

Alexander Uriyah Boskovich (1907 – 1964)

His Life ,Works and Ideology

"Artistic conceptions and forms of expression depend on place , time and the temperament of the artist. – Every great artist is part of his time , but also helps create them." [P.h.Lang " Music in Western Civilization"

The short history of Israel is also the history of its music and its composers . Israel's art music cannot display a remarkable past and historic continuity of music during hundreds of years like that of Europe. Taking the historic events of the 1930s and the 1940s in Europe into account is essential for understanding the formation of Israeli art music .

Most of the founding fathers of Israeli art music came to the Land of Israel (then British Mandatory Palestine) from different parts of Europe during the decade of the 1930s , a decade of political and social upheavals intensified by terrifying , antihuman calamities . They left behind a budding career and brought with them their cultural and musical heritage , education and professional experience thus enriching and enhancing the musical life in the country.

Despite the tragic events of WWII and the many hardships the Yishuv - the Jewish community in Palestine - experienced during those years , people felt to be privileged to be an integral part of that once in a time historic process , the renaissance of the Jewish people . Rebuilding the ancient – new homeland , turning the land into a fertile, blooming country where Jews could live as a sovereign and free people dominated their thoughts and exhilarated their whole being. This atmosphere imbued with dynamic activity and an enthusiastic Socio- Zionist ideology of creating a new society , culture and art based on thousands of years old cultural inheritance had an immense impact and inspired many composers, artists , and writers , each one in his own way.

It is intriguing to find out (discover) how these composers adjusted to their new life and especially to the atmosphere and general ideology that was part of the social climate in the country .How did some of the composers express this new reality in their music?

Despite the tragic events of WWII and the many difficulties we experienced during those years, we felt that we were privileged to be an integral part of that once in a time historic process, the renaissance of the Jewish people. Rebuilding our ancient –new homeland , turning the devastated land into a fertile, blooming country where Jews could live as a sovereign and free people and creating a new society , culture and art based on our thousands of years old cultural inheritance dominated our thoughts , our ideas and exhilarated our whole being. This atmosphere imbued with dynamic activity and enthusiastic ideology had an immense impact and inspired composers , artist and writers , each one in his own way.

This reduced summary (survey) enables us to draw an image of Alexander Uriyah Boskovich, one of the prominent composers of the founding fathers of Israeli art music and the foremost and most articulate , ideological theorist of his generation.

A.U.Boskovich was born on the 16th , August 1907 in Koloszar ,Hungary ,(later Cluj, Romania), the capital of Transylvania to his parents David and Sarah. He and his younger brother (one and a half year apart) were brought up in an atmosphere of Jewish tradition and European culture .They enjoyed playing the four hands piano version of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven's symphonies and used to join their parents quite often to concerts and opera performances, thus getting acquainted with the standard works of classical music

The young Boskovich started to study the violin at eight , but changed very soon to play the piano . He was accepted by the well- known pianist and pedagogue Piroška Hevesi at the "Institute Pregative de Artiste" for exceptional gifted children .After having graduated from high -school (1924) he went to Vienna to study piano with Victor Ebenstein and composition under Richard Stoeckl at the Academy of Music .After one year he left for Paris to continue his musical education (1925/6) . He studied piano for a short time with Lazar Levy at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique, , and for the next coming three years he completed his piano studies with Alfred Cortot and composition under Paul Dukas and the legendary Nadia Boulanger at the Ecole Normale de Musique . At the Schola Cantorum he expertized in pre –classical choral music.

1929 he returned to his home -town and took up an intensive career as a composer . concert- pianist and conductor of the National Opera and the Goldmark Orchestra ,(named after the Jewish –Hungarian composer), which he founded in 1935. The Jewish members of this orchestra were partly professional and partly music- lovers of high standard. The orchestra rendered many concerts with diverse programs including eight symphonies by Beethoven, but the highlight was the concert with the world -known , famous violinist Bronisław Huberman .

Although European culture and spirit were an integral part of Boskovich's personality, it was his innermost wish (desire) to clarify and strengthen his Jewish identity and find the linkage with his Jewish heritage of culture and tradition . He joined a group of students , the young "Bnei Brit" ,whose goal was to arouse and enforce the Jewish awareness of the Jewish communities in Transylvania. The group published an almanach named "Between East and West", which included diverse articles and also one by Boskovich "Questions about Jewish Music" . In this article the young composer displayed his concept of the Jewish composer's mission , a concept which crystalized and matured in his later writings. In constant search for his roots he toured many villages of the Carpathian mountains to get acquainted with the traditions and compile the beautiful melodies of the Jewish communities who lived there. Deeply inspired by this experience he composed 1937 an orchestral as well as a

piano version of a suite based on seven East European Jewish folksongs named "*Chansons Populaires Juives*".

A radio transmission of a concert with the well-known conductor Issai Dobrowen changed his destiny . Boskovich was so enthusiastic about the performance that he decided to meet the conductor in Budapest and show him the score of his suite. Dobrowen immediately decided to include the work in his forthcoming concert series with the "The Palestine Orchestra" , now the " Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra".

1938 Boskovich was invited by the orchestra to be present at the world premiere of his suite under the baton of maestro Dobrowen. He came as visitor but decided to make his home in Eretz Israel and to participate in the renaissance of his people in its ancient –new homeland. Here he renamed his suite "*The Golden Chain*" , (after a play by Y.L.Peretz " Die Goldene Keit "). This new name symbolized to him the continuous chain of generations throughout Jewish history. He used to say that "The Golden Chain" had saved his life from the Holocaust.

The encounter with the new reality so different from the European one – socially, culturally , geographically – was not an easy one .Boskovich decided not to look back , but to open his ears and his heart to the East. He believed that the collective, the people who lived on its soil were the basis to create culture and music of its own. The "Where" , the physical and spiritual surroundings of the composer as well as the historical "When" were the fount from which he drew his inspiration. The geographical "Static Landscape – the bare mountains (which were not as green as today) , the dazzling sunlight , the "Dynamic Landscape" – the ingathering of Jews from different corners of the world , the diverse accents and intonations of the Hebrew turned the country into a human melting pot of enormous dynamics , which had a great impact and inspiration on the composer:

"The composer strives to become an integral citizen of the region he inhabits(the Where) and to be an inseparable part of the collective , which builds its country (the When). This is his goal, his sacred task."

I listen and hear the sounds of our Land , listen and give voice to them in my music.

Following his fervent quest to create a musical language suitable for expressing the new reality Boskovich meticulously studied and familiarized himself through personal acquaintance with the traditions , music and dances of diverse Eastern (Oriental) Jewish communities , in particular with the artistically , imaginative folklore of the Yemenite Jews. He continuously got acquainted with Arab and Druse musicians, their music and indigenous instruments. This colorful mosaic exerted tremendous influence on his music. The poetic beauty of the Bible, its diverse cantillations and the revival of the Hebrew language were, for him, an inexhaustible fount of inspiration. Being absolutely convinced by the way he had chosen sparked (off) a rapid transformation in the aesthetic conception of his musical language. Boskovich's

music is a historic and at the time a modern work of art - contemporary music integrating the values and idioms of our times with the cultural and spiritual heritage of our history of thousands of years. His music and writings offer evidence of the nation's identification with its past. Without doubt historical memories constitute the a central element in the Jewish renaissance in our country.

"Culture ,music and art can emerge and grow only on the fruitful soil of a society , a collective that lives and has its roots in his homeland ".

.By creating a synthesis between the archaic and the new ,an amalgam of the cultural and musical traditions of his people , of oriental(eastern) ethnic musical elements and western compositional achievements , he shaped the new idiom of his musical language , which he coined with the term " The East Mediterranean Style ". The ***Concerto for Oboe*** (1942) , the ***Concerto for Violin*** (1942) , ***Piano Pieces for the Youth***(1944) and the ***"Semitic Suite"***(1945/59) and all its versions are the key works initiating this style and constitute important landmarks in Israeli art music.

"My music is a most personal re-interpretation of the essence of this unique world of Israel. The musical idiom is a synthesis of biblical cantillations , liturgical ethos and dance impulses – especially those of the specific body gestures and speech intonations of the Yemenite community."

During those years , Bracha Zefira , a most popular folksinger and pioneer of the Hebrew song was an original and influential factor in the constitution of Israel's art music. Born in Jerusalem 1910 to parents who immigrated from Yemen, she was orphaned at the age of 3 and raised by several families of various ethnic communities. Remembering all the melodies she had heard in her youth from her surroundings, she was a treasure trove of Yemenite, Persian and Sephardic traditional and liturgical songs, which she performed during her concert- career in Israel, Europe and the U.S.A. With the quest to merge western and eastern music she approached some of the immigrant composers to arrange piano and orchestral accompaniments for her songs to be suitable for classical concerts. Boskovich refused to be part of this project claiming that these accompaniments harmed (impaired) the originality of her songs and her authenticity. He composed for Zefira four original songs of his own inspired by the unique color of her voice, by her guttural pronunciation and accentuation of the Hebrew language , creating a synthesis of the diverse traditional songs of the Oriental Jewish communities. During the years of 1942-3 he composed " ***Prayer*** " set to words by Avigdor Hame'iri,(1890 -1970) "***Two Jests***" , words by Yehuda Ben Shlomo Alcharizi (Spain, 1225-1165)and the often performed " ***The Lord Is My Shepherd*** " , Psalm 23 . Boskovich wrote these songs for orchestral , piano, and string quartet versions.

Boskovich was a broadminded , knowledgeable intellect. With a sound background of European philosophy he strove constantly to broaden his horizons and enrich his outlook . Jewish mysticism intrigued his searching mind and was an important source of inspiration to his works during the five last years of his life. The Kabbala , one of the most precious treasures of Judaism , cast its spell on him . He studied the book of the "Zohar " as well as the Midrash , the homiletic commentaries of the Bible and Chassidic literature . (During the last months of his life he started to compose an oratoria based and named after Martin Buber's books , " The Hidden Light " , one of the biggest collections of Chassidic tales.) During this period of his life he also took great interest in the Indian philosophy and its theories of reincarnation of body and soul. The books of Sri Aurobindo opened to him gates to a spiritual world unknown to the Western world.