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An Account of the Present State of the Arts in Israel

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I WILL try to give an account of the present state of the arts in Israel, my country. Frank as my comments will be, they have to be read as subjective observations rather than the account of an historian.

Since my emigration in 1934 from Germany to Israel, I noticed phases of deeply rooted changes in naive musical expressions, commonly called folksongs. The changes were influenced by the numerous immigration waves from East and West, each one importing its cultural background while crossbreeding it with the new society — as well as with nature-given conditions, which evoked new sentiments and new emotions.

A few months after my arrival, the authorities for Jewish education asked me to go to some settlements from which a new output of folksongs was streaming into the country. Most of the authors were shepherds or workers. Usually they wrote the words but could not write the music. Therefore, the songs wandered orally from the settlements to the villages and towns. At this time, no recording facilities were available. Consequently, my mission has been to write down the music according to the author's original version. But this version was never exactly the same a few hours later, when I wanted to control my work. Moreover, when I visited a settlement in the neighborhood and listened to the schoolchildren's song lessons, I quickly found out that they sang

their own versions, simplifying difficult rhythms or otherwise difficult to catch interval-leaps. Finally, when the song made its way around the country, it became a true folksong. This was a unique experience: to watch the birth and growth of a folksong was still possible during the early thirties in Israel, then called Palestine.

This is now a story of the past because of the electronic communications media. Technological developments certainly will change the intellectual level of future folksongs, similar to the consequences of artificial intelligence. In the domain of art and music, three events of far-reaching cultural influence occurred during the year 1936: the establishment of the Palestine Broadcast Service and the founding of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, followed one year later by the Jerusalem Academy of Music.

All these institutions changed their names in time in accordance with political developments. Consequently, music in all its functions played a major role in the cultural life of the country and still does so today.

The art of drama was introduced in the 1920s. Jewish actors from Russia, who worked under Stanislavski, founded the National Theatre "Habimah" in Tel Aviv. They have kept the old traditions but do not close themselves off from new trends and techniques. Of course, the new generation of "Habimah" actors presents a very different style of acting from the old Jewish-Russian one. Meanwhile, all the larger towns in the country have their own theatres, mostly subsidized by the Ministry of Culture and by the municipalities.

The cultivation of the classical Hebrew language on the stage functions as a noble contribution to the enrichment of the day-to-day language. Thus, the spoken secular Hebrew represents the main cultural pillar of the reborn state of Israel.

The always-changing folksong styles were accompanied by similar metamorphoses in folkdance expressions. The Yemenite dance patterns have had an especially decisive influence on the folkdance spirit. In the realm of art-dance, classical ballet dominated in the beginning of the 1930s. Later, with the immigration of modern dancers from Western Europe and the United States, so-called Modern Dance became the language of Israeli dancers. Today we have professional dance groups in towns and settlements, which often participate in international festivals. The stylistic trend develops more and more toward the dance theatre.

Today, painting, sculpture, and all the other arts are cultivated in all their techniques. One has to consider the historical fact that religious Jewish tradition forbade the fine arts in order to counteract the making of images of idols. Today we have in Israel very fine painters who come from orthodox religious sectors of the community. It is too early as yet to evaluate the importance of this latter development.

Obviously, one has to mention the Israel Museum and the Rockefeller Museum, both in Jerusalem, as well as the Tel-Aviv Museum and smaller ones in other towns and settlements.

The scientific part of music is represented by the departments of musicology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Tel Aviv University, Bar-Ilan University and Ben Gurion University in Beersheba.

This list is not a complete one. I have attempted to avoid a dry enumeration of existing institutes by adding some personal remarks about their coming-into-being.