

Shlonsky, Verdina (1905-1990): Overview of Writings

Verdina Shlonsky (1905-1990) was not only the first Israeli woman devoted to composition, in a variety of musical forms and for various vocal and instrumental ensembles, but also the first Israeli composer who wrote a symphony (1937), and the only one who produced dozens of newspaper essays, spanning over thirty years, between the 1930s and the 1960s, on diverse topics.

Her artistic personality, which impacted her music and writings, was complex. On the one hand, she was the daughter of Tuvia Shlonsky, a Chabad Hasid, and the sister of one of the most prominent Israeli poets, Avraham Shlonsky (1900-1973), who translated her texts, originally written in Russian, to Hebrew. Alongside art songs, some of which were composed to her brother's poems, she also composed several "utilitarian songs", as she herself defined them, together with incidental music for local theaters. On the other hand, she not only received her education in Piano Performance and Composition in Europe with celebrated teachers such as Arthur Schnabel, Max Deutsch, and Edgard Varèse, but chose to return and stay there for considerable periods of time, even though she had already visited Eretz-Israel during the 1920s and the 1930s, until finally immigrating in 1944.

Moreover, unlike other local composers, Shlonsky avoided incorporating Mediterranean signifiers into her musical works. Her style often combines expanded tonality and modernist influences, including twelve-tone music, despite her objection to strict compositional methods, which she expressed in several writings. Similarly, the majority of her texts testify to her European tendencies, focusing mainly on her encounters with German and French musicians, rather than Israeli ones. She usually wrote in a subjective, personal, non-academic tone, with prevalent use of metaphors. Despite this, her texts often raise burning aesthetic issues, such as attitudes toward electronic music or the principles of Romanticism versus Modernism. Some are short aphorisms with concise, expressive philosophical thoughts, under titles such as "Fragments" or "Necklace," but most of them are longer and more elaborate.

Shlonsky published mainly in *Al-Hamishmar*, a daily newspaper affiliated with the workers' party, but in the 1930s and early 1940s, she wrote "Song in Israel" (1935), the article "Musical Talks" printed in *Davar*, also connected to a workers' organization (1936); and in 1942, "Palestine and Jewish Music", published in *The New Judea*, a fortnightly Zionist journal published in London. These early texts did, in fact, grapple with issues concerning the formation of Israeli Music. They focus on the song as a starting point or a tool not only for the masses, who will create organic, non-artificial self-expression, but also for composers who will absorb the songs and then create large-scale works, such as a symphony or an oratorio. In

1942, she particularly stressed the need for composers to remold their style, guided by folksongs, religious melodies, and the Hora national dance, while avoiding abundant use of Mediterranean signifiers.

Shlonsky's motivation for these articles was her encounter with Hanns Eisler (1898-1962), described in a series of texts titled "Three Profiles: Fragmented Memories from Pre-War Paris" (1945). The profiles are those of Arnold Schoenberg, Oskar Fried and Hanns Eisler, but the focus is undoubtedly on Schoenberg - the enthusiasm upon his arrival in Paris; guests who visit him, such as Fried, Ernst Toch and Karol Rathaus, all composers who were marginalized and fled Europe following the rise of Nazism, alongside frequent visits of Shlonsky herself, who, as she testifies, visited him often; and his wishes to establish a Conservatory in Palestine and to come back from Lutheranism to Judaism. These encounters are portrayed against the backdrop of Paris, between 1933 and 1934, described as a large vessel, sending lifeboats to drowning people from all around Europe, while at the same time, there is a lack of understanding or reaction by French authorities to the rising antisemitism and increasing violence in Germany. Eisler, who was Schoenberg's student, is quoted as saying: "I began writing songs for the people... especially nowadays, we must create for the masses, if not, all will be lost... do you not feel where this crazy world is leading to?" Eisler, Shlonsky testified, urged her to adapt this approach and write songs for the masses in Eretz-Israel.

Tzliot (Silhouettes) is an unpublished collection of selected articles by Shlonsky, edited by the Israeli musicologist Prof. Herzl Shmueli around 1988. It was named after one of her late works, for a wordless mezzo-soprano, or clarinet, and percussion (1977). This is not an all-encompassing volume, but it offers a broad spectrum of the main themes and ideas presented in her articles - concerts she attended, such as Yehudi Menuhin's performance in London in spring 1943, or Bartok's Sonata for two pianos and percussion performed in Paris in 1938; a commemoration of birthdays, such as Arturo Toscanini's eightieth birthday in 1947, or death days such as twenty years to Debussy's death in 1938; her teachers, e.g. a depiction of a lesson with Schnabel in 1926; and meetings with musicians such as conductor Otto Klemperer or various French composers. There are accounts from Germany and London, but France stands at the heart of her writings, mainly through specific talks with French musicians, such as André Jolivet, Daniel-Lesur, Louis Sager, Henry Barraud, Henri Dutilleux and Maurice Thiriet. Although Shlonsky admired Schoenberg, participated in the new music course in Darmstadt in 1964, and composed several modernist works throughout her career, articles such as "They Were Mistaken: or André Jolivet's Healthy Opposition" testify to her animosity towards some of the new music's characteristics, especially to electronic music. "Both of us studied with Varèse", she says, "and we remember his noisy experiments... Jolivet experimented with it and came to the conclusion that these are only sound effects... music is a completely different world, it is not a mathematical calculation of sounds".

In 1957, she published "A letter from Paris: Two talks", where she speaks with Pierre Capdevielle and Georges Auric. She asks Capdevielle for his opinion on electronic music. He responds: "This is a machine, and only a humanized machine can perceive it...", and she remarks: "The state of young people seems tragic to me,

such hurriedness and phenomenal industrial novelties... one must keep the authentic in art and avoid those influences from penetrating the artistic work." Auric is quoted as talking about the Les Six group, to which he belonged: "I am not sure if we were right, but we avoided a resemblance to Debussy or Ravel... What we call 'French Music' meant flowing, with spirit, joyful yet dynamic; we went against the German tragedy, against its heaviness... dodecaphonic music is an adventure, it is a dangerous novelty." Different opinions are expressed by the musicologist Pierre Souvtchinsky and the composer Henri Dutilleux. Souvtchinsky claims that electronic music is a new sensibility that will develop alongside classical music. According to Dutilleux, electronic music might pave the way to new ways of thinking in the future. He also expressed his belief in the individual's ability to find his own voice without enslaving himself to a strict method.

One of Shlonsky's most moving paragraphs is her depiction of the darkness in London during the 1940 Blitz, published under the title "Observing from a Dark Corner" in 1945. This is the background for the composition of her first Ballade for piano solo, where she chose to indicate "War Time". The music is not programmatic, but the text helps to understand the dark aura in which it was composed: "I have often caught myself doing it: my thoughts switch directly in accordance with the light at a particular moment. Activities, movements, and aspirations by daylight seem to be calculated from one point to another, while nighttime thoughts seem to eliminate all points, eradicate borders and obscure movements outside... These contrasts reflect the texture of our emotions. The balance between the contradictions is the secret of perseverance by virtue of which we are in perpetual motion, continually seeking... Fate led me to become acquainted with a third state of thought and motion: in the blackest night, without the comfort of electricity, above me the torn, wounded sky... That is why all my memories, and particularly my musical ones, are covered with a thin frost that descends from the black night and the torn sky."

In a radio interview from the early 1980s, Shlonsky expressed her will to detach herself from any national flag. Her texts show a specific European inclination, especially towards France, but several articles and her Hebrew songs clearly show her Israeli connection. Her European contacts do not make her less Israeli; on the contrary, she made an enormous contribution as a pioneering woman composer with a cosmopolitan perspective, in her texts and in her music.

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For further information:

Verdina Shlonsky's archival collection is held at The National Library of Israel in Jerusalem and the Archive of the Felicja Blumental Music Center and Library, Tel Aviv. Additional manuscripts are at the Archive of Israeli Music in Tel-Aviv

University. Hebrew and English versions of *Silhouettes* are available at the Felicja Blumental Archive. Manuscripts of articles in the original Russian are at the National Library of Israel. Most articles, in Hebrew, are available at:

<https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/newspapers/jpress>

Recent publications of Shlonsky's works by Felicja: Musical Arts Center, edited by Dr. Anat Viks, include biographical information and additional commentary.

For Further Reading:

Seter, Ronit, "Verdina Shlonsky: The First Lady of Israeli Music", in: *Min-ad: Israeli Studies in Musicology Online* 6 (2007-2008).

Youngerman, Irit, "Between Belonging, Alienation and Exclusion: Verdina Shlonsky and the Israeli Musical Canon", in: *Classical and Popular Music in Israel: Transcultural Dialogues and Contrasts*, edited by Malcolm Miller, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005, pp. 163-189.

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