

BOOK REVIEWS

Robert Fleisher. *Twenty Israeli Composers: Voices of a Culture*. Detroit: Wayne State University, 1997. 380 pp. Photographs, Appendix, Notes, Discography, Bibliography, Index.

Twenty Israeli Composers: Voices of a Culture stands out as an example of deeply involved scholarship and personal, "subjective" yet totally impartial commitment. It is a very worthy book, which can certainly enrich our perception of music written by Jewish composers living in Israel which, to be perfectly honest, is completely unknown. And this music should certainly be distinguished from music written by the Jewish composers living - in the past and at present - in Diaspora (nowadays we could mention Applebaum, Fisher, Glick, Pishny-Floyd and Kaplan in Canada or Lawrence Axelrod, Diane Thome and Robert Fleisher himself in the US; not to mention such well known artists as Philip Glass or John Zorn). Now, what is Jewish music? We know full well names of Jewish composers who contributed a great deal to the development of the Western classical canon and whose music still casts a rather 'preventive' shadow on the output of their Israeli heirs/counterparts: Mendelssohn, Bruch, Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg, Bloch, Copland and - whether you like it or not - Bernstein. As far as Fleisher's book is concerned, THIS music does not count, at least within the context of his research. The author is preoccupied with contemporary classical music written in the modern Israel. Many, too many seemingly excellent Israeli composers have been marginalised by their predecessors or contemporaries living outside Israel...

Robert Fleisher is a seasoned composer and scholar who knows how to approach the subject. It is extremely difficult to maintain composure while conducting a non-journalistic, scholarly interview (*Twenty Israeli Composers* consists of a series of interviews), an interview whose subject is so closely related to one's area of expertise and interest as well as personal/cultural background and sentiments. Fleisher does it with grace and understanding. He just listens and writes down what his interlocutors have said. After all, we deal with intelligent people here who have a lot of interesting things to communicate. The editing is minimal, spontaneity of discourse being far more important than artificial and superfluous polish. It is wonderful reading! Finally, we see a group of composers who no longer depend on their "diasporic" tradition, composers who want to create their own Israeli music, which would reflect their own emerging culture - for being an old nation does not mean that, under new /socio-political and cultural circumstances, you do not redefine yourself. They are a group of individuals whose personalities shine throughout

the book, if only for the fact that they do not hesitate to put the neo-naziesque, North American political correctness aside - they do, for instance, express their reservations about each other without much hesitation. And sometimes, as is the case of Ami Maayani reacting quite violently to Arik Shapira's being given a high state award (very unjustly, according to Maayani, since his younger colleague immerses himself in the Western avant-garde 'rubbish'), things get nasty. After having dealt with North American impotent politeness and sick correctness which, more and more often, lead to favouring 'looks' rather than 'substance', one can truly appreciate (and enjoy!) the Israelis' refreshing sincerity. It is up to the music historians to determine who was or is or will be the greatest Israeli composer. One thing is beyond any doubt, though. We have been given an excellent, enlightening book, which will serve as an example of extraordinary and useful achievement. This book is strongly recommended to anyone interested in the contemporary classical music and involved in research concerning this music. (pgm)

