Yehezkel Braun (Breslau, 18 January 1922—Tel Aviv, 26 August 2014) and his Rebellion against Composing while Thinking

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In the present article, I will present a brief assessment of Yehezkel Braun's highly individual contribution to Israeli art music. One of Israel's greatest composers, he was the last of the second phase of composers who founded Israeli art music. The first phase included the "founding fathers" who were born between 1891–1915, raised and educated in Europe, and immigrated to Palestine in the 1930s (Erich [Walter] Sternberg; Paul [Frankenburger] Ben-Haim; Karl [Salomon] Shalmon; [Heinrich] Hanokh Jacobi; Marc Lavri, [Alexander] U. Boscovic; Joseph [Grünthal] Tal; Ődőn Partos; and Verdina Shlonsky. Menahem [Mahler-Kalkstein] Avidom and Mordechai [Straominsky] Seter immigrated with their parents as young boys, studied abroad, and returned to Palestine in the 1930s. Stefan Wolpe left the country in 1939. [Heinz] Haim Alexander completed his studies in Jerusalem). The second phase included those born in the 1920s in Germany, who were brought to Palestine as small children, and educated in this country. They included Yehezkel Braun, Ben-Zion [Buschel] Orgad (1926–2006), and Zvi Avni (b. 1927).

Yehezkel Braun's compositional career spanned over sixty years. Braun's military service in the British army during the last year of World War II and in the newly formed IDF in the 1948 war, when he was among the defenders of his Kibbutz, Mishmar Ha'Emek, prevented him from regular music studies until the late 1940s.

Braun started composing works for kibbutz functions, such as the Spring Legend. Most of these were lost, but he incorporated sections of some of them in his later works. His agricultural work in the kibbutz postponed his full-scale musical activity until 1951, when he left the kibbutz and became a very busy music teacher, teaching in several schools at the same time, most importantly at the Music Teachers' Training College and at the Music Academy of Tel Aviv, which became part of Tel Aviv University. Despite these vicissitudes, he became a highly prolific composer. His last work was the Wind Quintet, written when he was ninety.

Yehezkel Braun's Output

Braun's enormous output can be divided into six major categories:

1. Orchestral works, more than half of which are concertos for solo instrument and orchestra.
2. Chamber works consisting of numerous solo works and duos, spanning nearly every melodic instrument (harp, violin, viola, cello, double bass, piccolo, flute, clarinet, trumpet, horn, bassoon, trombone, tuba, mandolin, and guitar), and almost all kinds of ensembles—from trios to sextets. Many of these works

resulted from personal acquaintances, sometimes very temporary, such as the trumpet sonata that started as a single movement written for a female student at the Academy whom "he liked," but who soon dropped out—he then completed the work as a three-movement sonata.

3. Works for piano solo. Although the piano was his favorite instrument, he did not perform as a pianist, and he preferred the piano as a chamber rather than a solo instrument.
4. The largest category is of choral works, both with and without an orchestra. Braun composed for every professional choir in the country, as well as for fine semi-professional amateur choirs. His many works range from the large-scale powerful oratorio *Night of No-Amon*, which is a setting of Nathan Altermann's masterpiece *Poems of the Plagues of Egypt*, to short, light a capella songs, many of them specifically intended for "girls." Braun always coordinated his music with the poetic aspects of the poems, embracing the stanza structure, the meter of the verses, and the emotional meaning of the lyrical texts. Most of the choral works are intended for chamber choruses of light texture, and a few for small vocal ensembles such as the brilliant, humoristic *Va'yimalet Cain* (*And Cain Escaped*) composed for the highly popular *Shlishiat Gesher Hayarkon* (*The Yarkon Bridge Trio*).

   A special sub-group is the settings of lyrics in ancient Greek and Latin, which Braun had systematically studied at the Department of Classical Studies of Tel Aviv University. His most distinctive work is *Three Folk Songs* (1986), which alternates verse by verse between the original ancient Greek and the Hebrew translation.
5. A relatively small group of songs (Lieder) for voice with piano, or voice with a chamber ensemble.
6. An especially large group of arrangements of traditional or folk melodies, whether commissioned for specific events or artistic arrangements, such as the Passover songs.

Opera was the one genre that Braun did not touch. Apart from the practical need for a commission for such a large-scale work, Braun's personality as a composer tended to the introvert, lyrical, and structural, and less to the extrovert and dramatic.

Ideological Pressures

Yehezkel Braun studied for a short time with Alexander U. Boscovic (1907–1964), the main ideologue of Israeli national music, who coined the concept of "time and place" as the determining factor of Israeli music (J. Hirshberg, 1993). Braun began composing in the mid-1950s, at the time when young Israeli composers were under three types of ideological pressure:

1. To develop a national "Israeli" style. Critics and columnists judged them according to their adherence to this alleged style—the nature of which no one really knew. In the early 1950s, the first years of Israeli statehood, the concept of "Israeli Music" generally implied folk-like light and rhythmic dances, mostly Hora, which Boscovic and Max Brod termed "Mediterranean Music." Such were

Boscovic's *Piccola Suite* (1954), most of Marc Lavri's works, Ben-Haim's *"Israel" Suite* (1951), Menahem Avidom's *Mediterranean Sinfonietta* (1952), and Haim Alexander's *Israeli Dances* (1951). At that time, Bartok's music gained great popularity in Israel, mostly because of his dedication to folk music and his brave struggle against Fascism. Most local piano teachers used his Microcosmos systematically as pedagogical material for all levels. Braun was strongly influenced by Bartok in his early works.

2. The request to interpolate ethnic and traditional Jewish melos, such as *ta'amei hamikra* in their works. Israeli composers made great use of Idelsohn's *Thesaurus* and book on Jewish music (E. Schleifer, 1986). Young Yemenite singers became an important source of traditional melodies, mostly Bracha Zefira (c. 1910–90) as well as Shoshana Damari and the Imbal Dance Theater, founded by Sara Levi-Tanai in 1948. As a child, Braun was fascinated by the songs of the Yemenite women who passed next to his parents' home in the Rehovot settlement on their way to work.
3. The request to keep abreast with *avant-garde* music, mostly through Arnold Schoenberg's teachings, which were eagerly explored by Israeli composers and performers, who had been separated from them during the long war years. These teachings were disseminated mainly by musicologist and publisher Peter Emanuel Gradenwitz, composers Joseph Tal and Menahem Avidom, and performer Frank Polack-Pelleg. The newly-named Israel Philharmonic Orchestra amazed Israeli audiences with local premieres of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*. Violinist Yehudi Menuhin premiered Bartok's solo Sonata, the excellent Israeli String Quartet performed Bartok's Third and Fourth String Quartets and Prokofiev's Quintet, ad hoc chamber ensembles performed European avant-garde music, such as that composed by Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Joseph Tal founded the first Studio for Electronic Music at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Tal, 185). The slogan "nowadays one does not compose this way" became a vicious critical whip.

Braun's Rebellion

Braun's ideological rebellion started low key, as befitting his gentle, always pleasant nature, and consequently did not raise any opposing reaction. His first orchestral work was the *Flute Concerto* (1957), about which he wrote:

> At that time, I happened to hear on the radio a work for flute and strings composed by one of the Israeli composers. There were nice moments in this music, but also such of which I felt that "I would have continued differently." This feeling did not leave me and I sat down to write a flute concerto.

The rebellion continued with his second orchestral work, *Canticle for Strings* (1960). Braun's attestation of the composition process—as an afterthought—is an important key to the crystallization of his independent personality as a composer: He had just received a commission for the Ramat Gan String Orchestra.

> I picked up the music paper and started to think what to write (first mistake). I started to write something dazzling, like the blue skies of the Land of Israel

> (second mistake). And I remained stuck between decision and thought for an entire week. One should not think and should not decide about music. Music is something that either happens or does not. After an entire week of emotional torment and feelings of humiliation and failure, it did happen. I picked up the pencil and wrote something trivial…two weeks later I finished the work, nothing "dazzling," no "blue skies of the Land of Israel," but sixteen minutes of intense drama, of things evolving from things, and all issuing from the same trivial matter from which it all started. I called it Sonata for Strings. The publisher, Dr. Peter Emanuel Gradenwitz, agreed to take the work under his wing, but he expressed reservations…about the term Sonata. Instead, he suggested Psalm for Strings. Stupidly I agreed (fourth mistake). My stupidity had far-reaching consequences. Most critics hailed the work, although one of them opposed the complexity of the texture and another commented, contrarywise, that it was not "modern" enough. A third one praised the "Israeli" nature of the Psalm and was especially impressed by the "Jewish nature" of the second movement, although I interpolated into this movement an ancient Irish tune of rare beauty far from anything Jewish. Generally speaking, my Canticle had nothing to do with Psalm, with Jewishness, or with "Israelism." Many years later, the Psalm for Strings was performed in Prague as part of a festival on the theme of Bible in Music. Well….

Braun's rebellion soon burst out with a daring stylistic statement:

> I write for performers and instruments. I do not use performers and instruments to express a certain idea. Most of my works are for a solo instrument, or for an instrumental dialogue, and my musical taste is directed accordingly. I have no doubt about Mahler's greatness, but personally I have no patience to listen to an entire work by Mahler.… I gave up on two things: on thinking about music and on thinking what to think and how to think, to compose while thinking. It used to cause me torment and terrible emotional pain. One day I said to myself: the hell with all that, I will write what I hear. Another thing: the hope, weak as it was in the first place, which I attached to the dodecaphonic system and to serialism disappointed me. I made several attempts, I produced a few beautiful things but it always came out melodic and harmonic, never genuine twelve tone [a fine example of his very few dodecaphonic compositions is the Prelude and Passacaglia for harp solo (1967)]. I came to the conclusion: why do I need all that…. My basic principle remained thinking in sounds, not with concepts, not with emotions.

The most significant expression in Braun's statement is *I will write what I hear*, which is the key to his individual style. Every musician—and especially every composer—is familiar with the sensation of "hearing" music being played in his inner ear. This music is frequently a replay of sections or brief snatches from works to which the composer has listened and especially liked, whether they appear by themselves or are invoked deliberately. With composers, such inner hearing frequently stimulates their own creativity, which expands the previously heard music to new directions. In Braun's case, the process of Brahms's powerful influence was such. Following his short period of formal studies at the Academy of Music in Tel Aviv, he felt the need for further training and his first project was a thorough analysis he made on his own of Brahms's Symphony no. 4, with special emphasize on its

Finale, which he liked very much. This explains the powerful presence of Brahms in some of his music, mostly in a specific group of his chamber works. Braun's *Hexagon for String Sextet* indeed was premiered in a program together with Brahms's two Sextets, with which it forms an integrated unit. Brahms's admirable Piano Trios echo in Braun's four Trios, and Brahms's inclination to massive polyphonic texture has found its extreme expression in Braun's breathtaking *Music for Double Trio* (2001).

Braun has frequently expressed his admiration of Haydn coupled with his preference for the sonata form as the greatest achievement of Western art music. The full expression of his attitude is found in his Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Chamber Orchestra, composed in 2007 when he was 85. This is a massive concerto lasting about half an hour. Braun wrote:

> In this work the soloist is first among equals and therefore I named it Sinfonia rather than concerto. All instruments compete with one another, hence the title "concertante." Still the competition does not include all the effects and tricks found in the soloist's technique because they never interested me, to say the least, and I apologize for that. In this work, I endeavored to create a transparent polyphony, I tried to lead a creation of a clear form, a form with inner logic, which reflects the feeling of "this is the way it must be." Other than that, the Symphony does not try to "express" or to describe anything, no ideas, no feeling, no pictures, no story, it only offers itself to the listener as it is.

This is the embodiment of a classical attitude. Such also is the *Sonata for Mandolin and Guitar* (2004) which is full of Haydn's sophisticated humor. Braun's last composition is the lively *Wind Quintet* (2012), which is composed as a classical divertimento with large-scale movements in sonata form.

Braun's harmony is basically modal-diatonic and consonant, enriched by the minor seventh which acts as a consonant. He totally avoids the expressive Romantic chromaticism associated with Wagnerian harmony. Even in *The Night of No-Amon*, his darkest and most dramatic work, he bases the harmony on diatonic dissonant chords rich with major seconds.

A warm, friendly person all his life, Braun easily befriended his performers. In several cases, works that allegedly appeared like illustrations of ideology, were in reality the fruits of personal friendship. The most extreme case is that of Psalterion for santur and piano trio, which was soon arranged for santur and orchestra (2003). It had nothing to do with the ideology of the East, which prevailed in Israeli music in differing ways from the 1940s. It was a unique work resulting from Braun's chance meeting with the Persian carpet storeowner, Eli Sasson. Braun and his wife, Shulamit, noticed the santur in the carpet store, and Sasson willingly illustrated his virtuoso technique and mastery of Persian music, which he had started to play at the age of 47. Braun related: "Eli Sasson gave me his recorded cassette and I selected three movements that I notated as accurately as I could." At the same time, Braun formed a close friendship with the members of the Inbar Trio (pianist Lior Kertzer, violinist Uri Dror, and Cellist Michael Kroitero Weismann. Current pianist is Ariel Halevi), for whom he had composed trios 2-4. He then introduced Eli Sasson to the Trio: "I tried to teach the European instruments to talk Persian…this was one of the hardest jobs I ever did." Later, Sasson asked him to orchestrate the chamber work. He engaged the Jerusalem Symphony and Armenian conductor Vag Papian, and there were concerts in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. "One morning Sasson called me with a call for help: I

came to Jerusalem and mediated between him and the conductor. The members of the Trio naturally collaborated with him but, with the orchestra, it was terrible," the reason being that Sasson kept improvising and the orchestral players could not keep up with him. The two versions of the work are fascinating, yet Braun did not develop it further into an ideology, and the composition remained unique.

In the case of his numerous vocal works, Braun's process of invocation of inner hearing was especially complex. The text was his point of departure, yet it affected him in different ways, unique to each composition; the formal aspect of the poetic form, meter and accent always came first. The most extreme example is his masterpiece, *The Night of No-Amon*, in which his formal approach was based entirely on the strict poetic form of Altermann's great poem. The extent of expression of single words or sentences differed from work to work.

The last aspect that I would like to highlight is the salient communicability of Yehezkel Braun's music. The prevalence of flowing melody, easily grasped formal organization, and consonant qualities have made his works well received by audiences, despite the fact that the large forms of most of Braun's works require long spans of attention. Some of his works, mostly vocal, approached the foggy area separating popular, folk-like music from art works. The most important of them is the beautiful and charming cycle *Songs of the Dove* and *Lily* (1956) to poems by Lea Goldberg.

Braun's idiomatic writing made his works very attractive to first-rate performers, despite their extreme technical demands.

Many of Braun's works are readily available on the internet for readers of the present article.

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