Shlonsky, "The First Lady of Israeli Music"

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Say "Shlonsky" in Israel, and most people will instantly know who you are talking about—the poet Avraham Shlonsky. Shlonsky was one of the founders of modern Hebrew poetry in the 1930s, a leader in the generation that followed Bialik, who shaped—indeed reinvented—a Hebrew culture. Say "Shlonsky" to musicians: they will think the same thing. How many musicians know about Avraham Shlonsky's younger sister, Verdina? How many knew of her during her lifetime? Verdina Shlonsky (1905-90), like Sternberg, was apparently another victim of the exclusive club of national composers. But *her* "sins" were threefold: she was a woman; she was strongly attached to the European tradition and its contemporary composers—i.e. she was not "Israeli enough"; and, what is more, she had no interest in *Mizrahi* (Middle Eastern) music.

In the first place, Shlonsky was a female composer striving to achieve recognition in an entirely male-dominated profession. Until the early 1950s, there simply were no other women known to pursue seriously the composition of art music in Eretz-Israel. Since Jewish women musicians were rare at the turn of the century (to this day, women are not allowed to sing in Orthodox synagogues or in public, according to the halakhah of *kol be-ishah*[1]), and there were no women composers among the Jewish-Russian school, she had to struggle within a strongly patriarchal society to achieve even modest recognition as a composer. Even her numerous prose writings, through which she became known to some musicians, did not help her to gain performances and thus to sustain her name as a composer of merit. Only in her obituary was she acclaimed as "the first lady of Israeli music"—an accolade that held little meaning in Israel during her lifetime.[2]

Secondly, Shlonsky maintained ties with European musicians and composers to a far greater degree than did most of her local contemporaries; she traveled to the European centers of music much more frequently than they did. Consequently, she became

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[1] *Kol be-ishah* means, literally, "voice of a woman"; it is an halakhic term pertaining to the singing voice of women as being potentially seductive, hence forbidden. Beyond Jewish studies, especially Jewish gender studies, the issue has also been discussed within ethnomusicological discourse. Notably, see Ellen Koskoff, "Miriam Sings Her Song: The Self and the Other in Anthropological Discourse," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Koskoff's is one of the most inspired critical discussions of women's singing (amongst themselves) within Jewish Orthodox communities.

[2] Oded Assaf, "Electronit hi lo savla" ("Electronic [music] she Could not Bear"), *Ha-'ir* (Tel Aviv, 2 March 1990): 70. Shlonsky's writings, many of which were published in the newspaper *Al-Ha-mishmar*, can be found in the music archives of the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL), Hebrew University, Jerusalem (Givat Ram campus). Many of her writings were collected and edited by Herzl Shmueli for publication as a book, though the book never materialized. That collection is also kept at the National Library. For Shlonsky's biography, see Jenny Aouizerate-Levin, "Shlonski, Verdina" in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2007, just published, more accurate than her *Grove* entry); see also Jenny Aouizerate-Levin, "'Mi she-lo mistakel ve-lo ro'e, az efshar rak le-hagid she-haval…': Verdina Shlonski, sipur shel malhina" ("If one does not look and see, you can just say it is a pity…: Verdina Shlonski, a story of a composer"), MA seminar paper under Jehoash Hirshberg (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006).

perceived as an outsider of sorts, consistently interested more in international than in local work. She did not join her family when they made aliyah from Russia to Eretz-Israel in 1923. Rather, she stayed on in Europe for further studies, first in Berlin, where she studied with Artur Schnabel and Egon Petri, and then in Paris, with Nadia Boulanger, Max Deutsch, and Edgar Varèse.[3] While she spent some time in Palestine between 1934 and 1937 before she finally immigrated in 1944, she maintained her European ties for decades after her immigration through lengthy sojourns in Europe and extensive correspondence.[4] She kept in touch with French avant-garde composers of the 1950s, and was one of the first Israeli composers to visit Darmstadt.

One can find rich evidence for Shlonsky's European ties in her archive at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. This archive contains her articles, mostly in Hebrew, written between 1935 and 1972 about Schoenberg, Deutsch, Hanns Eisler, Oskar Fried, Chagall, Messiaen, and Alexandre Tansman—all of whom Shlonsky met in Paris. The list of musicians from whom she received letters is equally impressive. Shlonsky's archive holds over 120 personal letters, mostly from musicians, in Russian, French, German, English and Hebrew, in addition to 150 letters from institutions—e.g. letters written by Boulanger, Chagall, Daniel-Lesur, Henri Dutilleux, Georges Enesco, Oskar Fried, Walter Goehr, Emil Hauser, and Jascha Heifetz. She also corresponded with André Jolivet, Louis Kentner, René Leibowitz, Yehudi Menuhin, Darius Milhaud, Isaac Stern, Erich Walter Sternberg, Alexandre Tansman, and Jennie Tourel.[5]

While such wide-ranging relationships with leaders of the art music world would normally have been counted as an asset, in pre- and immediately post-Independence Israel, these connections, when coupled with Shlonsky's inclination to a "cosmopolitan style," were bound to be construed as threatening an emerging independent culture. Her strong ties to the European cultural homeland were manifested also in her linguistic (hence cultural) affiliations: she preserved her native Russian, honed her French, and corresponded in German and English. But even after decades in Israel, and having a brother who was a leading Hebrew-language poet, her Hebrew was rudimentary. She never mastered the language. The composers who became leaders of the first generation—indeed, the whole cultural elite—struggled with the language barrier with pride, while marginalizing those others who did not.

Thirdly, and most significantly in explaining her inferior status among the founders, was her ideology regarding the music of the region. Shlonsky consistently opposed the *Mizrahi* trend in Israeli art music. This opposition was not expressed outright

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[3] Yahli Wagman, "Verdina Shlonsky (19.1.1905 – 20.2.1990)—In Memoriam," *IMI News* 90, 1 (Tel Aviv, 1990): 3. See page 9 of this article.

[4] Shlonsky's date of immigration is not entirely clear. In his brief encyclopedic essay about her, Cohen says that she "visited" Palestine several times between 1929 and 1944, and only then immigrated; this is cited in other sources. Cohen, *Ne'imei zmirot Israel* (*Israel's New Music*) (1990), 101. The short biography on her scores published by IMI in 1969 (1962, *Reflections*, and 1964, *Introduction and Scherzo*) cites her immigration date as 1929, and her NGII entry cites the date of her immigration as 1945. Michal Ben-Zur, "Shlonsky, Verdina," *Grove Music Online* (Accessed 27 July 2006). To judge by her Hebrew publications of the 1930s and '40s, she may have stayed in Palestine for longer than "visits" at that time.

[5] Shlonsky's archive, Mus. 70, in the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL) at the Hebrew University, Givat Ram, Jerusalem. Shlonsky received eight letters from Nadia Boulanger between 1930 and 1972, mostly in the 1950s. She also received thirteen letters from Menuhin (1968-77), three from Milhaud, and two each from Chagall, Fried, and Tansman. The rest of the cited musicians sent her one letter each.

in her prose; however, the *lack* of any support or appreciation of the Middle Eastern melos spoke loudly.

In her article, published in Hebrew in 1935, "Ha-zemer be-eretz-Israel" ("Song in Eretz-Israel"), she expressed the predictable Zionist enthusiasm for the creation of original, local, popular song. In her case, it was, indeed, expected: she was nurtured on the family's Zionism, an enthusiasm shared especially by her well-known brother, who probably translated this and her other articles from Russian, and whose poems she set to music. In this article, she noted the urgent need for the creation of local, original song, a task that should be undertaken by local composers. She followed her words with deeds: Shlonsky wrote over a hundred songs, some popular, some art songs. Her ideas in this article seem inherently similar to those held by the Jewish-Russian school, but her solutions appear less clear than Stutschewsky's. Only one sentence of the article hints at her attitude toward *Mizrahi* music. It is hidden in the midst of a poetic, elusive paragraph devoted to creating local song out "of [our own] intervals" of the Diaspora's melodies gathered in Eretz-Israel. The passing hint, however, reveals her attitude toward Middle Eastern material: "There is a need to find a solution for the Arabic influence, which should be adopted only as providing 'flavor.'"[6]

Several ideological points emerge from "Song in Israel" in general, and especially from that sentence about "Arabic influence." It seemed clear to Shlonsky in 1935 that the blending of too many singing styles in Eretz-Israel was undesirable; that there was a need for some sort of synthesis into a local, coherent style; and that the creation of authentic folklore should be a primary goal for the local composers. Her subtext was no less clear. Believing that national schools were—to use a gross generalization—"uniform" in the nineteenth century (looking at German, French, and Russian musical histories), she was striving, in vain, for a kind of uniformity that had never been a realistic vision in the first place. As much as it might have been the ideal model, American music did not count as a national school to follow, since its culture was developed by immigrants, as was that of Eretz-Israel. It was not perceived at the time as being in any way equivalent to the European models. In the mid-1930s, the time of Shlonsky's article, Ives was hardly known, nor were Gershwin and Copland.

The most revealing point of her article, however, was that, out of the many local influences, the Arab or Middle Eastern trend should not exceed certain limits. All her conclusions reflect tacit notions shared by many, arguably most, composers at the time (though not necessarily by those who became known as leaders of that generation). However, Shlonsky's other two points—the desire for one representative style, and the need for an original local folklore—were expressed by other composers far more than the need to reduce or limit the Arabic influence. Although many composers did indeed use the Arab melos merely as "flavor," if at all—Ben-Haim has been considered a leading

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[6] Originally: "'יש למצוא פתרון גם לשאלת ההשפעה הערבית שמן הראוי לסגלה רק כמין 'נותן טעם".
Verdina Shlonsky, "Ha-zemer be-eretz-Israel" ("Song in Eretz-Israel"), *Davar* (1935). A facsimile of the article is available in the Shlonsky archive at the JNUL (the national archive) in Jerusalem, Mus. 70, C1. This is probably her first published article in Hebrew; it appears as the earliest in her archive in Jerusalem. The article was most probably translated from the Russian by her brother, the poet Avraham Shlonsky (his name is not mentioned there; Benjamin [Benny] Perl, who was her student in the 1960s and who kept in touch with her through the years, gave me the information in August 2001. The fact that her brother translated her articles was mentioned also in Assaf, "Electronit hi lo savla" ("Electronic [music] she could not bear," 1990).

example—they did not dare express such an idea out loud: it would have clashed at full volume with the ruling *Zeitgeist*.

Over fifty years later, in 1986, Shlonsky was interviewed by Oded Assaf, a composer and musicologist. After Shlonsky died in 1990, Assaf published a long obituary, in which he drew upon the interview:

> What was, indeed, the musical language of Verdina Shlonsky? It was, perhaps, elusive, similar to her personality and her status in the Israel's musical community. I tried to inquire in order to receive definite [answers] from her on style in general and on Israeli style. She answered:
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> [Shlonsky:] All of this hysteria in search of style. I call it hysteria! I sought a way to flee [from that search] when I saw that the whole thing became a force, like a [political] party… there was a feeling that composers sought assurance in their writing: how to write? I did not ask [myself] this question. I ask[ed], what sort of person am I, why do I write; but not how to write.
> [Assaf:] Many Eretz-Israeli composers sought the *Mizrah*…
> [Shlonsky:] I did not.
> [Assaf:] Didn't you feel the need?
> [Shlonsky:] No. I do not know what orientalism [*mizrahi'ut*] is. Tell me, what is it? Hummus? You, tell me! I graduated in European studies.
> [Assaf:] Perhaps the use of certain modes, musical ornaments?
> [Shlonsky:] I studied modes from Bach, and ornaments from Mozart.
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> These answers were not final proof. At this very point, Shlonsky approached the piano. First she played a nice Hora, an Eretz-Israeli [Hora] to all intents and purposes, that she composed in the 1930s (and immediately took the trouble to add: "I wrote it with love, but also sometimes to make some money"). And later, with unhidden pride, she played and sang a Tango that she wrote, also decades old, and explained: "I told them: the day will come, when the youth will seek ballroom dances."[7]

These ideas were not unique at the time. They were shared by many composers—probably most composers—though not by most of those who have become, in perspective, the most influential. Shlonsky's ideas were ubiquitous among many of the

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[7] Assaf, "Electronit hi lo savla" (1990), 71.
אסף, עודד. "אלקטרונית היא לא סבלה." *העיר*, 2.3.1990, עמ' 70-71:

[שלונסקי:] "כל ההיסטריה הזאת בחיפושים אחרי סגנון. אני קוראת לזה היסטריה! חיפשתי לי דרך לברוח, כשראיתי שכל הענין נהפך לכוח, כמו מפלגה... היתה לי הרגשה שהמלחינים חיפשו בטחון בכתיבה שלהם: איך לכתוב? את השאלה הזו לא שאלתי. אני שואלת איך אני בכלל, ובשביל מה לכתוב, אבל איך לכתוב- לא.

[אסף:] מלחינים ארצישראלים רבים חיפשו את המזרח...
[שלונסקי:] אני לא.
[אסף:] לא הרגשת צורך?
[שלונסקי:] לא. אני לא יודעת מה זה מזרחיות. תגיד, מה זה? חומוס? תגיד אתה מה זה! אני גמרתי לימודים אירופיים.
[אסף:] אולי שימוש במודוסים מסוימים, בקישוטים מוזיקליים?
[שלונסקי:] אני למדתי מודוסים אצל באך וקישוטים אצל מוצרט."

forty immigrant composers of the early 1940s who were later doomed to oblivion, but who were influential enough in their time to make the leading founders, those discussed in these chapters, struggle for their *Mizrahi*-embracing ideology. Like most composers, Shlonsky did not like Middle Eastern music. Nor did she feel the need to struggle with that initial dislike or try to overcome it for ideological reasons, as did Ben-Haim, and still more so, Stutschewsky or Tal (only in around 1950). It seems evident that she did not regard the folklore of Jewish communities coming from Arab countries as equivalent to Jewish folklore coming from her native Russia or the West. For her, as for other composers, Middle Eastern music was far more primitive, even unfit to serve as the basis of a national style—it had nothing to do with the creation of art music in a Westernized Israel.

Shlonsky expressed her disapproval of the evolving mainstream by writing a tango at a time when such an act would be denounced as bourgeois, inappropriate for the socialist Eretz-Israeli *ḥaluz* (pioneer) who dances the "pure," local, working-class Hora. It was an act of rebellion, the courageous act of an independent artist. And, indeed, she paid a price for such independence. This attitude, especially toward Middle Eastern music, may have contributed to the readiness of those who became Israel's musical leaders to underestimate her.

The one article in which Shlonsky unfolded perhaps the full range of her views concerning local music was not written locally. She wrote it in London in 1941, in English, her fourth language after Russian, French, and German. This was before her final immigration in 1944, but it showed the thorough acquaintance with the vein of local arts and letters that she had acquired since her first visit to Eretz-Israel in 1929. The article was published under the general title "Palestine and Jewish Music." Interestingly, Shlonsky's manuscript bears a more specific title: "The Liberation of Jewish Music."[8] By "liberation" she meant the release of Jewish music from a past urgent necessity to protect it in the Diaspora from assimilation: "…the fear of assimilation clothed religious melodies with a protective armour, and therefore [they] did not develop." In Palestine, she implies, where Jewish identity could be preserved without the religious shield, composers could use these traditional religious melodies, develop them and elevate them to the level of art—an act impossible in the past, because "In the *Galuth* [exile], religion represented not only tradition but also promise of the Jewish people's survival…." Now that religious music could safely be used in art music, a whole treasure of original melos became available for crystallizing the Jewish identity in art music. Needless to say, for her "religious music" was only Ashkenazi; religious music of the *Mizrah* was not even mentioned.

Like Stutschewsky, Shlonsky drew a thick line between the "composer who is a Jew and the Jewish composer, i.e. the composer of genuinely Jewish music."[9] In the first category, she cited "Meyerbeer, Halévy, Mendelssohn, Moscheles, Offenbach, Golmann, Rubinstein, Konon, Mahler, Dukas, Arnold Schoenberg, Darius Milhaud, […and] Gershwin." In the latter, she cited one: Ernest Bloch. For her, the genuine Jewish

[8] Verdina Shlonsky, "Palestine and Jewish Music," *New Judea* 18, 8/9 (London, May-June 1942): 117-18. A facsimile of the article and a copy of the original typescript (1941) are available in Shlonsky's archive at the JNUL in Jerusalem, Mus. 70, C8 and B1 respectively. See original article copied in English Appendix.
[9] Ibid.

composer proudly uses his religious melodic heritage in his music; others are merely composers who happen to be Jews.

But, for the composer in Palestine, religious melos should not be the only source. No less significant, she continued, was the "local folk," upon which composers must base their art music, and toward which they must also contribute, for

> [s]ong is a tool of the people. All its emotional experience is expressed in its song. Hebrew songs speak of Palestine and of its significance. The songs of the *Galuth* which the Palestinian immigrants brought with them cannot easily be adapted to the new healthy life now being wrought in Palestine. The composer who finds himself in its atmosphere of creative endeavor remolds his style, which becomes the style of Palestinian music.[10]

Expressing common nineteenth-century notions held by most composers of the Jewish-Russian school, Shlonsky stated that just as the "unhealthy" *Galuth*-ghetto Jew had to be reconstructed, as Zionism proposed (unintentionally expressing internalized racism)—so her folk song had to be transformed. She did not explain, though, the nature of this transformation. Hasidic (klezmer) tunes, she argued, were passé, because it was music of the Diaspora (even though, in fact, her own family was originally Hasidic and her music reveals Hasidic traits[11]). Rather, the "Palestinian" composer should use the local Hora:

> A distinguishing feature of Jewish dance is the ensemble (Hasidic dances); but, like all other varieties of art in the *Galuth*, it has not remained immune to the influence of the peoples among whom the Jews were living. It is in the return to Palestinian soil, in common aspiration, in hands firmly joined together, in a single common rhythm bearing the name of Hora that the Palestinian dance has been born. The influence of the Hora rhythm is felt in all Palestinian folk songs, and constitutes a very important part of the Jewish composer's inspiration.[12]

It did not really matter at the time that the Hora, like Hasidic tunes, was also borrowed from East European (probably "goy-ish," non-Jewish) folk dances. The *perception* mattered: Hora was commonly perceived as uniquely "Palestinian" (as Eretz-Israeli *Jews* generally referred to themselves then, hard as that is to believe today). And, in the 1930s and '40s, a syncopated Hora movement as a finale for a local art composition was almost a must—the Eretz-Israeli proud and optimistic substitute for a rondo-finale. In that respect, Shlonsky clearly represented the majority of local musicians at the time: "Guided by religious melodies, folk songs, and the national dance, the Jewish composer may unhesitatingly venture toward the creation of Jewish music."[13]

Like Stutschewsky, who advocated the creation of a single, coherent local style, Shlonsky also noted that that one style would emerge in a gradual process of recovering

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[10] Shlonsky, "Palestine and Jewish Music" (1942), 117.

[11] Zvi Keren, *Contemporary Israeli Music: Its Sources and Stylistic Development* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1980), 43, 163.

[12] Shlonsky, "Palestine and Jewish Music" (1942), 118.

[13] Ibid. While local folk song and the Hora were more common as melodic bases for art music in the 1940s, religious tunes, and especially cantillation, were emphasized more both in the earlier Jewish-Russian school, and, from the late 1950s, in Israel.

from the "variegated style," which she saw as an "inevitable consequence of the tragic fact of our dispersion." Once composers lived and created in Palestine, on a common soil, Shlonsky predicted that the local music would undergo a teleologic, organic process toward a single common style.[14]

Two decades later, however, she was expressing different ideas: she began writing music that was mildly influenced by French contemporary composers such as Messiaen. In retrospect, the internationally prominent figure and locally-known pianist Yahli Wagman noted a continuous struggle throughout Shlonsky's life between a "cosmopolitan viewpoint" and "burning Zionist fervour": "In Verdina the two emotions became a continuous lifelong conflict never resolved, always ending in a draw…."[15] The "cosmopolitan viewpoint" was her devoted European orientation, which has been harshly misconstrued. In her *New Grove* entry, for example, one finds the following: "considered an avant-garde composer, she found it difficult initially to have her works performed." While Shlonsky, in fact, opposed the avant-garde (especially its German branch), the label stuck to her nevertheless.[16] Her reception as a "cosmopolitan" developed not only because of her European connections and excursions, but also because she opposed folklorism based on *Mizrahi* music, i.e. regional music, at a time when it had become *the* signifier for national style, far more substantially than the Hora-finale (while she practiced folklorism that was based on Ashkenazi sources, i.e. based on European or East European origins). The "burning Zionist fervour," on the other hand, was expressed in her insistence on living, creating and publishing in Zion, although it seems that she would have had a better critical reception and greater success had she settled in Paris, where she was a frequent visitor. But the Third Reich's Europe expelled her, and, for a Zionist like her, the only place to settle after a long quest Westward—from Russia to Berlin to Paris to London over the course of two decades—was *kadima*, to the East, to Eretz-Israel. Only there, paradoxically, could she express not only her European legacy, but also a Zionist identity, through the use of Hebrew texts in her songs and other vocal music.

Shlonsky has not been recognized as a significant composer of the founding generation of Israeli music. How could she have been? Her orchestral pieces were not premiered until the 1960s, two or three decades after they were written, by which time they were probably considered passé.[17] The lack of performances of her early orchestral music perhaps limited her to writing mostly chamber music after the 1940s, even though those works were also performed infrequently. She did write popular songs in the 1930s and 1940s, as did many of the founders. But, for them, this early light music was forgotten (and often goes unmentioned in their lists of works), whereas, in her case, it may have tagged her merely as a songwriter.

Another reason for her poor reception may have been her opposition to the German avant-garde, and not just to the Middle Eastern melos. "While listening to the lectures on electronic music [in Darmstadt in the 1960s], I sat just next to the window.

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Yahli Wagman, "Verdina Shlonsky, In Memoriam," (1990): 3. Wagman, Shlonsky's nephew, also wrote about her family background there.

[16] Ben-Zur, "Shlonsky," NGII.

[17] Most interestingly, Shlonsky's archive at the JNUL does not contain those items that seem the most precious, such as Schoenberg's letters to her (about which she wrote in her 1966 essay in *Tatzlil*, see the bibliography), and her large manuscripts: the 1935 symphony, the 1942 piano concerto, and the 1946 cantata.

There were fascinating flowers out there! I turned my head, and felt that there was no connection between them and the music I heard. For me, this was the answer: No way!"[18]

There was, therefore, no way she could have gained recognition in those "totalitarian" years of the 1960s. Few writers on Israeli music have chosen to write about Shlonsky, and most of these only in passing and not at length. She won her first major Israeli prize only in 1983, at the age of 78 (the ACUM Prize, for lifetime achievement)—whereas she had won her first European prizes during the 1930s and 1940s. Even her numerous writings—not common among Israeli composers, thus doubly significant—have scarcely been acknowledged (let alone discussed), unlike those by Stutschewsky or Boskovich, which were collected and published posthumously.[19] Her NGII entry does not mention a single one of them. As of recent years, however, her critical reception seems to be changing, now that the avant-garde is but one color on a full palette, and women composers have their own *ateliers*.

[18] Assaf, "Electronit hi lo savla" (1990), 71: "בזמן ההרצאות על מוסיקה אלקטרונית ישבתי בדיוק ליד החלון. פרחים נהדרים היו שם! אני מסובבת את הראש, ומרגישה שאין קשר בינם לבין המוסיקה שאני שומעת. בשבילי זאת היתה התשובה. לא בא בחשבון!"

[19] My paper on Israeli women composers (at The Thirteenth World Congress for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, August 2001) and the chapter "Israel" in *Asian Composers in the 20th Century* (Tokyo: The Japan Federation of Composers, 2002; pp. 197-221), 202, where I presented Shlonsky among the founders of Israeli art music, seem to have been the first of its kind.