example 13: Fourth movement, viola recitative ([Audio Example](#))

The image displays a musical score for the fourth movement, specifically the viola recitative. It consists of three systems of staves. The top system shows the viola part (treble clef) and the cello part (bass clef). The viola part begins with a *pp* dynamic and a tempo marking of *Piu lento, rubato e fantastico*. It features a series of notes with dynamics ranging from *p* to *mf*, followed by an *accel.* section, a *lento* section, and a *molto accel. e crescendo* section. The cello part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with triplets and a *pp* dynamic. The second system continues the viola part with a *f* dynamic and a *lento* tempo, and the cello part with triplets and a *f* dynamic. The third system shows the viola part with an *accel.* marking and a *p* dynamic, followed by a *molto rit.* section and a *Presto* section. The cello part also has an *accel.* marking and a *p* dynamic, followed by a *molto rit.* section and a *ff* dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

It is here that Orgad’s narrative is at its most convincing. The viola part is rife with augmented seconds and impassioned sigh motifs, and its culmination in a leap from the instrument’s lowest register to a piercing fortissimo scream in its higher ones, imparts a sense of heartrending anguish. The closing *presto* again takes up a version of the refrain motif, which becomes wildly faster and louder to reach the violent climax that ends the Quartet. Therefore, throughout the coda as a whole, the naïve folklorism of the opening theme succumbs to the violent impulses that disrupted it throughout the movement.

In sum, if we uncritically accept the identification of the theme of the refrain with European Jewry, Orgad’s programmatic narrative provides a convincingly close and powerfully autobiographical reading—not only of the finale, but of the quartet in its entirety, its mixture of serenity and anxiety, bustling energy and poignant nostalgia, traditional German classicism and oriental fantasy, all reflecting Ben-Haim’s own mental state at the time. We only have this interpretation from secondhand hearsay, and its authenticity will probably always remain unclear. Yet, in the numerous times I have performed Ben-Haim’s Quartet before audiences in Israel and abroad, acquainting the audience with Orgad’s reading of it has unfailingly enriched their experience of the piece. Thus, like many of the orally transmitted programs to Shostakovich’s works, or, more broadly, like so many apocryphal stories about culture, the programmatic interpretation, regardless of its authenticity, becomes an inseparable agent in the work’s reception, and in the wake of postmodernism in general and reception theory in particular, the question of authenticity becomes a moot point. What I have sought to achieve in this article, is to record and elaborate on the hitherto oral narrative—whether simply transmitted by Orgad, or invented by him *ex nihilo*—for it has, by now, become an integral part of the Quartet’s relevance to our own times. For, to quote Pierre Nora, “What counts are not objects, mere signs and traces, but the nature of the relationship to the past, and the ways that the present uses and reconstructs the past.”