

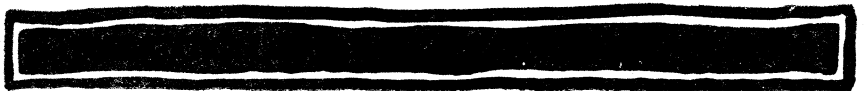
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NATIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN ISRAELI MUSIC

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When approaching a discussion of contemporary Israeli music, it is necessary, first of all, to differentiate between two separate terms: "Israeli music" and "contemporary music." The former serves to reflect the politico-cultural aspects of our society in Israel, and the latter, with its universal implications, shows us to be a member in the community of nations. This situation is not particular to us alone, but is prevalent in the whole of Western civilization. In fact, it would not be considered a problem, were it not that different schools of thought are continually being formed, clashing in their cultural standpoints and obscuring the horizon for the younger generations. Here, then, is the most important reason for discussing the trends in Israeli music, while seeing it in the broader perspective which regards music as a general expression of contemporary art.

The question is: how to begin? With the theoretical problem of dodecaphonic as against tonal music? With serial music as opposed to a renewed use of modes? Possibly — for the thousandth time — with an attempt to define national music and its functions? There is nothing at all novel in any one of these and yet, in spite of this, in spite of the "for" and "against" and of the many arguments in the past, "the trends in Israeli music" have come up for examination again. A few weeks ago I happened to read an article dealing with the influence of musicians emigrating from Hitler's Germany on American music. In this article the author deals at great length with the nature of American musical society's reaction to the influence of the atonalist, Hindemith, and to that of the dodecaphonist, Schonberg, and their followers. It seems that the American community armed itself with a defensive intel-

lectual shield, upon which it affixed a slogan: atonal and dodecaphonic music is the fruit of Nazi culture which these "contaminated" immigrants are trying to bring into the United States. And yet these emigrants themselves were expelled by the Nazis on the ground that atonal and dodecaphonic music was the fruit of Jewish degeneracy. Although these two views are diametrically opposed, they can be interpreted as expressing a common idea: fear of the unfamiliar and suspicion of anything which might disturb a lethargic state of smug self-satisfaction. Indeed the realisation that "there is nothing new under the sun" forms the impulse behind today's discussion as well.

It is difficult for us to see ourselves in historical perspective. Yet a minimal aloofness from daily living is imperative for the purposes of this discussion. If we do manage to achieve this distance, it appears clearly that the particular aura of our time can best be expressed by the term "standard." Following the example of industrial politics, the artist also provides "standard" works for which there is a demand in the market of concert tickets, records, television sets, etc. This standard is pressed from two moulds: from a musical dialect which is close to the known and the accepted, and from a national formula which gives evidence of the composition's source. During the Middle Ages the Catholic Church was responsible for upholding a very high standard. Thanks to this, music soon attained an honourable position, despite the fact that it had formerly been very backward in comparison with the other arts. When a secular regime replaced that of the Church, secular politics also appeared and, simultaneously, economic and national values. The creative artist, too, was enlisted by this national propaganda, just as the

Catholic Church had inspired its own spiritual adherents.

And here the first mistake was made: very soon a type of mixed chorus was formed, composed of three voices: folklore — supplying originality; nationalism — creating standard moulds, intelligible even to musical illiterates; and professional technical art — providing the “packaging” to attract buyers.

This chorus is known as “culture.” Were we to enquire further into the fate of these three voices in the life of our chorus, it would be found that folklore has made its way from spontaneous naivete to the apathy of routine; that national standardisation has withered from lack of change or experimentation; and that professional technical art has no function at all but to serve as the wrapping.

Although this has been said many times, I would like to repeat it once more: Israeli music is not the outcome of tonality or modality, of atonality or dodecaphony, nor of serial technique or electronics. These are nothing more than the means to which the folkloristic quotation, the combination of Mediterranean fifths, the *a la hora* rhythm, also belong. The means itself is good as long as it serves a living content and a vital will. In every living language the dialect must necessarily undergo changes: so in music too. Should atonality, in all its different guises, represent musical thought of today, then Israel, as a member in the community of nations, must also fulfill her obligations and must give expression to that uniqueness which is hers, not by way of the means of expression, but by way of the content.