

Zvi Keren: His Contribution to Israel's Music Scene An Interview in Honor of his 85th Birthday

Edited by Alona Keren-Sagee

Editor's Note:

It is with great pride that I introduce a new section in this issue of *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology*, dedicated to interviews with musicians who have made major contributions to Israel's music life. I am particularly pleased to inaugurate this section with an interview with our esteemed colleague (and in my case, teacher), Zvi Keren, a major figure in the development of Israel's contemporary, jazz and light music. This interview is conducted by Alona Keren-Sagee, Zvi Keren's daughter.

Biography:

1917 - Born in New York City as Howard Kirshenbaum

1937 - Bachelor of Science, NYU, with a major in Chemistry

1946 - M.A. in composition, Columbia University

1951 - Settled in Israel and Hebraized his name to Zvi Keren.

1961 - Ph.D. in Musicology from London University, with a dissertation entitled "The Sources and Stylistic Development of Israeli Art Music Since 1930."

Thesis advisor: Dr. Wilfrid Dunwell.

Book: *Contemporary Israeli Music: Its Sources and Stylistic Development* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1980).

*Let me open with an excerpt from a New York daily newspaper, **The Evening Graphic**, Friday, March 23, 1928 that describes the beginning of your career as a musician:*

Brooklyn Boy Wins Award for Music

Howard R. Kirshenbaum, 10, of 2236 81st Brooklyn, has received the highest award in the Thirty-Seventh District of Music Week Contests. The child has been playing the piano for two and a half years and received a mark of 80 plus. Howard won the admiration of the contest judges for his excellent memorizing and expression. His teacher was Paolo Gallico.

After getting off to such an excellent start, where and how did you continue your education?

Around 1932, my parents became friendly with the eminent Russian-American composer and theoretician Joseph Schillinger (1895-1943). Schillinger emigrated to the USA in 1928, after having served in high positions in some of the major music institutions in the Ukraine, Khar'kov, Moscow, and Leningrad. He settled in New York, where he taught music, mathematics, art history, and his theory of rhythmic design at the New School for Social Research, New York University, and the Teachers College of Columbia University. My parents met him frequently at the "Continental Club"¹ where he gave lectures on art and music. My mother, a pianist and interested in all the arts, thought that he would make an ideal teacher for me. When I was 16 years-old she took me to Schillinger's studio and I played for him several of my arrangements of popular songs. He recommended Nadia Reisenberg as a piano teacher in

order for me to acquire better finger control, which I did for about two years. At the same time I started working on my Bachelor's degree with a major in Chemistry.

Schillinger accepted me as a student in 1938, after the completion of my Bachelor's degree. Less than 20 years-old, fresh from the school room, I was particularly fascinated by Schillinger's formulated philosophical and practical system of music theory based on mathematics, in which rhythm acts as the underlying basis of artistic creation.² Given my solid background in the sciences, I succeeded in mastering Schillinger's theory of rhythm, which required arithmetic and some mathematics. This pleased him very much, and I continued to study with him for three years (1938-41). Schillinger taught his system of rhythm to numerous private pupils, who were active professional composers and arrangers in the fields of American popular and jazz music, such as George Gershwin, Glenn Miller, and Benny Goodman. Gershwin was Schillinger's most well known pupil. He came to Schillinger in 1932 while he was writing music for films in Hollywood because he felt that there was no originality left in his songs and was dissatisfied with what he was writing. Having heard from some of Schillinger's pupils in New York, who had "soft" radio jobs, about the unusual music they were learning to produce with the help of Schillinger, Gershwin decided to study with Schillinger three times a week! Schillinger became a celebrated teacher overnight, and the arrangers, conductors and players who were employed by the radio flocked to Schillinger. Gershwin wrote "Porgy and Bess" with Schillinger's help in 1935. He did not write any part of "Porgy and Bess" until he got the "OK" from Schillinger so that "Porgy and Bess" was written completely under the influence and guidance of Schillinger. Gershwin studied with him until 1936.

Schillinger included me among seven select students personally authorized by him to teach his approach to theory and composition. Indeed, when I arrived in Israel in 1951, I quickly became the foremost teacher of Schillinger's theories.

After my studies with Schillinger I went on to take my M.A. degree in Composition, which was completed in 1946. I then continued to take courses towards my Ph.D. in Musicology in NYU with musicologists such as Curt Sachs, Paul Henry Lang, and Gustave Reese.

As you mentioned, you settled in Israel in 1951.

What would you say about Israel's music scene according to what you saw when you first arrived?

The musicians who fled from Central Europe to Israel in the wake of Hitler settled in the three largest cities in Israel — Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem. These musicians constituted the dominant group in Israel's early music life, and the music that they performed bore the unmistakable stamp of Vienna or Prague. Thus, Israeli audiences in cafés, restaurants, and night clubs happily listened and danced to well known Viennese waltzes and other popular European tunes.

In 1960, the management of *Kol Yisrael* (the Voice of Israel, the Israeli broadcasting station) decided to form an orchestra in addition to its already existing symphonic orchestra. The new orchestra, with about 40 members, was to be devoted to more popular music — for which there was much demand. It was decided to name this ensemble *Tizmoret Habidur* (meaning Entertainment Orchestra). Once again, this freshly organized group was made up chiefly of musicians from Central Europe. At that time, I offered my services to *Kol Yisrael* as an arranger for the light music section, headed by the late Moshe Wilensky. My arrangements for the *Tizmoret Habidur* were well liked both by the musicians who played them and the staff of the light music division, which continuously ordered new arrangements.

It seems to me that my arrangements were well received because while my fellow European colleagues were steeped in the traditions of styles that they had absorbed before they came to Israel, my style of arrangement reflected a fast-moving American environment in which newness is prized as much as quality. Thus, while European composers wrote scores which sounded good but were lacking in originality, my arrangements injected original ideas into the orchestration, the rhythmic structure, and wherever else the bounds of good taste allowed me to do so. "Fly Me to the Moon" (by Bart Howard) and "Mood Indigo" (by Duke Ellington) are examples of such arrangements, as the orchestration, recalling the orchestrations of Duke Ellington and Quincy Jones, feature special combinations of instruments that create fresh blends of sound. In addition to these arrangements, I also composed several new pieces for the *Tizmoret Habidur*, such as "Electronic Brain," "Bankruptcy," "Disorder in Russia,"³ and "An Opening Theme for the *Tizmoret Habidur* Show." These works all have strong leanings toward the jazz

idiom as well as a Stravinskian savor. Of course, my studies with Schillinger were an invaluable source for new ideas.

The Israeli public liked my arrangements very much, and, soon after they began to be broadcasted, many people asked that I teach them privately how to write arrangements.

Who were the students that you accepted?

I mostly worked with professional musicians, some of whom were well known or became so at a later time in Israel and abroad, or students from music academies who wanted to broaden their musical perspectives. My outstanding pupils included Albert Piamenta (Israeli jazz and ethnic music clarinetist and saxophonist, composer and arranger), Avi Piamenta (Israeli flutist, arranger, and performer of jazz, ethnic, and hassidic music), Yaron Gershowski (jazz pianist and arranger, performing with and directing the successful American vocal jazz group “Manhattan Transfer”), Mischa Segal (jazz pianist who developed a musical career in the USA), Ariel Zilber (Israeli singer, composer, and keyboard player of pop and rock music), Liz Magnes (former American, now Israeli jazz and ethnic music pianist and composer), Nachum Pereferkovitch (former Russian, now Israeli violist, jazz pianist, and arranger), Yossi Mar-Chaim (Israeli composer and jazz music critic), Avner Kenner (Israeli composer and pianist of jazz and popular music), Yonni Rechter (Israeli popular and jazz music composer, arranger, and pianist), Shem-Tov Levy (Israeli flutist, pianist, composer and arranger of jazz and popular music), Raffi Kadishsohn (Israeli composer and arranger of symphonic and non-jazz music, as well as a pianist and arranger in the field of “light” music), Menachem Wiesenberg (Israeli composer, and classical and jazz pianist) and Addi Renert (Israeli “light” music and jazz pianist, and arranger).

All the musicians mentioned above are central and leading figures in today’s Israeli music scene, each in his own specialty — composing, arranging, or performing, and some of them also teach in the music academies.

Can you tell us what you emphasized in your lessons and what you feel was unique about your approach to teaching?

The lessons were based on Schillinger’s theory of composition, or my adapted version of Schillinger’s theory, and included teaching the skills of arranging, keyboard harmony, and improvisation in the jazz style.

In addition, I hoped to share with my students a spiritual attitude towards composition. As a religious person, I felt that composers invent much as the Almighty creates. This belief, an offspring of Schillinger’s theories of rhythm, recognizes affinities between rhythmic motion in music and the rhythmic frequencies that permeate the world. More specifically, Schillinger perceived the simultaneous combination of a number of frequencies, e.g., a person’s pulse beating regularly, the earth turning on its axis once every 24 hours, and the earth encircling the sun once every year, as new rhythmic entities. Similarly, in music, rhythmic modifications and recombinations alter musical phrases in infinite ways. I hoped that my students would align such processes of rhythmic variations with relentless Divine creations of new physiognomies.

Zvi Keren educated a generation or more of Israel’s finest musicians. As a token of gratitude, they sponsored a concert in his honor during the “Jazz, Blues, and Videotape Festival” (in Tel Aviv) in February 1999, entitled “The Teacher and His Pupils.” During this memorable evening, these noted Israeli musicians paid tribute to their teacher by playing with and for him.

“Amar Rabbi Yitzhak” is among your most famous compositions. Can you tell us about this work?

“Amar Rabbi Yitzhak” is a vocal piece for choir and instrumental ensemble (piano, vibraphone, double bass, and drums). It is based on an interpretation of the first verse of *Genesis* by the famous Jewish medieval commentator, Rashi (1040-1105). This work is unique in that it combines the old with the new. Its text, taken from Jewish sources, is set, in most parts, to jazz-like swing rhythms and bass lines. Similarly, the blues-tinged melodies and predominantly quartal voicings are flavored in the capella section with Gregorian Chant declamations set in a characteristic unison texture. Moreover, 20th-century musical

influences, heard during the whole piece, climax in complex multilayered rhythmic lines that mark the highpoint of the composition.

Why did you choose this text?

Rashi wrote his interpretation of the *Pentateuch* with an eye to the future. I wrote “Amar Rabbi Yitzhak” for my university students, whom I regarded as the future musicians of our generation. Most of all, I hoped that the text would inspire religious sentiments, strengthening the belief of the performers and the audience. Thus, the climax of the piece falls on the words: *The entire world belongs to the Holy One, Blessed Be He.*

In addition to your activities as a composer, we know that you also contributed much to Israel’s academic musical life. Can you please tell us about your participation in Israel’s academic life?

At the beginning of the 1970s, I joined Prof. Bathia Churgin in establishing the Department of Musicology at Bar-Ilan University. I became a full-time faculty member, where I taught such courses as the History of Instruments, Jewish Music, 20th-Century Music, Modern Harmony at the Keyboard, The Music of Stravinsky, History of Jazz, and especially Israeli Art Music. I also taught arranging at the Rubin Academy of Music at Tel Aviv University.

My book — *Contemporary Israeli Music: Its Sources and Stylistic Development*, is among the few important contributions to the field of Israeli art music. It aims at explaining the major influences on contemporary Israeli music. These influences include the music of the Jewish communities of the Middle East, Biblical cantillation and synagogue song, the religious and secular folk music of the Diaspora, the Hebrew language, Western Art music, and Jewish folk tunes from different parts of the world. Notated musical examples from a wide variety of compositions illustrate these influences. The last chapters describe the stylistic development of Israeli music since the 1930s and trends in Israeli art music after 1960. I based much of the original material presented in the book on personal interviews with Israeli composers, music educators, and musicologists; recordings of Israeli musical works; and scores, both published and unpublished.

Since retiring from Bar-Ilan University in 1986, Zvi Keren divides his activities between Jewish studies and music.

NOTES

1. Situated on West End Ave., near 72nd St., for people who were interested in hearing lectures about art and music.

2. His books include: *Kaleidophone: New Resources of Melody and Harmony* (New York: M. Witmark, 1940, reprint 1967); *The Schillinger System of Musical Composition* (New York: C. Fischer, 1941, reprint 1977); *Mathematical Basis of the Arts* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948, reprint 1976); *Encyclopedia of Rhythms* (New York: Charles Colin, 1966, reprint 1976).

3. The name of this piece in Hebrew consists of rhyming words.

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