

*"My music was composed in an attempt to create a musical structure and style, that can express-at least in the composer's view- the dialectics of the "where" and "when" in the collective spirit of our people's history...it is an individual interpretation of the essential features of this unique world of Israel" \**

## Alexander Uriyah Boskovich (1907-1964)

The relationship of Alexander Uriyah Boskovich to his art and the surrounding world molded him as a composer, writer, thinker, educator and music critic, and as one of the founding fathers of Israeli art music.

Born in Cluj, the capital of Transylvania, on August 16th 1907, Alexander Uriyah Boskovich was brought up in a milieu of Jewish tradition and European culture. After a year in Vienna (1924) Boskovich continued his professional musical education in Paris (1925-29). He studied piano with Alfred Cortot, composition with Paul Dukas and Nadia Boulanger, and specialized in choral music at the Scola Cantorum. Back in his hometown (1929) he was active as a composer, concert pianist and conductor of the National Opera and the Goldmark Symphony Orchestra, which he founded in 1936. Although European culture and humanism were an integral part of his personality, he followed a powerful inner drive to find links with his Jewish heritage, and clarify his identity.

In 1938 he was invited by the Palestine Symphony Orchestra (now Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra) to attend **the premiere** of his work "The Golden Chain", a suite based on seven East- European Jewish folksongs, under the baton of Maestro Issay Dobrowen. He came as a visitor, but decided to stay in the land of Israel and make it his home. The encounter with a new reality- culture and society, language and landscape- so different from the European one, was not an easy one. But Boskovich identified absolutely with the historical "here" and "now", and was intensely involved in the cultural renaissance of the Jewish people in their ancient- new homeland. The gathering of the Jews from different corners of the world turned the country into a cultural melting pot of enormous dynamism.

Boskovich was an idealist with a deep sense of historic responsibility. *"...in great moments of history, music always adopts a definite stand and attitude..."*.

He continually strove to create a musical language, which would be an integral part and expression of the new reality, by attaining a synthesis of the archaic and the new, an amalgam of the spiritual and musical tradition of his people, of oriental elements and

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\* All the quotations in this article are by the composer.

western compositional techniques. The absolute conviction in this way and goal were of tremendous importance and rapidly metamorphosed his musical language.

Amongst others, the Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra (1942), and the Semitic Suite (1945/9) with all its versions, are considered as initiating "The East- Mediterranean Style", a concept coined by Boskovich. These works are recognized as important landmarks in the history of Israeli art music. The composer's many articles and essays, as well as his book "Israeli Music- Its Authenticity, origins and problems" (1953-56), elucidate his credo and his ideology as an Israeli composer.

The tradition, the music and the dances of the various oriental Jewish communities, especially the artistic and rich folklore of the Yemenite Jews, yielded unfathomable treasures to Boskovich. His acquaintance with the indigenous music and instruments of the Arab and Druse population enriched this cultural human mosaic. The Bible, especially the poetic texts of the Psalms and Song of Songs, the Biblical cantillations, and the Hebrew language- all of which were for him a constant source of inspiration, and a fertile soil from which emerges the composer's new musical idiom.

Although not being his mother tongue, Boskovich was in love with the Hebrew language. He studied and analyzed it with endless energy and dedication. After the period of the East Mediterranean Style and its "Folklore Imaginaire", he created a unique relationship between serial technique and the Hebrew language, by transferring its melos, intonations, accentuations and rhythm into musical sound.

The Hebrew language, both archaic and new, is a common denominator underlying his last major compositions: "Daughter of Israel" (Bat Israel)- Cantata for Tenor, mixed choir and orchestra (1960), "Concerto da Camera"- for violin solo and ten instruments, (1962-3), "Ornaments" (Adayim)- for flute solo and orchestra (1964), "Names" (Shemot), Genesis, chapter 36- for mixed choir, two pianos, percussion instruments (1964, uncompleted).

All of the major works were awarded prizes, and performed under the baton of great conductors like Issay Dobrowen, Eduard Van Beinum, Sir John Babirolli, Charles Munch, Sergiu Celibidache, Gary Bertini and Gennady Rozhdestwensky.

### **"Song of Ascent " for Symphony Orchestra (1959/ 60)**

All the works of Boskovich, composed during the last five years of his life (this CS contains three of them) contain a poetic idea, religious feelings and reflect mystic- symbolic elements transformed into music. In *"The book of Psalms, the chapters of Song of Ascent, in particular chapter 122: "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go to the house of the Lord", are the source of inspiration of this composition. It is my feeling that these psalms express the yearning of the spirit and the soul to the Divine, an ascent which has no end and is timeless.*

*The longing as well as the ascent, are eternal".* The composition is set in one movement, delineated into three distinct parts. The rhythmic melodic structure of *Song of Ascent* has its source in the idea of the Talea used in motets of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Characteristic statements of the Talea may employ a reiterated scheme of time values, leading to repetitions of the melody (cantus firmus) in different rhythmical patterns.

In the Hebrew alphabet each letter has a numerical value. The name of the composer's son – David- is equivalent to the numbers 4-6-4. By breaking down the time value of this pattern into half- 2+3+2- quarters, Boskovich incorporates his son's name into the Talea's rhythmic structure of the *Song of Ascent*".

This work was awarded first prize in a competition sponsored by the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. It was **premiered** by the orchestra in 1961, under the baton of Mo. Gary Bertini.

### **- Andante Moderato**

The opening theme- a pattern that evolves in a continuous process of melodic- rhythmic variations- performed by bassoons and cellos, starts with a descending fourth: D-A. Inverted, the ascending fourth turns into the 'theme of yearning', played by violas and flutes, and elaborated by variations of the Talea by the piano and the violins. The rising fourth is like a driving force of chain reactions, and symbolizes *"the mounting tide of emotions"*.

### **- Allegro con Brio**

The second part develops into a joyous outburst through continuous variants of the Talea, the augmentation of the fourth into a sixth and the shining sonorities of the wind and string instruments. "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go to the House of the Lord" (Psalms, chapter 122).

### **- Piu Mosso**

The third part is ecstatic in mood. The accumulating tension erupts in a forceful climax- an oriental style toccata, performed by percussion instruments. With a sudden pianissimo, the music dissolves into an echolike sonority of peaceful quietude.

## **Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra (1942)**

"This was a first attempt to merge Oriental and European musical elements, striving to create an original Israeli musical style...When refraining from the "European cantabile espressivo style the sound of the oboe reminds one of the vowels and nuances of Semitic languages... I feel that the sound of the oboe is very East- Mediterranean, and a part of the acoustic tonescape of this region". By choosing the oboe Boskovich imagined the sound-color of the Arabic zurna.

The *Concerto* was premiered in 1943 by the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, with Bram Blez as soloist. It was awarded the Tel- Aviv Engel Prize, and performed in Australia, South and North America, and Europe by soloists like Heinz Holliger, MacKerras and Lady Rothwell- Barbirolli, and Leon Biriotti.

### **- Allegro giocoso and vigoroso**

The first movement is written in the Sonata Allegro form. "*The basic idea of the thematic material is the interval of the tetrachord*". The diverse thematic groups stem from the principal theme, and undergo variations and contrapuntal changes, moving in a tonal framework, that leans towards the Mixolydian mode.

### **- Andantino**

The second movement is structured in Lied form, with a short Coda. The contrast between the 7/8 metre of the ostinato pattern in the orchestral part contrasts and the melodic motion of the oboe, lends a mysterious tension to the music. "*One feels a constant movement, like wandering in a nocturnal oriental landscape*". The heterophonic style of the short middle section is interwoven with the ostinato pattern, which recurs with great persistence in the recapitulation. As in the cadenza of the first movement, the psalmodic archaic style of biblical cantillations, and the melogenic embellishment performed by the oboe, heighten the intensity of the music. A short coda concludes this movement in a dreamlike pianissimo.

### **- Rondo**

The third movement abounds with dancelike vitality- an outburst of pure joie de vivre. It is inspired by the melodic patterns of the Babylonian Jewish prayer of "Adon Olam", and of the Yemenite Jews' biblical cantillation of the "Song of the Sea" (Exodus, chapter 15). All three movements are interrelated by the basic musical idea of the tetrachord with thematic transformations of the material. The staccato style of the orchestra is reminiscent of the sonorities of oriental plucked instruments, like the oud, the kanoun and the santour.

## **"Daughter of Israel" (Bat Yisrael)- Cantata for Tenor, Mixed Choir & Orchestra (1960)**

In 1960 a competition was announced to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Henrietta Szold. Composers were asked to write a vocal work, based on the poem by Chaim Nachman Bialik, Israel's national poet. The composition by Boskovich was awarded the first prize and **premiered** in 1961, at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert of the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, with the British tenor Ronald Dowd and the "Rinat" Choir under the baton of Gary Bertini.

Diverse variations of the five-tone melodic pattern A- B- E- C- D, are heard throughout the Cantata. The composer uses serial technique in a liberal way, explaining that *"...The source of serialism in this work is the human intonation. This is contrary to the formal approach, which considers the basic acoustic rule of the series as predetermined organized tone pattern."* The text by Bialik is sung by the tenor. The declamatory style and complex rhythmical structure of the melody, merges with the contemporary musical language of the orchestra, while the choir sings verses from the "Song of Songs" and the Sabbath Prayers, music that moves in a tonal-modal framework, symbolizing archaic times and tradition. The verse where the poet describes his mother lighting seven Sabbath candles is represented by seven different instruments- harp, vibraphone, crotal, celesta, glockenspiel, triangle and violin. Two violins- the seventh candle- play a very high sounding organpoint, symbolizing the quietude of the Sabbath.

By blending two opposites- the archaic and the new- into an organic unit, Boskovich expresses, in musical terms, the continuity of tradition throughout thousands of years of Jewish history.

### **"Ornaments" ("Adayim") for Flute and Orchestra (1964)**

His last work, "Ornaments", is a contemporary musical interpretation of the text of the "Song of the Sea" (Pentateuch, Numbers, Chapter 15), based on Jewish Yemenite biblical cantillations. The verbal rhythmical structures of the text are the silken threads, woven into the embroidery of *Ornaments*: the embroidery of time, sound and color.

Boskovich comments, very precisely, on how to perform this composition: *"The music of Ornaments moves in two different and contrary times: 'proportional'- metric time, and 'Differential'- a-metric, flexible time, asking for an improvisational freedom of the soloist and orchestra players, in coordination with the conductor. To follow the concept of improvisation in oriental music... the soloist, as well as the orchestra players, are invited to choose their own 'tone form series'. When no instructions are given, percussionists are free to use different means and ways of playing, and enrich the sound color of their instruments- all according to the performer's imagination."*

*"The orchestra of 48 players is divided into four chamber orchestras of 12 players each, in the style of an oriental ensemble:*

*Group 1: Piano, celesta, vibraphone, flute in G, English horn, bass- clarinet, 3 violins, 2 violas, 1 double bass.*

*Group 2: 5 violins, 2 violas, 3 violincelli, 2 contrabasses.*

*Group 3: Harp, guitar, xylophone, marimba, piccolo, 2 clarinets, oboe, 2 bassoons, 2 horns.*

*Group 4: 4 percussion players, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, contrabass.*

*Each group should be placed according to the acoustic conditions of the concert hall, without consideration of the traditional staging"*

*Ornaments* is an artistic and organic fusion of serial technique, orchestral sound color, and a kind of an improvisational style, integrating the structure and rhythm of the Hebrew language into pure instrumental music.

It was premiered in 1965, one year after his death, at the Israel Festival, by the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, with soloist Uri Toeplitz, conducted by Mo. Gary Bertini.

In 1986 *Ornaments* was performed by the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, with soloist Wendy Eisler, conducted by Joel Thome (U.S.A).

**Miriam Boskovich**