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THE MUSIC OF ALEXANDER U. BOSKOVICH (1907-1964) AS REPRESENTATION OF IDEOLOGY OF ISRAELI MUSIC

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Alexander Uriah Boskovitch was the only composer within the group of the founding fathers' of Israeli music who conceived a comprehensive ideological base for that which he considered an incipient Israeli national style. The present essay will explore the close affinity between his ideology and his music, and will show that when conditions created a conflict between his ideology and his personal taste, ideology got the upper hand.

Boskovitch was born in Cluj, on 16 August 1907.¹ His parents, who were deeply religious, belonged to the Hungarian-speaking Jewish community of Transylvania. This was the heyday of the Jewish community of Cluj which doubled during the years 1910-1927 and reached 14,000, 13.4% of the population of the city.²

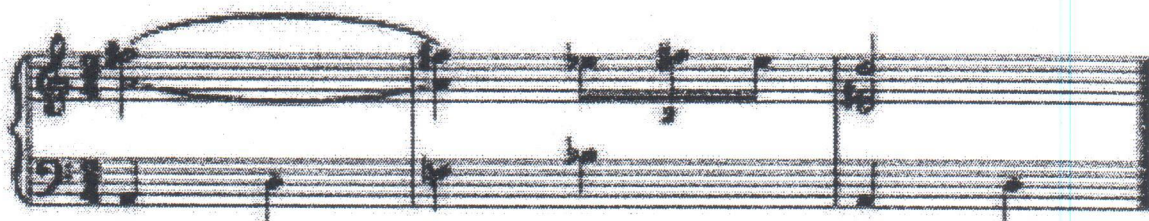
Boskovitch studied piano in Cluj with the great teacher Piroska Hevesi at the Institut de Pregătire de Artiști. In 1924 he studied for a year in Vienna with Victor Ebenstein. Having returned to Cluj, in 1927 he went to Paris for several years of advanced studies with pianist Lazar Levi, composer Paul Dukas, and the legendary musician Nadia Boulanger. Consequently French music and French culture became a primary factor in his personality as musician.

1. The sole monograph on Boskovitch so far is Herzl Shmueli & Jehoash Hirshberg, *Alexander Uriyah Boskovitch, his Life, his Works, and his Thought* (Jerusalem, 1995, in Hebrew).

2. 'Cluj', *The Encycloppedia Judaica*

Having returned to Cluj, he conducted the Cluj Opera. He also founded and directed the fine Jewish Goldmark orchestra, which, while officially an amateur ensemble, was of high professional level. Even the legendary violinist Bronislaw Huberman performed as soloist with the orchestra. Boskovitch belonged to a Zionist student group, but he himself had no intention of immigrating to Palestine. However, he became very interested in the expression of Judaism in music, on which he contributed an essay to a student publication.³ Boskovitch's premise was that 'European music after Wagner... reached a state of bareness... the exhausted European music was revived by the Russians... Fresh blood of folk music penetrated the circulation of art music... The new Jewish music recognized the extraordinary significance of the folk song... 'Boskovitch called for the establishment of a Transylvanian Jewish music society, and set the example by a study expedition to Jewish villages in the neighbouring Carpathian mountains. In 1937 he composed the suite *Chansons Populaires Juives*, which is a faithful arrangement of Yiddish songs. The suite was composed for piano, and immediately orchestrated. In the first song, Lullaby, Boskovitch avoided the major minor tonality. The Ahava Raba was harmonized by Steiger through a bitonal harmony.

Example 1: The Golden Chain



Music Example 1. *The Golden Chain*

In a lecture given in Tel Aviv in 1943 Boskovitch referred to this suite, later called *The Golden Chain*, as a work 'which saved my life'. Unemployed under the Fascist Romanian regime, he proposed the composition to Jewish conductor Issay Dobrowen who accepted it for performance with the newly founded Palestine Orchestra (later the IPO). The orchestra was the bold creation of violinist Bronislaw

3. *Kelet és Nyugat Között* [The Problems of Jewish Music]. A Zsidó Diáksegélyző Kiadás, Cluj, 1937).

Huberman, who conceived it as an emergency means to salvage the best of Jewish instrumentalists who were sacked from the finest orchestras in central and eastern Europe by the Fascist and Nazi governments. The orchestra was inaugurated in December 1936 in a memorable concert series under Arturo Toscanini and has retained its high international standards since then.⁴ Dobrowen approved of the Suite and the orchestra invited Boskovitch to come to Tel Aviv for the premiere in 1938, the second season of the new orchestra. This was the first premiere of a new Jewish composition by the orchestra. Following the performance Boskovitch decided to stay in Tel Aviv, having had no motivation to return to Fascist Romania.

The period from 1931 to 1938 was marked by a major upheaval in the musical scene of the Jewish community of Palestine, then under British mandate administration. The deterioration in Europe effected a large immigration of Jews to Palestine, among them some thirty well trained composers, mostly German born and trained, and a smaller group from Eastern Europe.⁵ They were abruptly thrown into a new situation characterized by the following aspects:

1. There was hardly any previous creative activity in art music in the country prior to 1931 so that they were faced with the overwhelming challenge of creating a new national musical style.
2. Their personal and professional backgrounds were extremely varied, and they recognized no central authority. Hence there existed no conditions for any 'School of Composition'. I would like to stress that the frequently mentioned concept of 'a Mediterranean School' in Palestine at that time is wrong and misleading.
3. They renewed their creative activity in Palestine under severe economic hardship, struggling to make ends meet.
4. Upon immigration they still viewed the ascent of Nazism in Europe as a merely temporary crisis, hoping to return to Europe within a short time.

Consequently, the immigrant composers acted under the dialectics which I have named as 'The Vision of the East and the Heritage of the West'. Their anger with Europe directed them to the Zionist ideology which called for all Jews to look to the East as their future inspiration. At the same time their western training and professional ties retained their deep rooted identification with European music.

The East – West factors were not in equilibrium. The immigrant composers

4. J. Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine 1880 - 1948 A Social History* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 122-144; *idem*, 'Israel Philharmonic Orchestra', in Robert Craven, ed., *Symphony Orchestras of the World* (New York, 1987), 200-204

5. *Music in the Jewish Community*, pp. 157-183

had deeply absorbed the western heritage as a practical technique of composition and as their way of life. By contrast, their exposure to Eastern music was extremely limited. The rich activity in Jewish communities of mid Eastern origins and among the Arabs in Palestine was compartmentalized and none of the immigrant composers had ever acquired training as ethnomusicologists needed to penetrate such communities. Their concept of East hardly went beyond Romantic European Orientalism on the one hand, and a study of Abraham Zvi Idelsohn's *Thesaurus of Yemenite and Babylonian traditions* on the other.⁶ Having reached Palestine, each of them searched an individual way to Eastern music which was just around the corner and yet remote and inaccessible.

Boskovitch expressed his ideology in several essays (all in Hebrew) culminating in the manuscript of his book 'The Problems of Original Israeli Music' which remained as torso upon his untimely death⁷. Boskovitch's consistent premises, as expressed throughout his lectures and writings, may be summarized as follows:

1. Boskovitch rejected the German romantic view of music as transcending time and place. He insisted that every great art has its roots in a clearly defined small community at a certain point in time, and only later can it communicate with other societies. Whatever suited German music such as counterpoint, fugue, and chromatic major-minor tonality would be totally alien in Palestine of the 1940s and later in the State of Israel (founded May 1948). The same applied to East European Jewish tradition, and consequently upon immigration Boskovitch abandoned the musical world of his own suite *The Golden Chain*.
2. Boskovitch defined the concept of place by 'static landscape', namely, the visual scenery of the scorching summer heat, the powerful bright sun light, and the sand dunes of Palestine, and 'dynamic landscape' which consisted of the sonorities of Hebrew in Sefardi accent and of Arabic as practiced around him on the streets of Tel Aviv and Jaffa, as well as the sonority and melos of Arabic music. Boskovitch made a thorough study of the motives of the Arabic *maqam*.
3. He regarded the role of the composer as the 'messenger' of the congregation, a *Shliach Tzibur* (*Schatz*). According to him the composer in Israel should not waste his and his audience's time on expression of his inner

6. See Eliyahu Schleifer, 'Idelsohn's Scholarly and Literary Publications: An Annotated Bibliography', in: Yuval, volume 5 (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 53-180.

7. All essays have been collated in Shmueli & Hirshberg, *Boskovitch*. Prof. Shmueli has edited the manuscript of the book.

emotions, as was the case with the world of romantic composers. He used to comment that 'Tchaikovsky talks only about himself, and I don't care for his emotional problems'.

4. Boskovitch requested that the Israeli composer make a direct contact with the live music of the East, that it, not through transcriptions into Western notation.
5. The absorption of Eastern music should not remove the Israeli composer from the artistic and technical achievements and current innovations of Western music.

My purpose at that point would be to illustrate how Boskovitch followed those theoretical tenets throughout his musical work.

Boskovitch's first large scale compositions in Palestine were the Violin and the Oboe concertos (1943-4). Boskovitch won the Huberman Prize for his violin concerto, which was brilliantly performed by the leader of the orchestra, Lorand Fenyves. Yet the composer, self-critical more than his critics, shelved the score and planned an extensive revision, which he never completed. It was only in 2002 that the young composer Michael Wolpe (b. 1960) who has been deeply dedicated to early Israeli music undertook the elaborate project of editing the violin concerto from the multitude of autographs and sketches, and the beautiful work has finally been performed in Jerusalem in December 2005.

The Oboe Concerto, on the other hand, remained in the repertory as a fine virtuoso piece. An unexpected event provided an indication that Boskovitch had found the way to the East in this piece. While on a tour in Cairo, Egypt, the oboe soloist Bram Blez visited the large market together with violinist Fenyves. While waiting for his shoes to be shined before the concert, the oboist absentmindedly hummed the theme of the second movement, upon which the boy who shined his shoes immediately repeated the theme.

The second movement of the oboe concerto is structured as the slow section of an Arabic Taqsim. The oboe, which emulates the oriental Zurna, gradually expands the range of a brief motive upwards and later downwards, while the orchestra provides a repetitive, percussive ostinato with no tonal function (see music ex. 2)



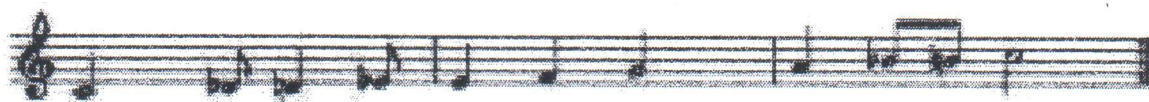
Music Example 2, *Oboe Concerto*

The only way by which any Western educated musician could forge a link with the actual and genuine music of the East was through a cooperating informant from the community. Boskovitch soon found two such links. One was Bracha Zefira (1910-1990), a Yemenite singer born in Jerusalem. Zefira, who was orphaned at the age of three, was raised by poor foster families of different ethnic origins, and in that way she absorbed a rich variety of Jewish traditional songs as well as Arabic folk music which she retained in her superb musical memory.⁸ During the 1930s Zefira had a brilliant career as singer with her first husband, improvising pianist Nahum Nardim. Together they performed a repertory of traditional Yemenite, Persian, Sefardi, and Arabic Jewish tunes, all of them removed from their religious functions and fitted with modern Hebrew poetry. The songs were performed in Western concert context, mostly to Ashkenazi audience. After a split between her and Nardi, she turned from 1939 to commissioning song arrangements from most of the new immigrant composers. Zefira insisted on performing with Western trained musicians, mostly from the Palestine orchestra.

With his image of a new Jewish musical style Boskovitch refused to make arrangements of ethnically defined material. However, his encounters with the singer acquainted him with her songs, together with her pure Yemenite Hebrew accent, and her eastern voice production so contrasted to European bel-canto. He composed four original songs for her, the most salient of which was Psalm Adonai Ro'i, (The Lord is my Shepherd, 1943). The melody moves within a modal framework on C with both B-flat and B natural, as shown in musical example 3. B-natural, however, never functions as leading tone. The orchestral accompaniment is a static

8. Bracha Zefira, *Kolot Rabim* [Many Voices], (autobiography and an edition of her songs, in Hebrew, Ramat Gan, 1970); Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community*, pp. 187-197.

ostinato with no modulation. The song was composed exclusively for Zefira's voice.



Musical Example 3. *Adonai Ro'i*

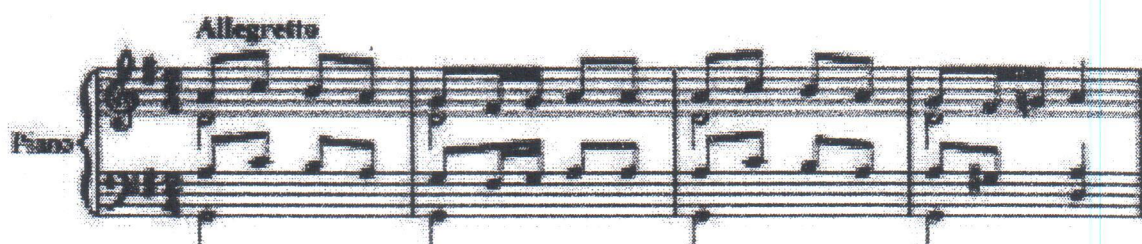
Boskovitch's other link with the East was through his collaboration with dancer Yardena Cohen. While raised on classical ballet tradition, she belonged to a group of young choreographers who had endeavoured to recreate that which they had regarded as the ancient biblical dance. A basic tenet of Zionist ideology was the link between the Land of the Bible and the newly emerging Jewish nationhood in Palestine, and part of this ideology was the recreation of folk, village traditions, which in the case of dance were merely based on biblical descriptions of dance such as of Miriam, with drum and cymbals. Yardena Cohen danced bare footed, dressed in simple Bedouin attire, and she endeavoured to be accompanied by genuine Arabic folk music. She worked at first with three Iraqi Jews, fish mongers from the Haifa market who played the Ud, Darbouka, and Arabic flute, but constant personal frictions between her and the musicians (for example, they could not collaborate with her request to rehearse every tiny aspect of the dance) led her to search a more communicative professional composer. Having heard Boskovitch's oboe concerto, she commissioned him to transcribe her dances for piano. The opening section of one of them, the Dance of the Shulamit from *The Song of Songs*, found its way into his most consequential work, *Semitic Suite*. I have asked the great musician, Iraqi Jewish musician Ezra Aharon (1903-1995),⁹ to attempt a reconstruction of the original improvisation which he immediately identified as music in *maqam bayati*. Music example 4 presents a transcription of Aharon's recording above the theme from the *Semitic Suite*, in which the piano emulates the playing of the Ud or the Qanun.

9. Ezra Aharon was a member of the Royal Iraqi ensemble. In 1935 he immigrated to Palestine and became the director of Arabic music of the Palestine Broadcast Service (founded March 1936). He was composer, an Ud virtuoso, and a singer.



Music Example 4. *Semitic Suite*

In his introduction to the edition of the *Semitic Suite* Boskovitch described it as 'an expression of the dialectics of time and place in the spiritual collective theme of the history of our people. As a projection of the non musical elements, the suite emerges as an allegedly extroverted folk music, but in reality it is based on imaginary folklore because it contains no melodic or rhythmic quotes.' The rejection of the harmonic parameter prevails almost throughout, as in the first movement which is based on a drone of a fifth G – D (Music Example 5)



Musical Example 5. *Semitic Suite*

Boskovitch laboured on the *Semitic Suite* for three years, constantly revising and rewriting. Interestingly, the only movement which remained unchanged throughout the process was the final, *Hodaya* ('Thanksgiving'), in which Boskovitch nostalgically retained his European heritage (Music example 6)

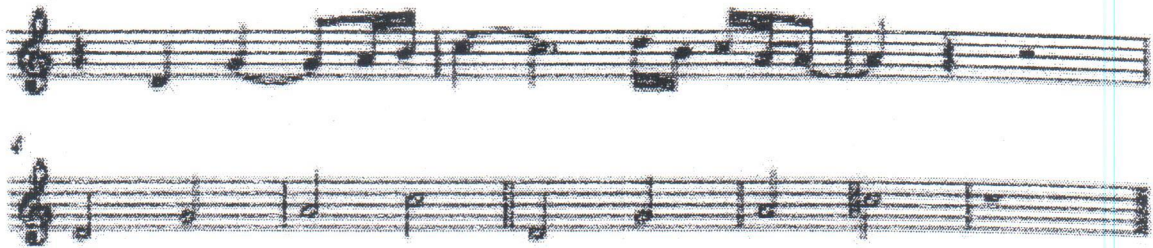


Music Example 6. *Semitic Suite*

The completion of the *Semitic Suite* in 1946 was followed by Boskovitch's 'period of silence' which lasted until 1959. In fact it was a period of hectic inactivity, since during those years Boskovitch composed incidental music for ten theatre plays, mostly of the national Habimah theatre, wrote folk songs, and was preoccupied with his heavy teaching load at the Tel Aviv Academy of Music, and from 1956 also worked as a highly dedicated music critic for the daily *Ha'Aretz*. Yet it is true that it was only in 1959 that he presented a new composition in the realm of art music, the symphonic poem *Shir Hama'a lot* (translated by the composer as *Song of Ascent* although the more traditional translation would be *Song of Degrees*).¹⁰ His friends and colleagues were under the impression that after the *Semitic Suite* he needed a period of reflection and search for new directions. Yet the next major composition which terminated 'the period of silence', the orchestral *Song of Ascent*, negates this romantic assumption, since the new composition only deepened and stylized the melodic, harmonic, and sonorous world of the *Semitic Suite*. Indeed it appears that the *Song of Ascent* required a very long period of gestation, even more than the *Semitic Suite*.

The powerful opening gesture of the *Song of Ascent* preserves the modal framework of fourths and fifths which prevails in the *Semitic Suite*.

10. A CD of four of his key compositions (*Song of Ascent*, *Oboe Concerto*, *Ornaments*, and the Cantata *Bat Yisrael* [Daughter of Israel]) has been issued by Israel Music Institute (IMI-cd-09, 2004).



Music Example 7. *Song of Ascent*

The climactic point of the *Song of Degrees* introduces the first case of an overt contradiction between ideology and practice in Boskovitch's works. It is an excited hora dance.



Music Example 8. *Song of Ascent*

The local hora, which had become in the 1920s the most popular folk dance of the Jews in Palestine was most likely of Hasidic origin. It was characterized by 4 bar regular phrases in common time with repeated syncopated rhythms. In 1936 composer Marc Lavri (1903-1967) elaborated his hora song '*Emek*' [The Valley, relating to the fertile Valley of Jezre'el] in his symphonic poem by the same name.



Music Example 9. *Emek*

Boskovitch's unfinished book contains a chapter titled 'The Trauma of the Hora'. Boskovitch suggested that 'the syncopation of the hora expresses powerful tension which had suited the recent period' and that 'it had become *conditio sine qua non* in Israeli composition.' Still, Boskovitch demanded that the hora dance cease to be the identification card of Israeli music. This raises the question of why did he reach the climax of *Song of Ascent* with a hora? At first glance this looks like

a contradiction between ideology and practice, which was unexpected in the work of such a consistent ideologist. Indeed there is a contradiction here, but of a much deeper meaning. The Song of Ascent was a summation of a period during which Boskovitch endeavoured to create a symbolic musical representation of the time and place of Israeli society during the stormy first decade of the young nation. The composition commences with the yearning to the archaic image of the Book of Psalms and reaches its excited climax with the naive, victorious hora as the most salient symbol of the rejuvenation of the Jewish nation in Israel. Despite his objection to the hora, Boskovitch once more played the role of the spokesman, the Shliach Tzibur, preferring the spirit of the collective to his own personal taste.

Immediately after the completion of The Song of Ascent Boskovitch adopted various aspects of dodecaphonic and serial techniques combined with his research into Eastern music and extra-musical numerology and mysticism. A discussion of the three ensuing masterpieces – the Cantata *Bat Yisrael* (Daughter of Israel), the *Concerto da Camera*, and *Ada'im* (Ornaments) – is beyond the scope of the present essay. They started a new period in his composition which was abruptly halted by his untimely death in 1964 at the age of 57.