

## Tzvi Avni's Late Style and His Three Newest Works

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**Abstract:** Tzvi Avni (b. 1927) is now Israel's oldest composer. In 2020, Jehoash Hirshberg and Rakefet Bar-Sadeh published their book *Tzvi Avni, his Life and Works* (Carmel, Jerusalem, which includes Avni's Autobiography). Since then, Avni has composed three new works: *Shapes*, for flute solo, completed in November 2020 (the original Hebrew title is *Gvanim – Colors*); *About These Days*, for string quartet, completed in April 2021; and *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra*, completed in 2022. The present article discusses the three new works in the context of Avni's late style, which is dominated by a regression from avant-garde to classical form and mostly regular meter.

**Keywords:** Tzvi Avni, Israeli art music, sonata form, avant-garde, tonality.

Tzvi Avni (b. 1927), Yechezkel Braun (1922-2014) and Ben-Zion Orgad (1926-2006) comprised the first group of German-born composers who immigrated to Israel as children and received their initial professional training there.<sup>1</sup> All three were prolific composers whose contributions to emerging Israeli music was highly significant. My monograph on Tzvi Avni<sup>2</sup> was published in 2020, and at the last minute I included his recently completed orchestral work, *Moshe on Mount Nevo*, composed that same year. But Avni's fountain of productivity continued to flow, and in the present article I will discuss Avni's late style, focusing on the last three works he has written – thus far – since publication of my monograph:

- *Shapes*, for flute solo, completed on 20 November 2020 (the original Hebrew title is *Gvanim – Colors*);
- *About These Days*, for string quartet, completed on 1 April 2021;
- *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra*, completed in 2022.

In his autobiography Avni wrote about the inception of his musical career in the 1950s: "...It was clear to me that I was ready to do everything, just everything to express myself through music,"<sup>3</sup> and that at a relatively advanced age to begin professional music studies. For that Avni turned to the most influential and inspiring teachers in the country:

<sup>1</sup> Jehoash Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine 1880-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Jehoash Hirshberg, Rotem Luz, and Yechezkel Braun, *Yechezkel Braun, His Life and Works* (with the participation of Josef Goldenberg, Naftali Wagner, and Rakefet Bar-Sadeh), Tel Aviv: Institute of Israeli Music, and Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing, 2017 (in Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> Jehoash Hirshberg and Rakefet Bar-Sadeh, *Tzvi Avni, His Life and Works*, with the participation of Tzvi Avni (autobiography), Joseph Goldenberg, and Liran Gurkievitch, Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing, 2020 (in Hebrew).

<sup>3</sup> Hirshberg and Bar-Sadeh, *Tzvi Avni*, p. 32.

Paul Ben Haim, Abel Ehrlich, and finally to Mordechai Seter, who taught a class at what was then the Academy of Music in Tel Aviv, where Avni was the only student of composition. He also participated in a summer seminar under Oedoen Partos. This inspiring and rich background contributed strongly to Avni's becoming an open-minded and highly inspired young composer. Nevertheless, the most important and influential event in his professional life was clearly his stay in New York in 1962-1964, during which he concentrated on "absorbing impressions and experiences"<sup>4</sup> in one of the most innovative and free-minded centers of avant-garde music. His third orchestral work, composed soon after his return from New York, was *Meditations on Drama* (1966) – a powerful, rich and dramatic work that marked a new stage along Avni's professional path.<sup>5</sup> However, the most significant modification in his technique came in 1970 with the composition of *Holiday Metaphors*.

Common to the otherwise oppositional tonal and dodecaphonic techniques is their use of single tones as raw material. *Holiday Metaphors* is part of a broad category of avant-garde compositions based on clusters of various kinds. In such works, the single tone is hardly active and the music proceeds in sets of elaborate clusters. It consists of 30 staves, each of which presents its own motive in a very short duration so that no harmonic combinations may result; rather, a constantly changing cluster is formed, as is clearly audible when listening to the piece. The work is scored for a large Romantic orchestra, which includes a bass clarinet, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, a harp which plays quick passages, a piano played with brushes and drum sticks, and a huge group of percussion instruments that requires four players.

A similar use of clusters dominates Avni's significant work *Program Music* (1980). Also, an imaginative painter, Avni employs clusters to musically paint *The Game of Machines* (whose score requires multiple percussion instruments played by four musicians, as shown in Appendix 1). This enormous assembly is further amplified by five timpani, a celesta and a piano, typical of the huge percussion groups that are a trademark in Avni's later style. In addition, the viola, cello and double bass players are required to strike the strings of their instruments sharply with their fingers and to play *col legno*, while the piano is played with brushes.

The predominating role of clusters in *Holiday Metaphors* and *Program Music* is based on a well-planned series of rich and diverse sonorities. At the same time the traditional form, especially the dominating aspects of the sonata form, is abandoned, inasmuch as it is exclusively based on interrelationships of single pitches.

Yet shortly after composing these two major orchestral works based on sets of clusters, Avni embarked on a gradual return to the single tone as a basic element of his

<sup>4</sup> Hirschberg and Bar-Sadeh, *Tzvi Avni, His Life and Works*, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Publication of the monograph was accompanied by the initiation of the internet site of the audio recording of Avni's works, <http://www.imi.org.il/avni-book>. Listening to the recording is a must for anyone studying Avni's music.

musical compositions. The first major work that marked it was *Metamorphosis on a Bach Chorale* (1985),<sup>6</sup> inspired by Bach's chorale cantata *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*. The work begins with a long solo for bass clarinet accompanied by a double bass, together creating a foggy sonority with no clear melodic progression. But the quotation of the chorale returns the parameter of melody to the fore.

A similar combined procedure dominates *Desert Scenes*, a monumental three-movement symphony (1991). The movement *Feast of Dance* is dominated by a parodic quotation of the *Piyut* – sacred song – of Sephardic Jews *Eyn Adir Ka'adonay* (*There is None So Mighty as My Lord*), especially the motto opening motive that begins in parallel sevenths (Example 1):

**Example 1.** Desert Scenes, 1st movement (Quotation of the *Piyut*).



Yet the next movement resumes the pattern of a series of clusters, with a page containing 32 staves. The only way for the conductor to coordinate the performers is to beat the units of seconds marked on the top as shown in Appendix 2.

Avni's principal works based on the cluster model extend over a long period, some twenty years of Avni's creative life, and represent his closest approach to the avant-garde. But he has not stayed there: From 2001 to the present, he has composed four concerti, for bassoon (2001), for piano (2010), for horn (2015), and for clarinet (2020). They mark his return to the formal model of the classical romantic concerto dominated by a single tone and devoid of clusters. The most significant of them is his composition for the piano, which follows all the formal criteria of that model, especially the motto opening motive begins with an open chord of a fourth and a fifth (Example 2):

**Example 2.** Piano Concerto, Measure 1.



In his three most recent works, on which the present article focuses, Avni has returned to the grammar of Romantic expanded tonality and regular metric organization.

Tribute to J.S. Bach was common among the early Israeli composers. Paul Ben-Haim was the first to do so, with his own 1968 *Metamorphosis on a Bach Chorale*.

### ***Shapes, for flute solo***

*Shapes* is a charming short work, following the line of solo pieces by composers such as Cecil Chaminade (1857–1944) and Benjamin Goddard (1849–1895). It is very idiomatic and constitutes a good addition to the repertory for solo flute. The flute begins with a D-minor motive that spreads over the first two octaves and ends on the leading note (Example 3), which is a full return to minor tonality:

**Example 3.** *Shapes* for flute solo (beginning).



It continues with a motive that brings it to the *tritone* g# through a sequential progression (Example 4), which is one of the most frequent tonal means.

**Example 4.** *Shapes* for flute solo (a sequential progression).



The work, however, does not end on the tonic D, so that the return to tonality is not complete.

### ***About These Days, for string quartet***

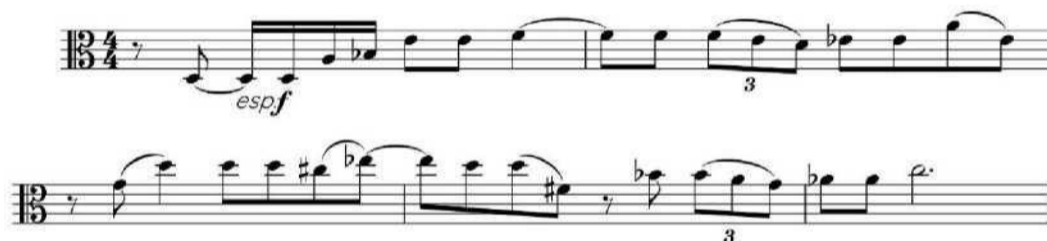
Tzvi Avni composed four string quartets over nearly sixty years and separated from one another by significant spans of time: 1962, 1969, 2003, and the most recent work in 2021. Common to all four is intensive, dramatic expression, which preserves the prestigious position occupied by the string quartet since Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and Bartok. *About These Days*, Avni's fourth quartet, is a single-movement work, dominated by dense eighth- and sixteenth-note chords, *risoluto*, established in the two opening measures (Example 5):

**Example 5.** About These Days, Measure 1.



The **Quartet** was Avni's response to the prolonged shock which engulfed the country – and other countries as well- with the outbreak of the Covid epidemic. The extended chordal line reaches *fortissimo* and changes rhythmically into asymmetrical alternations of 2/4, 4/4 and 3/4. The strong contrast between the opening and the second subject, together with the manner of elaboration, situate the writing near the concept of the sonata form. The viola returns to the first subject in excited rhetoric (Example 6):

**Example 6.** About These Days, Measure 42.



The tension increases progressively and the quartet ends with the opening *fortissimo* chords.

Avni's fourth string quartet reflects the high standing he has accorded this preferred form and its classic-romantic conception.

***Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra***  
(*Memories, Midnight Intermezzo, Metamorphosis on "Debka Druze"*)

The concerto is scored for a chamber orchestra which does not overpower the soloist – flute, oboe, clarinet and bassoon, two horns, timpani – but nevertheless calls for a large battery of percussion for four players, as is typical for Avni.

The first movement, *Memories*, begins with a busy contrapuntal *tutti*. The opening solo is a long, continuous melodic line, dominated by Avni’s characteristic internal chromaticism (Example 7):

**Example 7.** Clarinet Concerto, 1st movement (beginning).



The movement continues with hardly any rests and is nearly monothematic.

In striking contrast, the second movement – *Midnight Intermezzo* – is scored for solo clarinet, with an optional background of resounding percussion: large tom-tom, medium gong, and wind chimes, played *sempre piano*. Example 8 presents the opening of the movement:

**Example 8.** Clarinet Concerto, 2nd movement (beginning).

TEMPO RUBATO (♩ = 64) *molto espr.*

The short concluding section begins with a recapitulation and concludes on the leading tone, A-#.

The *finale* recalls Avni’s early period; it is a lively variant of “*Debka Druze*,” a tune by Uri Givon (1912-1974) based on a traditional Arabic melody. The original recording of Givon’s composition is available on *Zemereshet*.<sup>7</sup> The internal chromaticism

<sup>7</sup> Zemereshet (זמרשת) is a superb site comprising and preserving a large collection of early recordings of the extensive repertory of so-called folk songs, all composed by known composers.

of the song fully corresponds to Avni’s repeated device (Example 9):

**Example 9.** Clarinet Concerto, 3rd movement (“Debka Druze” theme).



The *finale* is a nostalgic memory of Avni’s early days in the Mediterranean style.

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The overall conclusion is that in his late works, Avni, the great avant-gardist, has returned to classical Romantic parameters in fresh, innovative garb. Several other composers have followed a similar circuit in recent decades, notably the American composer George Rochberg (1918-2005). Perhaps we should conclude that the powers of the basic classical Romantic parameters are indeed much superior to those of the dodecaphonic ones or to those of the avant-gardist clusters and related devices. Indeed, Yechezkel Braun has concluded that “the sonata form is the most complex form, the most clever, the most diverse, that the musical genius has ever invented”.<sup>8</sup>

The year 2023 brought with it extreme social and political crisis in Israel, culminating in a horrendous military catastrophe. As always alert to events around him, Tzvi Avni responded by turning the string quartet "About These Days" into a dramatic version for a string orchestra, which received a superb interpretation by the Jerusalem Camerata under the baton of Avner Biron. The new version retained the music of the quartet unchanged, but made the most of the chordal power of the texture of the string orchestra in dissonant chords of min or seconds and tritones.

**Example 10.**

*to my friends Götz, and Rosemarie*

**ABOUT THESE DAYS**      **אודות ימים אלה**  
 FOR STRING ORCHESTRA      (2021)      לתזמורת כלי קשת

צבי אבני  
TZVI AVNI

*Risoluto* ♩ = 80-85

<sup>8</sup> Hirshberg, Luz, and Braun, *Yehezkel Braun*, p. 104.

The chordal opening is contrasted by a four-part imitative section:

**Example 11.**

The musical score for Example 11 is a four-part imitative section for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The score is in 4/4 time and begins with a *mf* dynamic. The Violin I part starts with a *solo* marking and features a melodic line with a slur over the first two measures. The Violin II part enters in the second measure with a similar melodic line. The Viola and Violoncello parts enter in the third measure, also with similar melodic lines. The score is written in a single system with four staves.

But the heavy chords soon return to predominate, even in a long pizzicato section toward the end. "About these Days," in its orchestral version, is a powerful critical commentary on the darkest period in Israeli history thus far by this alert nonagenarian composer.



[APPENDICES]

Appendix 1 - Program Music, Instrumentation

- I. Xylophone
  - Marimba
  - Snare drum
  - Wood block
  - Bass drum
  - Wood chimes
  - Glass chimes
  - Anvil
- II. Vibraphone
  - Crotales (Bb, C#, D)
  - A pair of cymbals
  - 3 Tom Toms
  - 2 Temple blocks
  - Tambourine
  - Rattle
  - Maracas
- III. Tubular bells
  - High Hat
  - Snare drum
  - Guiro
  - A pair of Cymbals
  - 2 Triangles
  - 2 Gongs
  - Whip
  - Sand Paper
  - Vibra Slap
- IV. Glockenspiel
  - Tenor drums
  - 3 Cow bells
  - Suspended symbals
  - Tam Tam
  - Vibra slap
  - Flexatone
  - Maracas (high)
  - 2 Log Drums
- V. 5 Timpani
  - Celesta
  - Piano

Appendix 2 – Desert Visions, 2nd movement

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Pic.

2 Fls.

2 Obs. I

E.Hn.

2 Cls. (Bb)

B.Cl. (Bb)

2 Bns.

I

II

Hns. (F)

IV

266 I

Tpts. II

III

I

II

Trbs. III

Tuba

Timp.

I

Perc. II

III

Hrp.

I

II

Vlns.

Vla.

Vcl.

D.B.