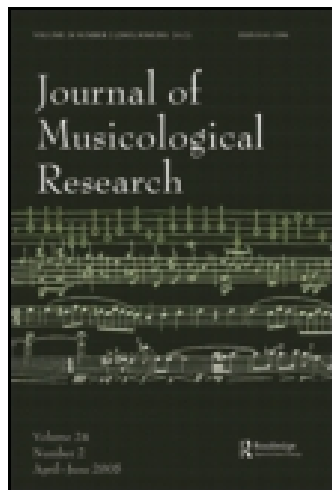


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### The Dilution of National Onomatopoeias in Post-Statehood Israeli Art Music: Precursors, Contiguities, Shifts

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bureaucratic collectivism (represented de facto by the state), and the massive immigration of Arab Jews after the 1948 war that interfered with the cultural space in which the veteran society and its governmental institutions had consolidated,<sup>64</sup> statehood had progressively fragmented and dismantled the visionary core that characterized Hebrewism in its pre-statehood phase, giving birth in the 1950s to hybrid patterns that rendered former Hebrewist components blurred and inoperative. The composers involved in destabilizing the meanings that Hebrewism had acquired prior to statehood were therefore less impressed with the musical innovations and iconoclastic rhetoric spilling over from Darmstadt, whose *stunde null* the young State of Israel interpreted differently as the influx of Holocaust survivors was arriving in a country that still fought for its existence. Gradual abandonment of romanticist models had been replaced therefore with serial devices devoid of dogmatic matrices and attentive to the linear properties found in non-Western Jewish music. Converged, these confluences brought to the fore and amplified stylistic alternatives practiced during pre-statehood years, catalyzing various stylistic hybrids ranging from serial textural imitations and melodic layering to cell harmony and permutations à la Schoenberg. No one saw the need to proclaim the latter dead.

One of the few musicological voices discussing these transformations was Alexander Boskovich, who in the early 1950s addressed the problems of Israeli art music in the literary journal *Orlogin*. A visitor-turned-immigrant, Boskovich had arrived in Palestine in 1938 for the premiere of his suite *Chansons Populaires Juifs* (1937), an arrangement of eastern European Jewish folksongs partly based on previously transcribed material.<sup>65</sup> Although the suite did not transgress the tonality offered by the folksongs, Boskovich soon sought to free Israeli art music from the spiritual colonialism he found in the *yishuv*'s musical culture. To a certain extent his critical writings in the 1950s and 1960s, a project abruptly cut by his untimely death in 1964, document the way he destabilized his own romanticist model. Consequently, what had begun with an argument for the need to abandon Eurocentric colonial templates led in practice to a localization of post-World War II serialism in the early 1960s.

Boskovich's publications in *Orlogin* witnessed the crystallization of the composer's arguments in both language and academic grounding. The first article prepared the groundwork philosophically; it surveyed various

<sup>64</sup> Orit Rozin, *The Rise of the Individual in 1950s Israel: A Challenge to Collectivism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 191–99.

<sup>65</sup> Fritz Mordechai Kaufmann, ed., *Die schönsten Lieder der Ostjuden: siebenundvierzig ausgewählte Volkslieder* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1920). Boskovich would later refer to the suite as the work that “saved my life.” See Alexander U. Boskovich, “The Jewish Suite,” *Duchan* 4 (1963), 49–50 (in Hebrew); and Alexander Boskovich Collection, MUS 37 C14, NLI (in Hebrew). See also Jehoash Hirshberg, “Alexander U. Boskovich and the Quest for an Israeli National Musical Style,” *Studies in Contemporary Judaism* 9 (1993), 96–98.

aesthetic approaches to art and music, relying on cross-disciplinary theories ranging from Aristotle to Leonardo da Vinci and from Cassirer to Ortega y Gasset and Susanne Langer. Drawing on the latter's discursive symbolization, Boskovich determined that music was the incomplete implicit symbol, possessing all symbolist qualities yet devoid of concrete signification.<sup>66</sup> His next article appeared in the same journal more than two years later and has since become a milestone in the annals of Israeli art music. Qualifying his 1951 philosophical introduction, Boskovich now argued that abstract definitions of art require a social basis the dialectical tension of which is generated by the "where" and "when." Considering concepts such as *Zeitlose kunst* (timeless art) and *Raumlose kunst* (nonspatial art) absurd, he remarked that artists' social agency is fed by and reflective of the "spiritual attitude of a given collective."

This kind of social validation sets up a centrifugal movement that moves progressively from the parochial to the universal, allowing the composer to absorb foreign elements without losing his or her social coordinates; movement in the opposite direction was seen as an "artistic Esperanto devoid of collectivist reality."<sup>67</sup> The "when" and "where" in Boskovich's thought drew on a territorial perception of the nation ("individual musical creation in a national spirit is impossible without a Jewish homeland"), which, accordingly, colored the history of western European Jewish composers as tragic, succumbing to an "ethnographically foreign environment."<sup>68</sup> Any reproduction of this vanishing exilic world, therefore, would be out of sync with the two dialectically intertwined landscapes encountered by composers in the country: the geographical and the human. Boskovich maintained that the static "eastern Mediterranean" geographical landscape, whose climate, light, and hues differ significantly from their European counterparts, demands the recognition that such stillness cannot be expressed using the European toolbox. In terms of human acoustic landscape, he referred to the "semitic ring" of the intense native eastern speech-sound and to the socially dynamic human landscape—costumes, manners, social organization—that often contradicted what the European emigrant composer had come to know in his country of origin. The static and the dynamic therefore formed a dialectical conflict—two opposing axes capable of producing a dramatic tension by sheer recognition of the realistic "where." The tasks of the period, then, necessitated identifying, sifting, and shaping the spiritual-collective image of the nation and the articulation of "our" reality in a symbolism that aspires toward collectivist expression "understandable to all." Using terms such as

<sup>66</sup> Alexander U. Boskovich, "The Problems of Music and of Original Music in Israel," *Orlogin* 3 (1951), 177–87 (in Hebrew); and Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 204–45.

<sup>67</sup> Boskovich, "The Problems of Music and of Original Music in Israel," 281–82.

<sup>68</sup> Boskovich, "The Problems of Music and of Original Music in Israel," 283–84.

“return to” and “revival of” a collective reality, Boskovich spoke of a process of transvaluation of values.<sup>69</sup>

The final subheading of the article called for stylistic syncretism. According to Boskovich, unlike the uninhabited landscapes of impressionist European pastorals (alluding probably to Ben-Haim’s formulations), Israeli pastorals are anthropomorphic even when they describe a static and objective landscape. Branding this “anthropomorphic impressionism,” he found in it the camel-like rhythm (where the accent falls on the second eighth), the narrow melodic gamut with monotonous movements whose form is modal and tetrachordal, and the improvisational mode of performance consisting of variations on melodic patterns (*maqam*) that are often only alluded to.<sup>70</sup> While echoing Béla Bartók’s rejection of romanticist “sentimentality and superfluous ornaments,”<sup>71</sup> Boskovich’s list of musical properties sheds light on the compositional means of his 1945 *Semitic Suite* (see Example 6). The opening of the suite indeed manifests his dialectical movement, as it carries both the earmarks of *folklore imaginaire* and the harbingers of his later linear approach. Unison settings of melodies that run in and out of sync were designed to produce a two-part toccata-like texture, as melodic movement in mostly major second becomes the harmonic underpinning in lieu of triads. Aggregates in the work consist of perfect fifths and major seconds that determine the range of the short tetrachordal melodies built from them (see Example 6, mm. 24–33). This proceeds dialectically to measures 34–35, where a series of tetrachords, opening with B–C–D–E and its exact sequence a major second below, shift into an octatonic tetrachord, F♯–G–A–B♭, which is a *maqam saba* on F♯ “normalized” through tempered intervals (see Example 6, mm. 33–35). Boskovich sustains these harmonic tensions using meter changes the reset of which reintroduces the symmetric properties of the main theme; its harmony shows the inversion of two pairs of fifths, animating the equivalent of a I–V progression yet devoid of directionality (see Example 6, mm. 38–43).

Requiring the composer to “come in direct contract with eastern chant” and to describe it to the best of his abilities using the procrustean bed of European notation, Boskovich maintained that understanding the Eastern musical mentality should be seen as a “means of correcting historic Hebrewist continuity and a source of unexploited musical material,” which could divert universal music into completely new channels. Boskovich’s linear historic perception, the result of his internalization of Zionist teleological explanations, was now applied on a wider scale, demonstrating his own move from the parochial to the universal. Interest in the non-Western

<sup>69</sup> Boskovich, “The Problems of Music and of Original Music in Israel,” 284–87. Boskovich had most likely taken his cue here from Micha Josef Berdyczewski; see Gideon Shimony, *The Zionist Ideology* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), 289–90.

<sup>70</sup> Boskovich, “The Problems of Music and of Original Music in Israel,” 287–89.

<sup>71</sup> Béla Bartók, *Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 341.

**EXAMPLE 6** Alexander U. Boskovich, *Semitic Suite* (1945), mm. 24–41. Used by permission of the Israel Music Institute.

mentality is not an isolated Israeli phenomenon, he wrote, but a turn signaled by many twentieth-century composers whose attention to the “where” and “when” breaks away from a “spiritual colonial status.”<sup>72</sup> And so a prescription followed: Composers should engage in transcription of Eastern melodies, amplify these transcriptions through accompaniments that resonate with the barren landscape rather than through the “prism of the European salon,” and, finally, utilize the Eastern melody as a constituent, constructive, and organic component within the compositional arsenal. In accordance with Bartók’s arguments to move from citation to invention, and finally to a complete

<sup>72</sup> Boskovich, “The Problems of Music and of Original Music in Israel,” 289–90.

absorption of the idioms of peasant music to the point of mastering it as if it were a mother tongue,<sup>73</sup> Boskovich's suggestions facilitate an equivalent trajectory toward an abstraction of ethnographic musical sources whose syntactic basis is melodic and linear and its polyphonic formation resulting from melodic layering irrespective of vertical harmonic constraints.<sup>74</sup> Assuming the role of a spokesman, Boskovich tried to guide composers into transcending musical mixtures—where two different musical vocabularies only underscore the partitions between East and West—and move toward musical compounds that incorporate *maqamat* principles. But no new large-scale articles followed, nor could Boskovich finish the manuscript through which he sought to expand the previously mentioned thesis.<sup>75</sup> What he left, instead, were his late compositions, which partly reason and partly develop his arguments.

Boskovich offered a final glimpse of his perpetually evolving dialectics in a short article from 1963, "La Musique Israélienne Contemporaine et les Traditions Ethniques."<sup>76</sup> Fifteen years into statehood had not led Boskovich to doubt his internalization of the linear national teleology, which moved from destruction, through exile, to redemption (and equally from Jewish ethnomusicological research to composers' use of Jewish musical traditions), even though his musical dialectics had de facto invalidated the function of Eurocentric musical onomatopoeias through which composers assumed the role of a mouthpiece in pre-statehood years. The gap did not seem to have troubled him, and no records indicate that he was aware of the parallel discourse in modern Hebrew poetry at the time he was developing his theories. Looking back, Boskovich retold the story of Israeli art music in three stages: the first was the "neo-primitivist and optimist period of the pioneers"<sup>77</sup> (or "Mediterranean music"), which was an attempt to translate the geographical and human landscapes between 1940 and 1950, resulting in either a "dry" *stile secco* sound similar to his *Semitic Suite* (1945) or an impressionist *stile affettuoso* approach, as in Ben-Haim's music. The second stage, extending from 1950 to 1959, witnessed the gradual downfall of impressionism and neoprimitivism, concomitant with an acclimatization of horizontal (linear) thinking and a preference for short motifs with variants, as well as recitatives free from the "collectivist" simplicity that had been prevalent during the first stage, and tonal ambiguity with melodic tonality and polar notes (rather than triads). Although Boskovich counted Tal, Odeon Partos, and Mordecai Seter

<sup>73</sup> Bartók, *Essays*, 343–44.

<sup>74</sup> Boskovich, "The Problems of Music and of Original Music in Israel," 290–92.

<sup>75</sup> Alexander Boskovich Collection, MUS 37 C1-5, NLI. On Boskovich's professional and fiscal constraints in the 1950s, see Jehoash Hirshberg and Herzl Shmueli, *Alexander Uriah Boskovich: His Life, His Work, and His Thought* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 1995), 73–79 (in Hebrew); and Jehoash Hirshberg, "Recruited Music," in *The Challenge of Independence: Ideological and Cultural Aspects of Israel's First Decade*, ed. Mordechai Bar-On (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1999), 242 (in Hebrew).

<sup>76</sup> Alexander U. Boskovich, "La Musique Israélienne Contemporaine et les Traditions Ethniques (1963)," *International Folk Music Journal* 16 (1964), 39–42.

<sup>77</sup> Boskovich, "La Musique Israélienne Contemporaine et les Traditions Ethniques," 40.



among the proponents of this musical stage, the nine-year period he delimited as his second stage in fact marked his own stylistic shift, which was punctuated by his *Song of Ascents* (1960).<sup>78</sup> Finally, the third, contemporary, stage was characterized by an awareness of recent Western art music, leading to a balanced synthesis as a result of the dissemination of serialism, which “terminates the mentality of small cloistered regional units.”<sup>79</sup> Composers should penetrate the ethnic essence, “the *noumenon*,” Boskovich wrote; they should renounce ethnic melodies and rhythms and develop serialism beyond its rigid orthodox format (i.e., total serialism) toward more “tolerant” directions, especially since the serial technique has ceased to be the exclusive property of a given “regional” school.<sup>80</sup>

## SHIFTS

Months before his sudden death, Boskovich’s completed *Ornaments* for flute and orchestra (1964), an attempt to paraphrase the Yemenite reading of the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:1–18) while drawing on post–World War II serial practices. The work marked the gaps between musical dialectics whose notions of collectivism become self-invalidated. *Ornaments* was not about the occidental staging of exotic frills; rather, the non-Western importation triggered an unsystematic nondifferential unfolding of melodic cells in thin heterophonic textures using both pitched and nonpitched instruments, thereby defamiliarizing both the Yemenite liturgy and its exotic Eurocentric morphology. In Yemenite-Jewish liturgy, the Song of the Sea is a measured melody consisting mostly of two rhythmic values: Nonstressed syllables are short, while stressed syllables are longer. According to Seroussi, the melody is sung slowly, loudly, and in complete unity by the entire congregation, “creating a ‘pluri-vocal’ effect that results from the gradual transposition of the melody by individuals who decide to lower the pitch by one tone or to raise it by a 5th and thereby cause the singers nearby to follow them.”<sup>81</sup> This dynamism produces the effect of a series of blocks built on the intervals of a second or a fourth. Boskovich’s choice to model his music after the simultaneous paraphrasing of a melodic prototype along with its commuting tonal centers and organum surfaces was not random. In advocating “tolerant” serialism he had probably realized the principles of Yemenite heterophony, which has “no systematics in the simultaneous appearance of the different

<sup>78</sup> Alexander U. Boskovich, “Pre-Concert Introductory Remarks,” *Duchan* 5 (1964), 103–8 (in Hebrew).

<sup>79</sup> Boskovich, “La Musique Israélienne Contemporaine et les Traditions Ethniques,” 42.

<sup>80</sup> Boskovich, “La Musique Israélienne Contemporaine et les Traditions Ethniques,” 39–42.

<sup>81</sup> Edwin Seroussi et al., “Jewish Music,” in *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.its.virginia.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/41322>, accessed 27 September 2013.

pitches,” and whose rhythmic heterophony lacks “synchronization between the performers as to the rendering of time values.”<sup>82</sup> Shifts in tempi and pitch therefore occur while participating congregants remain conscious of the common recitation of the text by their fellows, and so desynchronization does not exceed the limits of the textual verse. Additionally, performance of a melody in two or more voices does not depend on the size of the interval in each voice, nor does it rely on the concept of completing the unfolding of the two voices, as in the diatonic system.<sup>83</sup> In attempting to emulate these pulsating textures, *Ornaments* displays proportional (metrical) and differential (a-metrical) flux and accordingly, two opposing kinds of times that, navigated by the conductor, “increase the feeling of improvisation among the performers,” as described in Boskovich’s introductory notes to the work.<sup>84</sup> “It would be erroneous to look for folklore or exoticism in this music,” Boskovich continues: “*Ornaments* is a contemporary interpretation of the Yemenite *nusach* [style] . . . focusing on the characteristic possibilities offered by the rhythmic and melodic structures of the Hebrew text.”<sup>85</sup> Drawing on these sonic possibilities, however, required textless musical verses, lest the composer found himself competing with the text whose musical properties and implicit symbolism he was attempting to paraphrase. Boskovich’s commentary was therefore given through orchestral streams of various densities that reinterpreted the tonal commuting and textural flux of the Yemenite reading in the form of thin heterophonic proliferations and timbral exchanges, and most notably by juxtaposing the xylophone and the celesta’s icy sounds against assonances produced by nonpitched percussions (conspicuous among them are the *clochettes orientales*, which according to Boskovich are five vertically aligned bells Arabs hang on their camels).<sup>86</sup> Timbral exchanges and assonances were also the result of Boskovich’s inner division of the forty-eight-member orchestra into four internal chamber ensembles (indistinguishable by the ear), each of which was seen by him as proportional in size to an Eastern orchestra, which he then used to trigger an inner dynamism of groups paraphrasing other groups’ paraphrases.

*Ornaments* is arranged to match the intervallic contingencies of Yemenite heterophony. The completing of the chromatic spectrum in the seventh measure, for example, indicates no organizational matrices; rather, the work is animated by a musical metaphor whose human soundscape was centered and at the same time distanced from immediate linguistic and musical markers that connote exoticism or other significations. Boskovich, instead, splinters notes within which he wishes to saturate the score: The opening

<sup>82</sup> Simha Arom and Uri Sharvit, “Plurivocality in the Liturgical Music of the Jews of Sana’a (Yemen),” *Yuval* 6 (1994), 41.

<sup>83</sup> Arom and Sharvit, “Plurivocality in the Liturgical Music of the Jews of Sana’a,” 54–59.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander U. Boskovich, *Ornaments for Flute and Orchestra* (Tel Aviv: Israel Music Institute, 1977), 6 (in Hebrew).

<sup>85</sup> Boskovich, *Ornaments*, 6.

<sup>86</sup> Boskovich, *Ornaments*, 7.



shows a fragmented B–Bb cell ricocheting from one instrument to the other while being echoed by intervallically equivalent cells (see [Example 7](#), Eb–D in m. 3 and E–Eb in m. 5) as well as nonpitched assonances in the percussion. By the seventh measure the cell and its echoes proliferate across the instruments, disclosing simultaneous ascending and descending projections from common tones and an additional emphasis on a major second in the first violins, which unfolded in the opening of the work through the contrabass, piano, and harp (see [Example 7](#), m. 2). Despite these particular emphases, other notes are inserted into this glistening surface to buttress an athematism that relies on their presence to neutralize alternative tonalities and on the interjections of nonpitched instruments to further blur centers of gravity.

Looking back at the opening of the work, one notices that the two half-step and whole-step cells dissolve what on paper seems like a heavy emphasis on a bare fifth (see [Example 7](#), m. 2); was Boskovich recontextualizing what in another context would have been a “Mediterranean” acoustic signifier? Were projections and multiplications of the cell the equivalent of tonal commuting? The design of the work suggests that Boskovich may have also paraphrased Pierre Boulez’s textures, given the latter’s conception of the biological organicism of melodic cells rather than a goal-directed

**EXAMPLE 7** Boskovich, *Ornaments* (1964) for flute and orchestra, opening. Used by permission of the Israel Music Institute.

tonal trajectory, which in *Pli Selon Pli* (1957–62) gave vent to his experience with oriental musics.<sup>87</sup> One wonders, additionally, whether Boskovich had read Boulez's 1958 article on music's contact with poetry, where the latter argued that rather than choosing a poem as a "frame for the weaving of ornamental arabesques," Boulez does so "as an irrigation source for my music and thereby center an amalgam in which the poem becomes 'center and absence.'"<sup>88</sup> Other than obvious sonoric resemblances, Boskovich also centered the text from Exodus, allowing the instrumental paraphrases to consume it. And while Boskovich could not relate to the new paradigms transmitted by modern Hebrew poetry, his defamiliarization of Yemenite liturgy had a similar effect: Serialism became an outlet for Yemenite heterophony, but in turn offered an emphasis on interrelatedness and a self-invalidating dialectic that could no longer serve as the articulator of the collective's spiritual attitude. The composer was thus found rendering his national collective absent.

In a colossal anticlimax characterized by rage and an ugly mood of disillusionment, most of the established poetic styles had been undermined by the mid 1950s, as statehood and independence actualized in a struggling reality lost their charm and could no longer support the rhetoric and pathos that had been justified in the 1940s. Figurative language and evocative rhythms collapsed, their euphony and musicality giving way to impotence and fragmentary rhythmic patterns. Orphic and otherworldly symbolisms were rejected in favor of anti-ideological, antihistorical messages, reaching a climax in the early 1950s, as poetry had become more receptive to antiromantic decadent influences from which Hebrewism sought to be healed.<sup>89</sup> Decadence threatened the very validity of collectivism as a subject of art; its influence was diminished and displaced in the years leading to statehood, yet its antiromanticist attitude to political nationalism and the national allegory loomed large in the 1950s. Dismissing the chief bastions of a literary criticism that licensed the mood of the young poets of the 1950s, the poems of Nathan Zach project passivity in the face of entropy and decomposition, existential gloom, an Israeli reality lacking in historical depth, and individualism experienced "within the boundaries of a sequestered and fragmentary self."<sup>90</sup> Zach's poem "The Gold of Ophir" (the first stanza of which is presented as the epigraph to this article) demonstrates his violation of biblical tonalities,

<sup>87</sup> Arnold Whittall, "'Unbounded Visions': Boulez, Mallarmé and Modern Classicism," *Twentieth Century Music* 1/1 (2004), 76–77.

<sup>88</sup> Pierre Boulez, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1991), 40; and Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 90.

<sup>89</sup> Natan Zach, "On the Stylistic Climate of Our Poetry in the Fifties and Sixties," *Ha'aretz*, July 29, 1966 (in Hebrew), reprinted in Zach, *The Poetry beyond Words: Critical Essays 1954–1973* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2011), 165–71 (in Hebrew); Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 464–74; and Hamutal Bar-Yosef, "De-Romanticized Zionism in Modern Hebrew Literature," *Modern Judaism* 16/1 (1996), 76.

<sup>90</sup> Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 476, 484–86.