Miriam Levite: A Pioneer Musician

ANAT VIKS

"Neshef Sifruti Musiqali" (A literary-musical ball[1]) was the title of a unique concert held in Tel Aviv on December 18, 1939, in which pianist Miriam Levite (1891–1975) accompanied the singer Miriam Segal, alongside short lectures by Ben-Tsion Yedidyah and poetry readings by Rika Vardina. All four participants were cultural pioneers in Pre-State Israel. Segal worked in agriculture in Afula and the Jezreel Valley and later became one of the first prominent classical singers in the country; Yedidyah was an author and translator; Vardina was an actor and narrator; and Levite, whose pioneering work is the focus of this article, was not only a pianist, but also a composer and musical entrepreneur.[2]

The concept of combining literary or theatrical readings and lectures with musical performances was not in itself rare in Jewish communities at that time. An early example is the concerts organized by the Kinor Zion (Violin of Zion) Society, established in Jaffa in 1904, with a Jerusalem branch opening four years later. Hemdah Ben-Yehuda's description of such an event mentions not only works by classical and romantic composers such as Beethoven, Glinka, and Chopin, alongside literary readings such as excerpts from Shimon Frug's poetry, but also four art students from Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts "standing in front of blank white papers, and as the fingers rush on the piano adding more and more sketches on the canvas."[3] In 1909 the same society organized a concert featuring Levite at the piano. It was described enthusiastically:

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[1] The word "ball" was common as an equivalent to "concert" in Pre-State Israel.
Concert advertisement, Miriam Levite's archival collection, under the Beth-Lewiim collection (M2), Felicja Blumental Music Archive (hereafter FBMA), M2/2/2/2. I am grateful to Mrs. Olga Filatova, the archive's director, for her assistance.

[2] Levite is mentioned several times as a pianist and director of Beth-Lewiim in Jehoash Hirshberg's *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine 1880–1948* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 32–33, 37–38, but her myriad initiatives are largely ignored. For a thorough discussion on early music schools, including biographical details on Levite and a discussion on pedagogical aspects of her music school, see Anat Viks, "The Earliest Hebrew Speaking Music Schools: Tel-Aviv, 1910s," *Min-Ad* 20 (2022): 107–21.

[3] *Hashkafa*, December 26, 1906. Hemdah Ben-Yehuda (1873–1951) was an author and journalist, and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's second wife. She invited Levite to Eretz-Israel as part of her aspiration to promote a national secular culture.

> Tomorrow night, the Kinor Zion Society will hold a literary musical ball with the famous musician Miriam Levite, who came from Moscow to settle in our town. Though the name is already known to our readers, her wonderful piano playing is yet to be heard . . . the citizens of Jerusalem, young and old, will come to Beit Ha- ʻAm (The People's House) to enjoy her playing . . . We are told that the Kinor Zion Society has prepared a rich, wonderful program . . . performances in piano, violin and organ, declamations, poetry and more.[4]

Despite these impressive precedents, two main factors distinguish the 1939 ball. First, the program was dedicated specifically to Hebrew women poets, an uncommon choice that suggests a clear feminist stance. It did not juxtapose a single poem by a woman with texts by male poets, but instead focused entirely on works by three prominent poetesses: Rachel Bluwstein (1890–1931), known as Rachel the Poetess, Elisheva (Bichovsky; Elizaveta Zhirkova, 1888–1949), and Anda Amir-Pinkerfeld (1902–81); still, at this stage, it is noticeable that although the poets were women, all the composers were men—Paul Ben-Haim, Mordechai Zeira, Yariv Ezrahi,[5] and Emanuel Pougatchov (later, Amiran); second, Levite's involvement was not only as a performer—she was also the initiator. The event took place at the' Ulam Le-Qamer Musiqah (Chamber Music Hall) on 18 Brenner Street. This was the main hall of Levite's music school, Beit Ha-Midrash Li-Negina Beth-Lewiim (Beth Lewiim College of Music), which was established in 1914 as Beit Ha-Sefer Li-Negina Shel Miriam Levite (Miriam Levite's Music School) and has stood on Brenner Street since 1925. Beyond its strict curriculum of performance and music theory lessons, instrumental groups, and vocal ensembles, the school held regular concerts. Levite herself initiated many of the concert series held there and frequently participated as a performer. Her activities thus extended across multiple musical spheres, although at this stage they did not yet include composition.

A second milestone in Levite's progress toward composition was her significant role as the editor of the booklet *Mi-Shirei Rachel* featuring poems by Rachel the Poetess. The booklet, published in 1948 by Ha-Merkaz Le-Tarbut U-Le-Ḥinukh of the Histadrut (the cultural department of the Histadrut, the General Organization of Workers),[6] included eight songs, several set to music

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[4] *HaZevi*, July 30, 1909. Much later, during the 1930s, the Yafiya Society of Literature and Art devoted a significant portion of its activities to literary balls featuring poetry readings and vocal performances. Such an event took place at the Jascha Heifetz Hall in Shulamit Conservatory in 1937, and was dedicated to Hayim Nahman Bialik's poetry.

[5] Yariv Ezrahi (1904–2002) was a violinist, teacher, and music critic. From 1968 onward, he served as the director of Ron Shulamit Conservatory, a merger of the Shulamit Conservatory and the Ron Conservatory, which he had founded in 1938. Ezrahi was the son of Mordechai Ezrahi-Krishevsky, one of the first educators in Eretz-Israel, and brother of Lina Krishevsky, who married Shulamit's director, Moshe Hopenko.

[6] The publication was a part of the "Musical Library Series," directed by the composer Nissim Nissimov (1905–91), and later by Shlomo Kaplan (1909–74). The series featured vocal and instrumental music by Israeli composers, including collections of Hebrew poets, children's

by leading composers of the period: "Kore" (The miner) by Yedidyah Gorochov (Admon), "Rak 'Al 'Atsmi" (Only of myself) by Nissim Nissimov, "'Aqara" (Barren) by Mieczyslaw Fliderbaum, a violinist in the Eretz-Israeli Orchestra, with additional versions by Yehuda Bernstein, Paul Ben-Haim,[7] and Rivka Levinson, "Zemer" (Song) and "Hed" (Echo) by Aviasaf Bernstein, "Ḥag" (Holiday) by Avraham Daus, "Baderekh" (On the road) by Marc Lavry, and "'El' Artsi" (To my land) by Lavry and Ben-Haim.[8] But Levite's engagement with the work of poetesses progressed from an editor's role to a composer's role in a self-published booklet of her own songs, composed during the 1950s and published in 1961, which also included her setting of a poem by Rachel. The dedication "May this booklet be a modest greeting to my fellow poetesses on the brink of old age" testifies to her affectionate closeness to the poetesses whose texts she chose to set to music.

Seven Songs for voice and piano was published in handwritten format with accompanying texts. Several texts were translated by Shoshana Bluwstein-Sela, Rachel the Poetess's sister.[9] Along with Anda Amir-Pinkerfeld, Rachel, and Elisheva, whose names had already appeared in the 1939 concert, this publication included two poems by Lili Venetzianer[10] and two highly unusual inclusions: a poem by Rachel Korn in Yiddish, a language which stood in contrast to the prevailing indoctrination of the new Sabra that rejected the diaspora and promoted Hebrew culture,[11] and a concise political text by Haya Kadmon (see Figure 1).

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songs, Jewish holiday songs, Zionist songs, and more, often with educational agendas. In addition to Levite as an editor, and Levinson in one song in her booklet, the only woman composer represented in this series was Verdina Shlonsky (1905–90), whose *Songs* for voice and piano and *Sketches from the Diary* for piano solo were published in this format, in addition to two excerpts from the Suite for piano solo in the special series Sifriya Musiqalit Qetana (The tiny music library).

[7] Paul Ben-Haim's song was dedicated to Miriam Segal, who participated in the 1939 event.

[8] The musicologist and composer Menashe Ravina (Rabinowitz, 1899–1968), who taught music history and theoretical subjects at Beth-Lewiim and replaced Levite as the director in 1934, dedicated an article to art songs based on Rachel's texts, in which he elaborated on various musical and textual elements in Levite's booklet and mentioned her role as an editor. See "The Music to Rachel's Songs," in *Rachel and Her Poems*, ed. Mordechai Snir and Shimon Kushnir (Tel Aviv: Davar, 1971), 300–05.

[9] Shoshana Bluwstein-Sela (1899–1975) was a musician and author. She and Rachel came to Ḥavat Ha-'Alamot (Kinneret's Girls Farm) in 1911. Bluwstein-Sela documented her experiences in Moshavat Kinneret and her work with new immigrants from Yemen in two books published in 1940 and 1943.

[10] Biographical information about Venetzianer is sparse. She is mentioned as a student at the horticultural school in Austria during the 1920s who immigrated to Palestine. See https://davidkultur.at/artikel/8222verlassliche-gartnerinnen-heranzubilden8220 (accessed September 20, 2026).

[11] See Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (University of California Press, 2000).

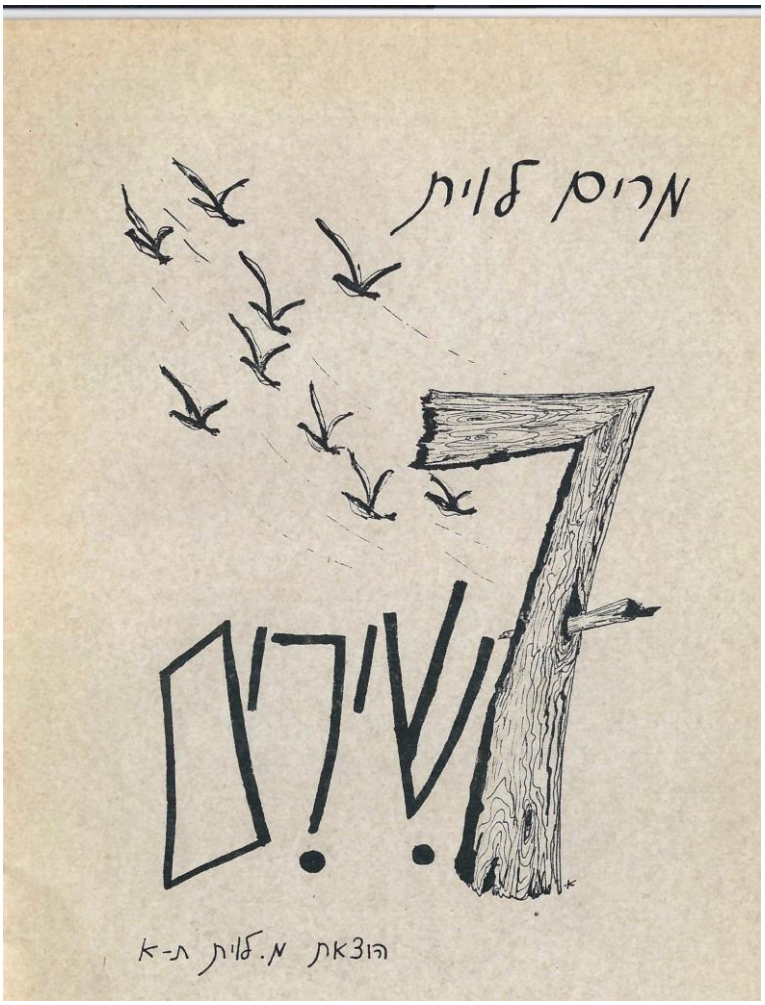


Figure 1 Miriam Levite, *Seven Songs*, cover page.

Levite's lasting engagement with poetry by women, with some of whom, such as Shoshana Bluwstein-Sela, Lili Venetzianer, and Elisheva, she had developed close friendships,[12] should be understood against the backdrop of her broader involvement in women's cultural and civic networks. Already in the early 1930s, she corresponded with two leading figures in women's organizations who fought for women's rights, Sara Azaryahu and Rachel Katznelson, in whose organizational activities she took part, either through contributing performances or through direct involvement. Azaryahu wrote to her on behalf of the Hit'aḥadut Nashim 'Ivriot Le-Shivvui Zekhuyot (The Union

[12] Several documents testify to Levite's friendship with the poetesses and with the translator Shoshana Bluwstein-Sela, such as a translation of Dmitry Kabalevsky's song "Spokoynoy nochi" (Good night), which she received as a gift for her 71st birthday from Bluwstein-Sela (FBMA, M2/2/35), a dedication by Lili Venetzianer in an album with greetings to celebrate the new building for the music school on Brenner Street, and a biographical sketch that mentions Elisheva as a close friend (FBMA, M2/3/9/2).

of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights), asking her to attend a special meeting as a member of this organization's committee.[13] Rachel Katznelson corresponded with Levite regarding a planned visit and performance in Mikve-Israel, following a request from Menashe Rabinovich.[14] A letter of thanks and appreciation dated earlier, on January 20, 1922, was also received from the Union of Hebrew Women. The letter mentions her lovely performance, which was given free of charge to raise money for the union. Though Levite did not write specifically about gender issues, her close ties with both poetesses and political activists show her appreciation and support of feminist endeavors.

Levite's achievements as the founder and director of one of the first music schools in Eretz-Israel, which helped establish the basic principles on which conservatories operate to this day, were only recently researched in more depth.[15] However, her myriad initiatives in organizing concert series, editing radio programs, and, most importantly, composing music have so far been completely neglected. This article will therefore focus on these aspects, which attest not only to Levite's talent, courage, and originality, but also to her significant contribution to the development of musical life in Israel.

Performer, Educator, Musical Initiator

Levite played a foundational role in shaping musical life in the Jewish Yishuv, and later in the State of Israel; but a letter written at the beginning of the 1960s to the Minister of Education, in which she asks for financial help, testifies to her difficult situation. In this letter, she pinpoints several dates in the history of her cultural work: the establishment of her music school (1914), the initiative to establish a music academy in Tel Aviv (early 1920s), and the new building for her school on Brenner Street (1925), which, alongside its success, caused her financial debts. She also mentions later projects, such as concert series and radio programs, that evolved from her work there. No answer to this letter was received.[16] In several other letters, she requested support for her booklet, but again to no avail.

Levite's situation as an older woman was portrayed by the author Yeshurun Keshet, who compared the talented young pianist whom he met in her youth to

[13] Azaryahu to Levite, January 23, 1931, FBMA, M2/3/9/1 (II). Sara Azaryahu (1873–1962) was a prominent Zionist and feminist who fought for women's rights in Mandatory Palestine and joined the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights in Eretz-Israel. Azaryahu published a book about the union (1948) and an autobiography (1956).
[14] Katzenelsohn-Shazar to Levite, January 28, early 1930s, FBMA, M2/3/9/1 (II). Rachel Katznelson-Shazar (1885–1975) was an activist for women's rights and the editor of the journal *Devar Ha-Po'elet* for 27 years from 1934. She received the Israel Prize in 1958 for her contribution. Katznelson-Shazar was the wife of the third president, Zalman Shazar.
[15] See Viks, "The Earliest Hebrew Speaking Music Schools."
[16] FBMA, M2/3/3/2.

the old, broken-hearted one he saw 50 years later. He was extremely impressed by her abilities as a young pianist: "Her playing was crystal clear, while maintaining a gentle lyricism . . . with a loyal expression of the composer's intentions." He used the imagery of "pearls" to describe her sound and compared her expressivity to that of the Russian poet Turgenev. In contrast, as an old woman, she seemed poor and lonely:

> with no proper apartment . . . the ownership of her school moved to others while depriving her of her rights. This gentle, honorable person was not suitable for this cynical world . . . I believe the public, and mostly the Tel Aviv municipality, sinned against Levite, who taught many and helped lay the basis for our culture.[17]

Miriam Reznikov-Levite grew up in Polatsk, Vitebsk. Her parents, Naftali and Esther, acknowledged her exceptional musical gift. They not only moved to Moscow, but they also decided to convert to Christianity to improve their daughter's chances of making progress in her musical career. Thus her name was temporarily changed to Maria Matveeva. Her career as a pianist began early, immediately following her graduation from the Moscow Conservatory, a leading institution, where the well-known pianist Alexander Goldenweiser (1875–1961) was one of her teachers. Upon graduation, she received a gold medal and the title of a "free artist." She then embarked on a series of recitals in several cities and started teaching at David Schor's Beethoven Music School, a role that was life-changing for her. Schor encouraged her to go to Eretz-Israel in 1909, following an invitation by Hemdah Ben-Yehuda, to help enrich local musical life. She spent half a year in Jerusalem, where she taught, and also performed in Jaffa: "A few days ago, Levite participated in a ball held in Jaffa, excelled in her playing, and, upon the request of many Jaffa residents, decided to reside there. Much to the detriment of the Kinor Zion society."[18] In several other reviews, she was described as a "genius" whose hands created magic that made the audience's hearts tremble and whose appearance seemed transcendent. But without honest Zionist motives, while facing physical difficulties and amazed by the lack of a proper music school, Levite decided not to stay in Palestine. Her return to Eretz-Israel in 1911 was completely different. Levite belonged to a social layer of educated women who immigrated to Palestine from Russia during the Second Aliyah and were influenced by Russian revolutionary movements.[19] She was mostly inspired by the writings of Chaim Zhitlowsky

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[17] Yeshurun Keshet (1893–1977) was a poet, essayist and literary critic. He described Levite in his book *Qedma Va-Yama: Pirqei Zikhronot* [East and West: memories] (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 1980), 68. His depiction of Levite provides a unique perspective.

[18] *HaZevi*, October 11, 1909.

[19] For more on women who immigrated to Eretz-Israel in the Second Aliyah see Deborah Bernstein, '*Isha Be-Eretz-Israel: Ha-She'ifa Le-Shivyon Bi-Tequfat Ha-Yishuv* [The struggle

(1865–1943),[20] a leading socialist Jewish philosopher, who believed that assimilation would improve the position of the Jews in the diaspora, but connected his ideas about Jewish nationalism with a Jewish territory after the anti-Jewish riots, pogroms known as "Sufot Ba-Negev" that began in 1881 and occurred especially after the 1903 Kishinev pogrom. Although Zhitlowsky's aspirations for a separate Jewish land were not necessarily linked to Palestine, the existence of the Jaffa Music School, established in 1910 by Shulamit Rupin, was a second, crucial factor in Levite's decision. The school, which was based on the model of European conservatories, with a specific curriculum and qualified teachers, raised hopes for a new generation of musicians that would influence the cultural development of the New Yishuv. Immediately upon her arrival, she started working there as a piano teacher; however, disagreements with the violinist and school director Moshe Hopenko, who replaced Rupin after her premature death in 1912,[21] stemming largely from Levite's individual vision on how a music school should operate and her independent character, led her to establish an independent institution. At the same time, she continued to perform. She received great praise, as the reviewer of her concert at the Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium writes: "The audience's applause shows the recognition of her work towards the advancement of music in our town . . . it seems that the audience does not forget those who labor for its sake."[22]

When the First World War broke out, Levite's husband, Yehuda Ron-Polani (see Figure 2),[23] was in Berlin. As foreign citizens, she and her parents were expelled by the Ottoman authorities to the moshava Zikhron Ya'akov, where she played several times for the Turkish Kaymakam (the district governor), who was an educated, musical man. Levite later decided to join her

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for equality: women workers in the Palestine "Yishuv"] (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz HaMeuchad, 1987), 16–26.

[20] David Tidhar, *Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel*, vol. 3 (1949), 1327, https://www.tidhar.tourolib.org/tidhar/view/3/1327 (accessed September 20, 2026). For more on Zhitlowsky's approach toward Jewish nationalism, see Joshua Shanes, "Yiddish and Jewish Diaspora Nationalism," *Monatshefte* 90, no. 2 (1998), 178–88.

[21] Shulamit Rupin (1878–1912) was the founder of the Jaffa Music School (1910), which was named after her, following her premature death. Shulamit, assisted by her husband, Arthur Rupin, head of the Palestine Office of the Zionist Organization, opened a school based on European principles of music pedagogy. For more on Rupin and Hopenko, see Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine 1880–1948*; Viks, "The Earliest Hebrew Speaking Music Schools."

[22] *Ha-Ḥerut*, July 7, 1914. Many students at Shulamit and Beth-Lewiim were students at Herzliyah Gymnasium, the first Hebrew high school, established in Jaffa in 1905, which also emphasized music studies.

[23] Yehuda Ron-Polani (1891–1983) was a prominent educator. Together with David Idelsohn, he founded the first local "Arbeit Schule," which followed the doctrine of German scholar Georg Kerschensteiner, integrating academic studies with physical activity. He was later active in several Youth Villages and Kibbutzim. As Miriam Levite's husband Ron-Polani assisted her as the music school's general secretary and with fundraising in the 1920s.

husband, who was by then in Bulgaria. This was a long journey that took her 21 days, but upon her arrival, she took the opportunity to perform in several recitals. Under these circumstances, most of the school's activities halted.



Figure 2 Miriam Levite and Yehuda Ron-Polani, 1910s. FBMA, M2/3/7.

The school reopened only after the war, and the number of concerts and students increased during the 1920s (see Figure 3). A booklet published by the school at the end of the 1928 school year describes its short history, explains its pedagogical principles, and mentions various collaborations.[24] The text emphasizes the school's contribution to local cultural life by hosting other artists and art institutions, not only from the music sphere, such as the Ohel dramatic studio and Margalit Orenstein's Rhythmic studio. Founded on socialist principles, the school reached out to workers in agricultural settlements, specifically through the Kursim Le-Madrikhim Le-Hafatsat Musiqah Ba-'Am (Instructors' Courses for the Popularization of Music among the People), which Schor initiated (see Figure 4). The curriculum reveals the influence of contemporary European and particularly Russian conservatories. The school integrated playing skills with theory and music history. Specific curricula were prepared, participation in the choir and orchestra was mandatory, and students performed regularly in concerts both within and outside the institution.

[24] FBMA, Menashe Ravina Collection, R1/4/2/2/1.



Figure 3 Miriam Levite at the piano, 1920s. FBMA, M2/3/7.



Figure 4 The Instructors' Courses, June 1928. FBMA, R1/4/3/8/2.

As program notes show, teachers and students collaborated in several concerts. Levite's role in the concerts was pivotal; she not only initiated and organized them but also performed in many of them in solo and chamber

works.[25] One of the earliest examples is a concert-lecture on Chopin's works, where Levite played mainly shorter works, such as the C minor Etude Op. 10, No. 12 or the Prelude Op. 28, No. 24, but also the Ballade in A-flat major Op. 47, No. 3. Various chamber music concerts also took place, some in the new location on Brenner Street, in the main chamber music hall, and others in different locations in Tel Aviv, where she collaborated with other musicians, most of them teachers in her school. Among the performers were the violinist and conductor of the school's orchestra, Shlomo Garter (1904–86; see Figure 5), Schor at the piano, and the cellist Thelma Yellin-Bentwich. Later, during the 1930s, the performers included violinist Shlomo Bor and cellist Boleslaw Ginzburg, both, like Garter, members of the Palestine orchestra, and singers such as Yehuda Har-Melach from the Eretz-Israeli Opera.



Figure 5 Beth-Lewiim Orchestra conducted by Shlomo Garter, 1926. FBMA, R1/11/1 .

One of the main characteristics of concerts between the 1920s and 1950s was the inclusion of works by members of the St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music (1908–19), who aspired to compose modern works in a Jewish national style, as the focus of the concert or in combination with classical works;

[25] This tendency increased mainly after 1926, when she was not the only responsible director of the school.

composers such as Joel Engel (1868–1927), Solomon Rosowsky (1878–1962), and Moshe Milner (1886–1953). An especially interesting concert took place on April 11, 1929, as part of the Jubilee Exhibition held between April 8 and 30.[26] Students, teachers, and guides from the school courses were all involved. The program included choral songs, conducted by Menashe Rabinowitz, including the "Lullaby" ("Numi Numi") to Engel's melody and "A Toast" ("L'Chaim Rebbe") set to a Jewish folk tune. The concert included solo performances by Levite of works by Rosowsky and Engel, as well as a performance of Rosowsky's "Fantastischer Tanz über ein Hebräisches Thema," Op. 6, by Levite, Yellin, and Garter. Alongside works by Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, and Ravel, the concert featured Beethoven's *Leonore* Overture No. 3 by the school's orchestra under Garter's direction.

During the 1930s, Jewish music appeared separately or with early local works. A concert held on March 3, 1938 at the school's concert hall was a memorial to Engel and was dedicated entirely to music by Jewish composers. We also see Levite participating in concerts dedicated to specific local composers, such as an evening of works by Shalom Aharoni at the Jascha Heifetz Hall in Shulamit Conservatory on March 11, 1936.[27] In the 1940s more such concerts were organized, for example the concert in the Menorah Club in Jerusalem on November 10, 1941, featuring works for voice and piano or for violin and piano by Aharoni, Marc Lavry, Moshe Rapaport, Nachum Nardi, Yehuda Bernstein, and Verdina Shlonsky with Levite at the piano. "A Ball of Ghetto and Hasidim" was held at the same hall on January 17, 1943. This was again a concert that combined literature, dance, and music. Participants included actor Eliyahu Goldenberg, Danya Levine, a pioneer dancer, and Levite, who accompanied singer Shlomo Weispish and cellist Regina Schein, who had immigrated to Palestine in 1938 with the composer Joachim Stutschewsky (1891–1982), then her husband. The specific program is unspecified, but the title, together with the participation of Stutschewsky, an enthusiastic proponent of Jewish music, suggests a Jewish Eastern European program, possibly with songs in Yiddish.

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[26] Of all the members of the society, Levite was particularly connected to Engel. In the 1920s she promoted an initiative to establish a higher-level conservatory and approached Engel to serve as the director. In two letters to Ron-Polani, dated September 22 and October 8, 1924, he emphasized that he was willing to help and cooperate, but did not wish to become the director (FBMA, M2/1/2/1). Following his death, Levite not only organized memorial concerts, but tried to convince the Tel Aviv Municipality to name a building after him.

[27] Shalom Aharoni (1895–1972) composed vocal and instrumental works often inspired by Jewish themes such as the oratorio *Deborah's Song*, "Prayer" for violin and piano, various songs based on texts from the Bible, Hebrew songs, and several songs in Yiddish. The violin was his principal instrument, for which he composed a concerto and other chamber works.

As Levite recalled in an unpublished interview conducted by Tzvi Avni and Shimshon Chalfi in 1966,[28] she had already envisioned concentrating on the music of diverse national traditions, including Jewish music, in the 1930s. This idea, which combined Russian nationalism with Zionist aspirations, culminated in the 1940s and 1950s in a series of concerts, "Bama Le-'Omanut Ha-'Amim" (Nation's Art Stage). In 1945 Levite held two events at Beit-Arlozoroff (Arlozoroff House), featuring works exemplifying Russian and Czech national styles alongside Jewish-Hebrew music informed by Zionist aspirations. Both evenings featured works by Verdina Shlonsky; her "Poème Hébraïque" for voice and piano, to words by Avraham Shlonsky, was performed at the "Evening of Hebrew-Russian Art" on April 14, as well as several songs with texts depicting Eretz-Israeli landscapes, the Galilee and the Desert, in addition to "Hora," sung on May 12 at the "Evening of Hebrew-Czechian Art."[29] The Russian-Hebrew event included two concerts, with additional composers born in the Russian Empire, such as Nachum Nardi (see Figure 6). This event was again a combined evening of music and literature. The first part featured piano, chamber, and vocal works by Russian composers accompanied by readings from prominent Soviet writers Alexei Tolstoy and Andrei Bely. Hebrew readings appeared in the second part, including "Menachem Mendel's Letter" by Nathan Altherman, published only a month earlier in response to the Holocaust, and Haim Hazaz's "Ha-Derasha" (The sermon), which focuses on the tension between Zionism and Diaspora Jewishness.[30] All readings were by the actor Yehuda Aran (Ehrenkrantz, 1906–96).

During the 1950s, concerts of Italian, Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, and Russian music were held, occasionally combined with music by Israeli composers and including, again, Verdina Shlonsky, such as the concert on September 6, 1951, where two songs by Shlonsky in the "Evening of Hebrew-Romanian Art" appeared together with songs by Paul Ben-Haim as well as Alexander Uriah Boskovich's *Semitic Suite* (1946). In 1951 the poet Alexander Penn read his translations of selected poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky, which

[28] FBMA, M/2/3/2.

[29] The exact relationship between Verdina Shlonsky (1905–90), one of the first Israeli women composers, and Levite is not documented; still, program notes show that Levite made an effort to include her works in various concerts alongside other composers.

[30] Levite chose up to date, burning topics for the reading in her series. Alterman's text focuses on the destruction of Jewish life in the Holocaust through the eyes of Menachem-Mendel, writing to his wife, Sheyne-Sheyndl, characters borrowed from Shalom Aleichem's stories. As Shalom Aleichem himself explained in the preface to the second edition (1910), Menachem-Mendel is not a hero of a novel or a fictional character, but rather a symbol of every Jew. Alterman adapts this idea by using the same letter format to represent the tragedy of Jews. Hazaz's text emphasizes the tension between the Jewish diaspora (the "Galut") and Zionism through the character of Yudka, whose complex, troubled, polemic sermon offers detachment from the problematic history of the Jewish people.

had been published a year earlier, at the "Evening of Soviet Art." In combining Jewish music with works by local composers, Levite showed her clear standpoint; unlike the common view which negated the diaspora, she did not perceive Galut and Zionism as contradictory. On the contrary, she sought to find the connecting thread between them.

The inclusion of poetry in concerts led to another initiative: a series of broadcasts on Kol-Israel on the themes of "Meshorer Ve-Shirato" (A poet and his work) and "Meshorer Bi-Tselil Va-'Omer" (The poet in sound and words). Levite's interest focused on finding common ground between poetry and music. The programs, described in a newspaper review as "important and interesting," were dedicated to poets and poetesses such as Elisheva, Avraham Shlonsky, Yaacov Fichman, and Yehuda Karni, with the participation of singers Yulia Stutschewsky, Lotte Laufer, and others. The poet Leah Goldberg spoke about Avraham Shlonsky.[31] Levite clarified to Avni and Chalfi her idea behind those programs:

> I guess I do have a nature of a Ḥalutsa . . . I noticed that art music composers sometimes use lower [non-artistic] texts, while popular music composers use higher texts. I wanted to interfere, because I've always had the nerve, and although I'm not fluent in Hebrew, I put a lot of effort into learning . . . Also, writers do not have enough music appreciation, because they sometimes know nothing about it.

Her vision—one that she did not fulfill—was to establish "A Club on the Wings of Song," named after Heinrich Heine, to create a closer encounter between the two kinds of artists.[32] On December 2, 1952 she organized a Heinrich Heine evening with a lecture and a concert. The program included works by Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Grieg, Liszt, and Rimsky-Korsakov, along with Heine's "Nun ist es Zeit." Heine's text was translated by Rachel as "Higi'a Ha-'Et" and composed by Aviasaf Bernstein (Barnea). Several handwritten scores of these songs are in Levite's archival collection, including Grieg's "Abschied," Op. 4 No. 3, and Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Pine and the Palm," translated by Elisheva as "Dekel Va-'Oren." The evening received a positive review: "One should mention the reading of texts before their performance, which enables the listener to penetrate deeply into the essence of the song and its content . . . the well-organized evening exemplified Heine's great influence on composers who were inspired by his poetry, from his time until now."[33]

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[31] Ron, B. in *Davar*, February 25, 1949. "Ron B." was a pen name of the musicologist Moshe Gorali (born Bronzaft, 1910–96).
[32] FBMA, M2/3/2.
[33] H. Ratner, "An Evening of Reading and Playing Dedicated to Heinrich Heine's Work," *Kol Ha-'Am*, December 12, 1952. The author recommended that this interesting evening should reach a wider audience.



On Saturday 14.4.45 at Bath Arlosoroff Hall
2 CONCERTS AT 7¹⁵ — 9¹⁵ P. M

במוצאי שבת 14.4.45, באולם בית ארלוזורוב
2 קונצרטים בשעות 7¹⁵ — 9¹⁵

EVENING OF HEBREW-RUSSIAN ART

ערב לאמנות עברית-רוסית

Part I.

Glinka-Balakirev	L'Alouette	M. LEVITE	גלינקה-בלקירף	עפרוני	מרים לוית
Rachmaninoff	Prelude gis-moll		רחמנינוב	פרליוד	
Gliere	Variations populaires		גליר	וואריאציות עממיות	
Tschaikovsky	Berceuse	S. PETSCHAFT	צ'יקובסקי	שיר ערש	שרה פטשפט
Tschaikovsky	Romance		צ'יקובסקי	לו ידעתי (רומנס)	
Vassilenko	"Tar"		וסילנקו	"טאר"	
Hrennikoff	from Kino-Film		כרניקוב	מתוך הסרט "רוחה התוירות"	
A. Bieli	Poeme	Y EHRENKRANZ	אנדריי בילי	הלולא ברוסיה	יהודה ארנקרנץ
A. Tolstoi	Story		אלקסי טולסטוי	אמן חזיר	
Arensky	IIIme partie Trio	M. LEVITE I. BRANDMAN M. RAPPAPORT	ארנסקי	חלק ג' מהטריו ד-מול	מרים לוית י. ברנדמן מ. רפפורט
Miaskovsky	Andante con elevazione		מיסקובסקי	אנדנטה	

Part II.

Engel	Dance g-moll	M. LEVITE	י. אנגל	רקוד ג'-מול	מרים לוית
Pugatscheff	Dance arabe		ע. פוגצ'וב	רקוד ערבי	
Rosovsky	Hora		רוזובסקי	הורה	
I. Brandman	IIIme partie from Sonate Violin and Piano	I. BRANDMAN M. LEVITE	י. ברנדמן	חלק ג' מהסונטה לכנור ופסנתר	י. ברנדמן מרים לוית
Alterman	Letter	Y. EHRENKRANZ	נ. אלתרמן	מכתבו של מנחם מנדל	י. ארנקרנץ
Hazaz	Speech		ח. הזז	מ"הדרשה"	
M. Rappaport	Hebrew Rhapsody	M. RAPPAPORT	מ. רפפורט	רפסודיה עברית	מ. רפפורט
Schlonsky	Poeme Hebraique	S. PETSCHAFT	ו. שלונסקי	פואמה עברית	שרה פטשפט
Rappaport	"Hanita"		מ. רפפורט	"חניתה"	
Nardi	Hora		נ. נרדי	הורה: אין דבר	

המחיר 30 מאיי

דפוס כסרוד

Figure 6 "Evening of Hebrew-Russian Art," April 14, 1945. FBMA, M2/2/2.

Poetry in Music: Miriam Levite's Songs

Levite's earliest surviving manuscripts are from 1907–08, when she was still a student. These manuscripts include two works, both for piano solo. The first is a three-voice fugue in G minor, probably composed as a polyphonic exercise, and the second is a Berceuse in G-flat major, a short character piece influenced by a Romantic idiom. It is in ternary form, and the contrasting middle section is in G-sharp minor. At this stage, Levite focused on performing and teaching and did not consider any career as a composer. What seems surprising is that much later, between the 1940s and 1950s, when she did compose, she produced no piano works, only vocal music.

Levite's songs (most are suitable for soprano, some for mezzo-soprano, and one for tenor) include eleven original songs and four chamber or choral arrangements. Seven songs for female voice and piano are included in the 1961 publication: "La-'Adam Ha-Tov" (To a good man) to words by Amir-

Pinkerfeld; "Kokhavon" (Tiny star) and "Sadot Nirḥavim" (Vast fields) by Venetzianer; "Fun Yener Zayt Lid" by Korn (On the other side of the poem, in Yiddish); "Ruth" by Elisheva; "Ka'ele Ba-'Aviv Yamutu" (Like these in spring they shall die) by Rachel; and "'Al 'Etsev Ve-'Al Simḥa" (On sorrow and joy) by Haya Kadmon. Her other songs include "Tugat Bedidut" (The sadness of loneliness) for tenor voice and piano, again to a text by Amir-Pinkerfeld; "Shir 'Eres Tsefoni" (Northern lullaby) for soprano and baritone with piano to words by Nordahl Grieg; and "Shoshana She-Lo Niqtefa" (The unpicked rose) for soprano and piano to words by Elisheva. Another short song, self-published separately, also in 1961, is "Yonat Shalom—Tefilat 'Enosh Tam Ba-'Asher Hu Sham" (A prayer for every human being wherever he is), in this case to words and music by Levite herself.

Levite's arrangements include a choral version of "Sadot Nirḥavim," two arrangements for voice and string quartet of songs originally composed for voice and piano, "Kokhavon" and "Ruth," and a setting of Korn's text "Fun Yener Zayt Lid" for soprano, three women's voices (or a women's choir), and string quartet. In addition to the volume *Mi-Shirei Rachel*, Levite edited the volume *Nation Tunes* for piano, composed by Baruch Liftman.[34] Another encounter with Rachel was as a translator of a Maurice Maeterlinck text in her "Zemer" (Song), a vocal dialogue with two performance options: mezzo-soprano and soprano voices with piano, or choir and harmonium. In "Tefila 'Aḥarona" (Last prayer), Moshe Tabenkin's text was the basis for a piece for soprano or mezzo-soprano, women's choir, or three women's voices, accompanied by piano. Levite's largest work is *Shir Ha-Shirim* (Song of songs), a contemporary ballad for orchestra with soloists, choirs, and organ to words by Alexander Penn, written in memory of the Holocaust. Levite dedicated this work to Yeshayahu Drucker, "the most noble and modest among saviors of Israel's children."[35]

Most of Levite's songs for voice and piano share a common theme clearly influenced by the Romantic Lied. They often center on a female protagonist, whose individual feelings and thoughts are confronted with nature or the surrounding society. Thus, in "Kokhavon," the heroine stands against the backdrop of the universe; in "Sadot Nirḥavim," she walks within endless, timeless surroundings, and in "Shoshana She-Lo Niqtefa," she finds her strength in an imaginative, eternal world. Feelings of isolation, estrangement, and alienation are often expressed, but the need to belong, to be loved, and to take

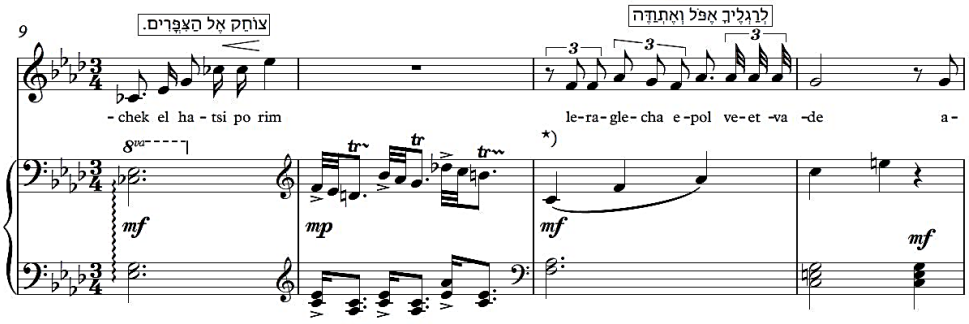
[34] Published by Langer, Tel Aviv, 1947.

[35] Yeshayahu Drucker (1914–2004), a chaplain in the Polish army, was active in locating Jewish children from orphanages, Polish families, and monasteries after the Holocaust. He brought them to a children's home in Zabrze, Poland, and from there they arrived in Israel with the assistance of '*Aliyat Ha-No'ar* (The Youth Aliyah).

part in the world overcomes these difficulties. Her strength is through the inner rather than the external world. Similar to Romantic notions, the individual character is both vulnerable and heroic. Those feelings correspond to Levite's own struggles for recognition and financial support throughout her career. Inner, intimate feelings stand at the center of most texts, and their musical expression is influenced by Expressionism. Each song creates a short, dramatic scene, occasionally strengthened by declamatory phrases with frequent changes in specific musical parameters, such as meter, dynamics, and tonal expansions.[36]

In the opening song of the booklet, "La-'Adam Ha-Tov," the protagonist describes a unique moment of enlightenment when a single, miraculous figure, a "good man" who laughs at the birds, awakens her and shakes off the ravages of time while penetrating the depths of her soul. She uses an external symbol to awaken the creative feeling inherent within her. By creating this pastoral scene, Levite expresses Romantic notions that give nature the ability to erase the ravages of time and activate. Word painting is evident in the ornamentation of the piano part, which symbolizes the birds. While A-flat major serves as the work's principal tonal center, the incorporation of lowered scale degrees and augmented sonorities extends the harmonic language and creates expressive tension (see Example 1). The tempo increases during the reflection on lost years, supported by minor-mode harmonies, dynamic intensification, and broader melodic gestures. The recitation section—"Where was I? / How did I become so quiet?"—separates the moment of remembrance from the moment of disillusionment, and at the end of the song, the enlightened, calm feeling returns through the use of Tempo I and the original major tonality. This part, which hints at a ternary form, serves as a coda.

[36] Most of Levite's songs, including all songs from *Seven Songs,* along with "Tugat Bedidut," "Shoshana She-Lo Niqtefa," and the arrangements of "Kokhavon" and "Ruth" for voice and string quartet, were published for the first time by Felicja: Musical Arts Center between 2024 and 2025.



Example 1 "La-'Adam Ha-Tov," excerpt from the second verse: "Laughing at the birds / I will fall at your feet and confess." Felicja: Musical Arts Center, FL/Music Scores 16.

The strength of the main female figure in "Kokhavon" lies not in her physical size—after all, she is a tiny star among the stars—but in her soul, in which the entire world is embodied. The song is through-composed, but it incorporates variants of similar melodic movements. C major harmony is embellished by an abundant use of accidentals and chromaticism that create surprising harmonic implications (see Example 2). Slight constant tempo changes culminate in the concise Allegro section that divides the first and second verses. In addition, the rising melodic figures in the nine-measure piano coda contribute to the timeless feeling. Example 3 shows the equivalent section in the arrangement for voice and string quartet.



Example 2 "Kokhavon," from *Seven Songs*, excerpt: "Not a sun am I, but a star / A tiny star among stars."



Example 3 Excerpt from "Kokhavon" for voice and string quartet. Felicja: Musical Arts Center, FL/Music Scores 1.

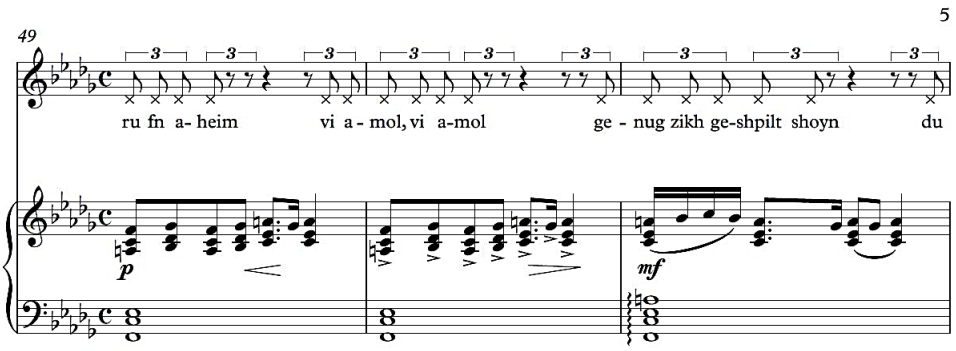
In the third song, "Sadot Nirḥavim," the fields serve as an image that does not signify any specific place but represents an infinite nature, which stands in contrast to the solitary figure. The song uses chorale-like figurations in G minor, enriched with modality. It is in ternary form, and the opening section returns toward the end with slight changes. The piano responds to the voice or accompanies it with chordal patterns and limited melodic movements. In the a cappella arrangement, the interaction originally scored for voice and piano is distributed between the baritone soloist and the vocal quartet.

The fourth song is distinctive in several respects. While most of Levite's songs are in Hebrew, either in the original or in translation, "Fun Yener Zayt Lid*"* is sung in Yiddish. Furthermore, unlike most other through-composed or ternary songs, it has five stanzas with a uniform four-line structure. The text expresses Rachel Korn's longing for her mother, who was murdered together with her brother in the Holocaust. The garden, the graceful hut, the bird that migrates and returns every year—all those childhood memories knock on the window, but, alas, "the window is closed"; the past can no longer return. The song is in B-flat, a tonal center that shifts between major and minor according to the text. For the bird's appearance in the second verse, the harmony is B-flat major, with added rhythmic sixteenth notes and ornaments in the piano part, and a varied melodic line (see Example 4).



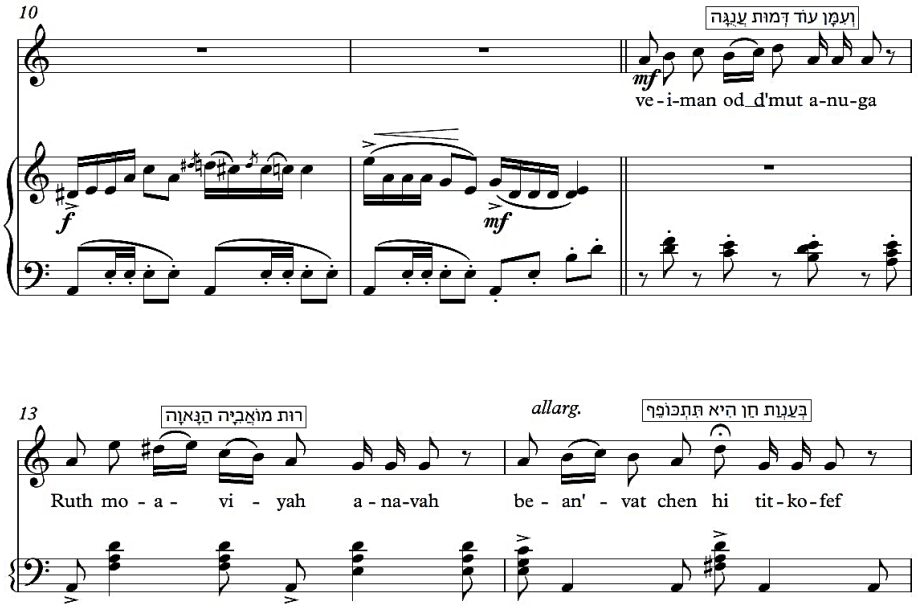
Example 4 "Fun Yener Zayt Lid," excerpt from the second verse: "On the other side of the poem, there's a bird, yes, a bird / Brownish-golden with a reddish little belly." Felicja: Musical Arts Center, FL/Music Scores 19.

The next verses shift between minor and major harmonies when memories of wonderful hours are mixed with darkness. Levite combines declamation with singing in the mother's appearance in the concluding scene: "Standing on the threshold. A little embarrassed, calling me home: Aren't you tired yet? Night is coming," which evokes deep pain and longing (see Example 5).



Example 5 "Fun Yener Zayt Lid," excerpt from the declamatory section in the last verse. Felicja: Musical Arts Center, FL/Music Scores 19.

"Ruth," the fifth song, is based on an early text by Elisheva published in Russia in 1919 under the title "Tainye pesni" (Hidden songs).[37] The poem focuses on the biblical figure of Ruth the Moabite. Ruth symbolizes the poet herself, who was drawn to Judaism, a process described in the final stanza: "Ruth the Moabite! With love beneath his wing, you, a stranger, were gathered in by the eternal people; this people, in its pride and fervor of spirit, also took hold of and conquered my heart." Levite probably felt close to both Ruth and Elisheva. In contrast to Levite's typical post-Romantic expressivity, here she employs several Mediterranean signifiers, such as modality—the principal mode is D Dorian—ornamentation, dense melodic movements, and dance-like rhythms (see Example 6), combined with a recitative-like section that appears toward the end of the second verse and continues to the third. Notwithstanding these implications, Levite chose to allude to the well-known Russian folk melody "Song of the Volga Boatmen" through a direct musical quotation. The quote represents Elisheva, who was known as "Ruth from the banks of the Volga." Thus her Russian origin is combined with local signifiers.



Example 6 Excerpt from "Ruth": "And with them another tender figure / Fair Ruth the Moabite / With humility will bow down." Felicja: Musical Arts Center, FL/Music Scores 20.

[37] Elisheva Bichovsky (born Elizaveta Zhirkova) was a Russian poet and author who became interested in Judaism and Hebrew. From 1920, she replaced Russian with Hebrew as her writing language. She immigrated to Eretz-Israel in 1925. Though she was received with enthusiasm, she later faced difficulties and harsh criticism.

"Ka'ele Ba-'Aviv Yamutu" is the sixth song in the booklet. The text by Rachel the Poetess appeared in the daily newspaper *Davar* on May 18, 1926. It was dedicated to the memory of Eliezer Faktori, one of the founders of botanical research in Pre-State Israel, and Benjamin Quint, a pioneer worker in Tel-Yosef. Both died of tuberculosis, the same disease that would claim Rachel herself five years later. This is the only text by Rachel that Levite composed, but as already mentioned, her interest in Rachel's poems had started many years earlier. Recurrent transitions between major and minor modes, which already appear in the piano introduction, express the contrasting traits of death in the spring, which is both morbid and blessed (see Example 7). Rachel, who studied agronomy and was in close touch with nature while working in Kibbutz Kinneret, incorporated agricultural themes in several poems and named three of them "Spring." In this poem, spring foreshadows her own death.



Example 7 Opening of "Ka'ele Ba-'Aviv Yamutu." FBMA, M2/3/3.

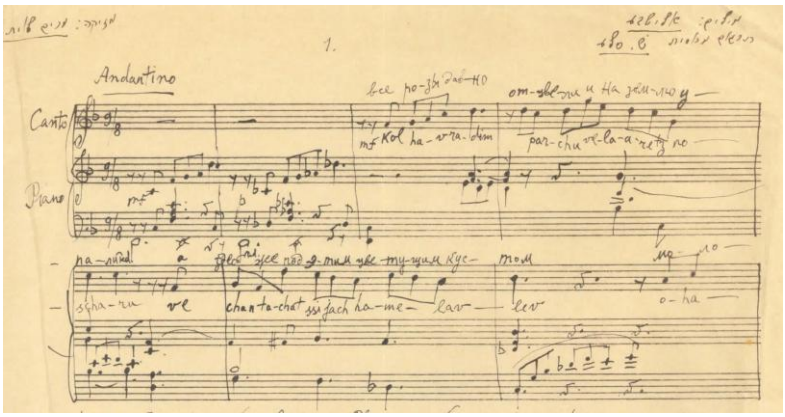
Despite the conciseness of "'Al 'Etsev Ve-'Al Simḥa," the last song in the booklet, it is filled with dramatic passion. The main tonal center is in F minor, but the opening progression in the piano includes chromatic motion, which, together with the *forte* dynamics, intensifies the emotional impact. The rising fifth motive between the notes F and C that appears on the verb "to burn" recurs several times in the piano part. After the short piano introduction, the singer enters with "to burn," and throughout the song, the piano part links the short vocal phrases within a structure that resembles a recitative. In contrast to the intimate sensitivity of the individual female characters central to most of the other poems, this text, shaped by communist ideas, focuses on the collective.

The text of "'Al 'Etsev Ve-'Al Simḥa" was written by Haya Kadmon (1919–60), a member of the Israeli Communist Party. Several greeting cards and invitations in Levite's archival collection testify to her affinity for that

party.[38] Kadmon, who was also an activist in the Peace Committee (a league for friendship between Israel and the Soviet Union), often published poems and articles in *Kol Ha-'Am*, a daily newspaper of the Communist Party. Two years after her death, on February 16, 1962, a eulogy for her appeared there: "A flame walked among us. A flame that we called upon and left us the command to burn, to burn always," so that "a giant flame of happiness will be hung on every person." A decade after her death, the collection *Liv'or Tamid* (To burn constantly), containing Kadmon's poems, was published.

The manuscripts of "Shoshana She-Lo Niqtefa," "Tugat Bedidut," and "Shir 'Eres Tsefoni" were not included in Levite's booklet. In "Shoshana She-Lo Niqtefa," Elisheva expresses feelings of foreignness and alienation. Though the heroine watches lovers in the real world, she declares that her illusion of love is timeless and magical. Portrayed in a Romantic idiom, she finds her strength within this imaginative world while identifying with the unpicked rose. The musical style reflects the romantic tenderness of the text and, at the same time, the emotional turmoil of the scene. Despite being in F major, the ascending piano line reaches a lowered sixth in the first two bars, subtly coloring the progression with a sense of mystery (see Example 8). Such slight changes eventually lead to a change of key to F minor with the text "Va-'Ani 'Aluva Ve-'Eyni 'Ahuvah" (And I am poor and unloved), but when the heroine declares "Yoter Mikem' Ed'a Shikhron 'Ahavah" (But my love overcomes yours) it quickly comes back to major harmony, leading to a change to D major, and eventually returning to the opening F. "Tugat Bedidut," a one-verse text, focuses on feelings of alienation and despair, and in contrast to "Shoshana She-Lo Niqtefa," suggests no answer. On the contrary, melancholy, as its title suggests, is the prevailing sentiment. The rhythmic movement, the octaves, the chromaticism, and the virtuosity required in the piano part show close affinity with post-Romantic piano music, especially Scriabin's piano preludes.

[38] FBMA, M2/3/3.



Example 8 Opening of "Shoshana She-Lo Niqtefa": "All the roses bloomed and fell to the ground / And here under the thriving bush, young lovers were thrilled." FBMA, M2/3/3.

In 1941 Miriam Levite responded to Gershon Swet's review of her concert of Russian and Hebrew music, presented on February 3.[39] Swet criticized the program for placing works by composers associated with the same aesthetic tradition, such as Joel Engel and Joseph Achron, in immediate succession, arguing that this resulted in a monotonous musical sequence. He also questioned Levite's inclusion of composers such as Moshe Rapaport, whom he regarded as of lesser artistic significance, and suggested replacing their works with compositions he considered more worthy of performance. Levite's response provides a clear articulation of the artistic and cultural objectives that guided the concert: "To give the audience a broad perspective on the development of Hebrew music, and second . . . to perform from Eretz-Israeli manuscripts that have never been heard before . . . Only after one listens can one judge, and this is, in my opinion, the obligation of pianists who live here."

Although formulated in response to a specific review, Levite's statement encapsulates the broader principles that informed her musical career. As this article has demonstrated, the commitment she expressed in 1941 is reflected not only in her programming but also in her later compositions and in her multifaceted contributions to musical life, many of which have remained overlooked or marginalized in existing scholarship. A comprehensive understanding of the development of music in Israel therefore requires a thorough examination of figures such as Miriam Levite, whose artistic, pedagogical, and cultural activities played a formative role in shaping its evolution.

[39] *Haaretz*, February 23, 1941. Swet's criticism appeared in his column "Misaviv La-Radio" (Around the radio) on February 9. A much more positive review by Menashe Rabinovich (here, already Ravina) appeared in *'Omer* on February 11. Ravina analyzed various musical aspects. He praised Levite for her devotion to Jewish music and her successful performance, especially in her choice of the accurate, most suitable tempo.