

Israeli music with a universal theme

AT A UNIVERSITY of Chicago seminar last week, Ben-Zion Orgad said he was apprehensive, even a little frightened, at the prospect of hearing the world premiere of his most recent composition. Orgad is an Israeli, and most of his music has been composed for concerts in his native land. He was concerned about the expectations of an anonymous American audience.

He need not have been. At Saturday night's opening concert of the University of Chicago's Contemporary Chamber Players [CCP] series, his "Dialogues on the First Scroll," one of four premieres of Israeli music heard at the concert, was a forceful utterance whose message and rhetoric were comprehended immediately.

It was an intriguing idea of Ralph Shapey's to have the American Bicentennial commemorated by commissions from Israel's National Council of Culture and Art. As the CCP's conductor, he was allowed to choose the composers, thus insuring, at least in part, quality and performability. The composers get a foreign performance, and American audiences get a welcome exposure to the unfamiliar.

THE IDIOMS employed hardly were unfamiliar, however. All four works shared the contemporary composer's love of surface sonority and experimental design. The prepared piano was much in evidence throughout the evening. Several times the string players were asked to use their instruments as drums, knocking patterns with their fingers.

Time schemes were stretched and compressed, textures overlaid upon textures, densities controlled with sculptural, rather than painterly methods. Any regular attendant at Shapey's significant series would find himself on charted ground. These were solidly crafted, mature works of their time.

Orgad's "Dialogues" was the most conservative in choice of materials. It had an exotic flavor that bespoke intimate acquaintance with the form and substance of Hebrew cantillation, as well as the rhythmic patterns of mid-Eastern folk dance. The brass calls from the audience, the impassioned recitative from a front and center cello, and the stereophonic percussion relied on tried and true means of musical communication.



Thomas Willis
Music critic

Michael Barolsky's "Cries and Whispers," on the other hand, was determinedly in vogue. As the youngest composer represented, he made use of the notational freedom and electronic apparatus. Much of the essential material was imbedded on electronic tape. Textures were built up by repeated patterns of indeterminate length and approximate pitch. Sonorities and densities ranged the outer extremities of the pitch and dynamic possibilities. What emerged was a compressed package of metaphors from nature, screened through a mind saturated with today's technology.

JACOB GILBOA'S "Beth Alpha Mosaic" tried to interpret in sound the impression created by the mosaic floor of a 6th-Century synagogue. A female voice, Isola Jones', in this case, transmits the verbal material found in the illustrations, and the surrounding instruments fashion intricate medallions of instrumental color. Some of these are very small—"The Zodiac" is divided into 12 miniatures. All avoid literalism—one feels the geometry and senses the various colored surfaces without being conscious of the time structures used for the process. And at first hearing, the episodes seem discontinuous rather than interrelated.

Josef Tal's "Shape" tried less than the others, but in my opinion accomplished more. Essentially a study in three-dimensional audio perspective, it built an impressive structure with economy and precision. Background and foreground were carefully distinguished—short soloistic motives were tailored to stand out from a more or less static background. At times, a pulse developed, but its energies were understated and seemed to arise from necessity rather than invention. The many short solos were related, although the material was being viewed from a different acoustic "angle." At the end, the listener felt as though he had taken a slow, contemplative walk around a softly colored, abstract sculpture.

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TAL: *Shape*; BAROLSKY: *Cries and Whispers*. The Contemporary Chamber Players of The University of Chicago conducted by Ralph Shapey. Grenadilla Stereo GS-1044, \$7.95.

There was a time when Israel's musical efforts were generally derived from folksong and dance and were incongruously couched in the late-romantic central-European harmonic language. Things seem to be changing, for these newer compositions are in an international avant-garde style; they could have been written in almost any nation in the world that pays homage to Western experimentation.

The two works are standard examples of their kind. Violence and calm are the two poles that enclose Josef Tal's *Shape*, and the shape that evolves runs the emotional gamut between them. Particularly attractive is a transparently scored intermezzo-like passage featuring massed instruments pitted against frequent solo declamations; this is followed by an intensification of mood and sound volume, with an underpinning of repeated-figure patterns. *Shape* is well-crafted and comely.

Michael Barolsky's *Cries and Whispers*, too, is an essay in violent contrasts, with an extraordinarily high energy level. There is a lot of plucking in the strings, instrumental playing in extreme registers, and prerecorded tape commentary. Barolsky's ending is particularly effective, presenting a hypnotic sound-picture whose horizon seems to stretch into infinity.

Ralph Shapey masterfully steers The Contemporary Chamber Players of The University of Chicago in controlled, expert readings, and Grenadilla has provided good sound and quiet surfaces. Richard Watkins' beautiful album cover painting deserves special commendation.

—Ringo