

Review

Carmel Quartet, with Shuli Waterman, viola. *Paul Ben-Haim: Chamber Music for Strings*. Toccata Classics (TOCC 0214).

“The music of pilgrimage...is contested music,” wrote Philip Bohlman in his 1996 discussion of music that accompanies journeys to holy sites in the “New Europe.”¹ Music, Bohlman argued, plays a significant role in the geographical–spiritual migrations associated with pilgrimage, and he remarked on the surprising rise in the incidence of religious pilgrimage in the modern era. In a moment in history that seems to shun religious superstition, pilgrimage to holy sites creates a sense of empowerment and community. Nevertheless, in setting peoples into motion, pilgrimage also causes tension—tension expressed, among other ways, through music.

The journey from Germany to Palestine that witnessed the transformation of Paul Frankenburger into Paul Ben-Haim was also a pilgrimage of sorts—albeit one forced and hastened by the specter of Nazism; the trigger, in some ways, for the formation of the “New Europe.” And the musical results of Ben-Haim’s journey are no less contested than the pilgrimage music that Bohlman described.

Two important way-stations along Ben-Haim’s journey have come into focus in a remarkable new recording issued by the Carmel Quartet—Rachel Ringelstein and Liah Raikhlin, violins; Yoel Greenberg, viola; and Tami Waterman, cello—with guest violist Shuli Waterman, on Toccata Classics. The album features the performances of two of Ben-Haim’s works for string ensemble: the string quartet no. 1, op. 21, and—in a premiere recording—the string quintet in E minor. Together, these two works attest to the composer’s journey through space and time, from his early work in the Richard-Strauss-inflected style in which he was trained at the Munich Music Academy, to his later attempts at forging a style that would reflect his new geographical and cultural realities—as well as his new, Hebraized name—in Palestine. In both works, the performers display great musical sensitivity, producing a wide array of timbres and adapting themselves to the composer’s rich stylistic palette. Their musicality and technical virtuosity do great service to Ben-Haim’s works; the performances are clear, impassioned, and committed.

The musicological apparatus that accompanies the recording is substantial and noteworthy. An introductory essay by Jehoash Hirshberg, Ben-Haim’s biographer, opens the booklet. A lengthy essay written by violist and music theorist Yoel Greenberg follows, including facsimiles and musical examples. Greenberg offers insightful analyses of the two works on the CD, illustrating the themes of the various movements and describing their transformation through Ben-Haim’s formal processes. Both essays are informative and highly accessible, and both draw upon the authors’ considerable experience with Ben-Haim’s music.²

The author wishes to thank Ronit Seter for her valuable comments on this essay.

¹ Philip V. Bohlman, “Pilgrimage, Politics, and the Musical Remapping of the New Europe,” *Ethnomusicology* 40, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 390.

² Hirshberg’s monumental biography, *Paul Ben-Haim: His Life and Works*, is now in its third edition; references here are to the second edition (Jerusalem: Israeli Music Publications, Ltd., 1990). See also 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.

Ben-Haim composed his string quartet—by far the more widely known of the two works—in 1937. Following his immigration to Mandatory Palestine, this was one of the first works that he wrote after a multi-year break from composition, and it represented a “great turning point to a new original Palestinian creation.”³ The quintet was composed in 1919, in the aftermath of World War I, during which he experienced numerous personal traumas as well as the death of his brother and his mother. This was before Frankenburger changed his name to Ben-Haim.⁴ The quintet was performed numerous times in Germany prior to 1931. Following the composer’s emigration in 1933, this work was all but lost until Greenberg stumbled across the manuscript and the Carmel Quartet undertook a revival of the work.⁵ Ben-Haim was reluctant to have his early works from Germany performed in his new home; he initially stipulated in his will that only a select few of his early works be performed, implying that he desired an almost total divorce from his early output. Later, however, he allowed more of his early works to be performed.⁶ As part of the present-day revival of the quintet, the Israel Music Institute issued an edition of this work that up to now had been hidden away in the Ben-Haim Archive at the National Library of Israel.⁷ With the edition and the present recording, it is now possible to gain a more comprehensive picture of Ben-Haim’s musical development.

As Hirshberg suggested, the transformation of Frankenburger into Ben-Haim involved a concomitant shift in styles, especially as the composer began to integrate melodies and harmonies that would evoke the local Middle Eastern flavor. Nevertheless, even during its initial reception, the music of Ben-Haim’s post-immigration period displayed strong affinities with the Western European tradition. Some passages of the 1937 string quartet seem no more “Jewish” or Arabic than other works of the same era. The third movement in particular—“Largo e molto sostenuto”—may represent a rejection of the thick textures of late German Romanticism, but its modal language and open sonorities have a great deal in common with the French style of the early twentieth century. By contrast, the “Rondo–Finale” of the quartet, with its drones and Arabic-inflected melodies—though representing a clear departure from the composer’s earlier period—is strongly related, as Hirshberg suggested, to the “folkloristic” finale movements of Brahms⁸; indeed, Ben-Haim himself suggested Brahms’s Hungarian-influenced music as one of his models for the incorporation of folk elements into his own works.⁹ The mixed reception of Ben-Haim’s music during the formative period of an Israeli musical style, as Ronit Seter and others have noted, may have been due to his retention of many formal and textural elements of his German training, resulting in a style that integrated Arab-Jewish and Arabic music only superficially, rather than as integral components. The Rondo–Finale of the quartet is a case in point: the movement obviously uses as its template a formal model from European art music, merely superimposing *Mizrahi* or Arabic melodies on top.

The exploration of Ben-Haim’s melding of musical styles—evident in different ways in both the quartet and the quintet—is among the most important of the contributions made by this recording. Hirshberg has characterized Ben-Haim’s stylistic heterogeneity as a manifestation of a

³ Biography of Ben-Haim (1945), quoted in Seter, “Hirshberg’s *Ben-Haim*,” 103.

⁴ Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim*, 24-25.

⁵ Greenberg, “Drawn Up out of a Mute Wellspring,” 39-40. Hirshberg had discussed the quintet in his biography, but the work remained unavailable to performers and scholars; see Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim*, 30, 50-51.

⁶ On Hirshberg’s role in bringing these early works to performance, see Seter, “Hirshberg’s *Ben-Haim*,” 101.

⁷ The edition is described and evaluated in Greenberg, “Drawn Up out of a Mute Wellspring,” 40-42.

⁸ Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim*, 152.

⁹ Ben-Haim expressed this view in his responses to a survey drawn up by Amnon Shiloah in 1953; Ben-Haim’s responses are discussed in Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim*; 294 ff.

“self-induced feeling of confusion and loss of direction,” which, he suggests, “are the most faithful expressions of Israeli society and its culture...in the twentieth century.”¹⁰ But it is not just Israeli society, or the society of Mandatory Palestine, to which Ben-Haim was responding; his juxtaposition of divergent styles was a feature of his music even in his early works, including the quintet, although the vocabularies he drew upon in that work were quite different. Greenberg noted that the quintet initially received a mixed reception; critics were put off by its “hodge-podge of styles.”¹¹ Greenberg recast this criticism in more positive terms, suggesting that it “result[s] in a felicitous and consistently engaging work.”¹²

Indeed, the themes of the three-movement quintet derive from widely varying source-material and stylistic templates, and the effectiveness of this recording is due in no small part to the performers’ abilities to capture each of these characters convincingly and expressively. The performance of the second movement of the quintet, “*Sehr langsam, mit tiefster Empfindung*,” is particularly affective; the searching harmonic language of the movement is communicated through the performers’ variations in sound according to the instrument’s function at each moment. A unified, haunting timbre sounds at the opening of the movement, and melodies that grow out of this backdrop are projected using distinctive sound-colors, and expressive, rhetorical gestures. Throughout the work, the addition of the second viola to the standard quartet medium offered both the composer and the performers an opportunity to explore a variety of sonorities that otherwise would have been unavailable. Among these is a deep, rich sound that attests to Frankenburger’s late-Romantic training-ground.

Although the finales of the quartet and the quintet contrast sharply with one another in their thematic material, it is significant that the composer chose the rondo as the formal template for both movements. He seems to have viewed this form as a catalyst for the expression of his diverse tastes and stylistic interests, and, in both movements, the main thematic material is set off by widely varying intermediate sections. The performers on this recording project this variety with noteworthy fluency, shifting from one idea to another with ease.

The fact that one aspect of Ben-Haim’s approach to music involved a juxtaposition of diverse musical styles seems clear, although it manifests itself to greater and lesser extents in different works. However, the purposes of this approach—and its implications for the history of European music, Israeli music, and Jewish music—have yet to be explained fully. It seems possible that Ben-Haim viewed stylistic variety as a means of cultural mediation—as a synthesizing force, perhaps, in a world that presented him with chaos, or as a commentary on that chaos. As Seter suggested, however, characterizations of the stylistic diversity of Ben-Haim’s music are reminiscent of similar criticisms leveled at the music of Mahler, an early influence on Ben-Haim, as well as other Jewish composers.¹³ Whether or not we discern such a stylistic heterogeneity in Ben-Haim’s *oeuvre*, we would do well to remember that anti-Jewish

¹⁰ Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim*, 373. A critique of this analysis appears in Ronit Seter, “Hirshberg’s *Ben-Haim*: Three Decades Later,” *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology* 9 (2011): 105-106; see also Hirshberg, “A Response to Ronit Seter’s Review of my Monograph *Paul Ben-Haim: His Life and Works*,” *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology* 9 (2011).

¹¹ Review by Alfred Einstein, published in the *Rheinischer Musik und Theater-Zeitung*, quoted in Greenberg, “Drawn Up out of a Mute Wellspring,” 29.

¹² Greenberg, “Drawn Up out of a Mute Wellspring,” 29.

¹³ Ronit Seter, private correspondence, December 2014. The relationship between Ben-Haim’s music and that of Mahler is explored in Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim*, passim.

narratives related to the perceived “noisiness” of Jewish music have frequently informed such critiques of this compositional approach.¹⁴

The political implications of Ben-Haim’s works go beyond stylistic critique. It is perhaps unsurprising that works by Jewish composers from the period of the *Yishuv* and the early State of Israel are used in evaluations of the region’s politics, and that Ben-Haim’s music features prominently in such discussions. Recently, for example, Rachel Beckles Willson wrote of the need to assess the music of the first generation of art-music composers in Israel in light of their status as a “trigger for displacements of local people in Palestine.”¹⁵ In some respects, such discussions are quite proper: the formation of an art music for the growing Jewish population in Palestine was an effort with consciously political overtones.¹⁶ Yet, as Seter and Ralph Locke have shown, critiques of Ben-Haim’s “Orientalist” style descend into the essentialism and vilification that have dominated much of the study of Orientalism in music since the publication of Edward Said’s manifesto of that name.¹⁷

The stark opposition into which the study of Orientalism forces us as listeners and scholars—the choice between vilification of composers like Ben-Haim for their Orientalist musical tendencies and apologetics on his behalf for the same—is of course more a product of our own day than of his. We can hardly consider Ben-Haim to be a powerful figure, especially in the 1930s, when he fled Nazi Germany and resettled in Palestine. Indeed, his music has been placed so far on the margins of mainstream art music that we might wonder whether it should be understood within the category of Holocaust music—music that responded to the Holocaust and which scholars in the field of musicology engage *only* because of its special status with respect to the Holocaust. As Bohlman notes, the field of historical musicology has relegated Holocaust music “to the status of the exotic,”¹⁸ neglecting to incorporate it into the main historiographical narratives—perhaps because it responded to such extreme and horrifying historical events. Yet the Orientalist narratives of Ben-Haim’s music deny his status as a victim and cast him instead as an oppressor.

Furthermore, as Seter has shown, the Orientalist narrative fails to account for Ben-Haim’s own views on the subject. His writings from the 1930s onward suggest that he saw his effort to create a compositional style for his new home *not* as an attempt not to appropriate and assert control over the local music, but rather to build bridges and dialogue among the many diverse populations of the area.¹⁹ He took a special interest in the cultivation of Arabic traditions and of an art music that would combine these traditions with Jewish music of both Ashkenazi and *Mizrahi* descent.²⁰

¹⁴ See Ruth HaCohen, *The Music Libel Against the Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Rachel Beckles Willson, review of *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities, and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*, ed. Erik Levi & Florian Scheduling (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2010), in *Yearbook for Traditional Music* (2012): 187-89. The essay that comes under special scrutiny in this review is Jehoash Hirshberg, “The Vision of the East and the Heritage of the West: Displacement as a Catalyst for the Creation of Musical Life in the Jewish Community of Palestine,” in *Music and Displacement*, 57-70. See also Peter Tregear’s review of the same volume in *Music & Letters* 94, no. 3 (2013): 554.

¹⁶ See Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim*, especially Chapter 16, “Fanfare for Israel.”

¹⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Ralph Locke, “Musical Voyages and Their Baggage: Orientalism in Music and Critical Musicology,” *The Musical Quarterly* 94 (2011): 417-38; and Ronit Seter, “Israelism: Nationalism, Orientalism, and the Israeli Five,” in *The Musical Quarterly* 97, no. 2 (2014): 238-308. I am grateful to Seter for sharing her work with me in advance of publication.

¹⁸ Philip Bohlman, “World Music at the ‘End of History,’” *Ethnomusicology* 46, no. 1 (Winter 2002), 21.

¹⁹ Seter, “Israelism,” 262–63.

²⁰ See Hirshberg, *Paul Ben-Haim*, 294-95.

The analogy with which I started—that between Ben-Haim’s exile from Germany and the modern-day religious pilgrimages—is of course an artificial one. Ben-Haim did not set out from Germany as a pilgrim, but as a refugee. Nevertheless, Bohlman’s theory of pilgrimage helps to shed light on an aspect of Ben-Haim’s music that is overshadowed in the discourse on Orientalism—namely his search for a personal and national past. For, as Bohlman has shown, spiritual pilgrimages often involve a pilgrimage through time—a quest to recover a lost history.²¹ Ben-Haim’s journey through space was equally a journey through time; in evoking music of his surroundings in Palestine, he was attempting to recover his own lost heritage.²² Whether he would have embarked on such a journey without the bite of Nazism at his heels is an academic question.

The revival of the Frankfurter string quintet represents the recovery of a lost heritage as well, and we should thank the Carmel quartet for undertaking it on behalf of contemporary listeners and thinkers. If music represents an expression of and response to the human experience, then the responses of an artist like Ben-Haim to the dramatic events of his lifetime are of great import. Juxtaposition of the quartet and the quintet helps to complete the picture of the composer’s life journey.

At its core, then, this recording by the Carmel Quartet constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of Ben-Haim and his music precisely because it is a *musical* contribution, and a testimony to Ben-Haim’s search for a personal compositional voice. The composer’s choices are valid and valuable witnesses to his capacity to regenerate and reshape his artistic identity in the wake of trauma and loss. The players of the Carmel Quartet have become powerful advocates for Ben-Haim’s music, and their recording prompts us as listeners and thinkers to engage with his work on its own terms.

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²¹ Bohlman, “Pilgrimage, Politics, and the Musical Remapping of the New Europe,” 395.

²² Seter, “Israelism,” 248.