

# ZIONIST NEWSLETTER

Published by the Information Department of the  
Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organisation  
Jerusalem. P.O.B. 22



הנהלת הסוכנות היהודית והנהלת ההסתדרות הציונית

Jerusalem, 12th Elul, 5709 — 6th September, 1949

No. 24

## DOES ISRAELI MUSIC EXIST?

By SHULAMITH RYFTIN

"Yes, Israeli music does exist," said Joseph Gruenthal, well-known Israeli composer and pianist and Principal of the Israel Conservatoire of Music, whose interesting ballet, "Exodus", was recently performed by the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. A comparatively young man, Mr. Gruenthal is one of the foremost authorities on music in this country. His house in Jerusalem is filled with musical instruments, ancient and modern, and he boasts an extensive musical library and a fine collection of records. He took out a substantial volume and showed me the title. It was "The Music of Israel", by Dr. Peter Gradenwitz, published in New York this year. "Three hundred pages on Israel music," Mr. Gruenthal smiled, "and you ask if such a thing exists."

"I don't just mean music that originated in Israel," I explained. "One can live in this country and write music that is not Israeli in any way. What determines the purely national character of a musical composition?"

### *East European and Oriental Influence*

"Usually," Mr. Gruenthal replied, "nationality in music finds expression in the folksong, which is based on the nation's traditions. This problem, however, is one which occupies the minds of many musicians here. The traditional Jewish melody, as a mirror of historical development, is not really Jewish at all, but cosmopolitan. When the Jews were exiled from their ancient homeland, they were dispersed all over the world. Some went to the Orient, others to the Occident. As the greatest number of Jews were concentrated in Eastern Europe up to the time of the Nazi holocaust, the

East European background and idiom naturally exercised the strongest influence upon the Jewish folksong.

"The influence of the East European idiom can still be felt in Israel. The songs composed at various stages of modern Jewish development in this country reflect the local folk idiom of the immigrants' countries of origin; and in the earlier stages immigrants from Eastern Europe preponderated. But the Orient has also had an influence. Jews came to this country and other parts of the Middle East bringing with them a folk music entirely different from the Occidental. The two styles had nothing in common.

### *Musical Research*

"Considerable scientific research is now being undertaken in Israel into the nature of Jewish music. The first aim of this research is to establish the character of Jewish music before the Dispersion. It is the belief of some scholars that certain Jewish communities — Oriental ones — have preserved the national tradition in music almost intact. Dr. Gerson-Kiwi, one of the foremost students in this field, is now engaged in writing a book which will summarise the results of the research done by herself and her fellow-workers.

"The first to initiate research in this field was Prof. Idelsohn, of Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati. He was followed by Dr. Robert Lachman, with whom Dr. Kiwi originally worked.

### *Bible Cantillations and Ambrosian Chants*

"These scholars based their researches on several sources. One of these, as I have mentioned, was the traditional folk-

songs of the Orient. Another highly important source was provided by the cantillations of the Bible, which have probably been less subject to external influence than any other branch of Jewish music. Yet a third very useful source has proved to lie in early European church music. During the fourth century Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, toured the Middle East and recorded the melodies he heard in Palestine. His rendering of those melodies was not, perhaps, very faithful: he was a European and did not have the means at his disposal to note down the subtle nuances that characterise Oriental music. Nevertheless, his skeleton notation forms a basis for research. The Gregorian chant of the Mediaeval Church was based on Ambrose's material."

"Is this reconstruction of early Israeli music of importance for the modern composer?" I asked. "Or is it of purely academic value?"

### *Trying to Find Israeli Medium*

"Nearly all our composers were born and educated in Europe," Mr. Gruenthal replied, "so that their style naturally tends to be cosmopolitan and to follow along the lines of the European masters, old and new. Their problem is to find an expression of their attachment to the country through an Israeli medium.

"Some composers claim that all influences on a composer's style are external, like climate, the prevailing colour of the countryside, mountains, the sea and, indeed, the whole pattern of life made up of everyday details characteristic of and peculiar to the composer's environment. It therefore follows that, if a composer lives the life of the country, his music will be Israeli music, even if he makes use of the universal technical media he acquired in Europe.

"Another school of thought maintains that national music must be expressed in a specific idiom. Several Israel composers have already found formulas for their styles based on this principle. They use established forms which they consider to be purely Israeli in character, and which are related to the musical idioms that are to be found throughout the Mediterranean region. Composers who draw freely upon such forms include Ben-Chaim, Staromirsky, Boscovitch and Ya'akobi.

"A third group of composers are trying to find the solution to their musical problem by taking themes from the Bible or modern Jewish history. The events on which they base their music took place on the soil of Israel and are undoubtedly Israeli in character. However, they interpret their themes through the medium of modern technique, since they perceive them through modern minds. Composers of this school include Partos, Bushel, Starer and myself.

### *The People must Sing*

"Yet another group of composers write for the most part in a folk style in an attempt to create an Israeli folk music. The work done in this field is on a modest scale and executed through modest media, and it is intended to appeal to the public taste.

"So far, however, no purely Israeli folksong has emerged. What we have are merely the songs the public sings. Admittedly, they include some real gems, mostly written by villagers in the Kibbutzim, who are closest to the land. But most of the so-called folksongs and folk-dances are not, properly speaking, manifestations of an original folk art. Still, this does not really matter. In our times it is vitally necessary to provide songs for the public, especially after the trying pe-

riod we have just passed through. The soldiers, the youth and the people have to sing. What is important is that the teachers and educators should educate the nation, give it a sound basis for musical appreciation, and prevent mistakes and the creation of false musical values”.

### *Music and Schools*

“Do you,” I asked, “approve of music being made a compulsory subject in schools?”

“Most definitely,” was Mr. Gruenthal’s reply. “Plato considered music an important factor in the education of the citizen, and what he said still holds good. The foundations of music should be part of the education of every intelligent man and woman. Those who wish to continue and broaden their knowledge can, after

passing through the elementary stage, carry their education further in conservatoires or other institutions. The people of this country display a wide interest in music. Almost every child has some connection with music, either in a youth movement, where the learning of songs is a feature of the activities engaged in, or by studying an instrument under a teacher. The concert halls are always full in Israel. Musical education should, therefore, be included by the Government in its general education plans. This will raise the general level of appreciation in the country, with the natural consequence that better music will be written and that it will be better understood. Ours is a musical nation, and everything should be done to promote musical development. I believe that Israeli music will soon take its place in the forefront of world music.”