

Paul Ben-Haim

A Refugee in the Mediterranean Sun

Stephen Estep



Left to right: Mordecai Seter, Menahem Avidom, Margalit Oved, Gari Bertini, Paul Ben-Haim. Photo courtesy of the Milken Archive of Jewish Music and National Library of Israel.

Paul Ben-Haim is one of those composers whose recordings I'll snatch up any time I find them. He was born Paul Frankenburger in Munich in 1897; he studied composition with a student of Bruckner's and was the conducting assistant to Hans Knappertsbusch and Bruno Walter. After emigrating to Palestine in 1933, he—with other immigrant colleagues—founded a “Mediterranean school” of composition based on romanticism, neoclassicism, and the modal melodies, melismas, and irregular meters of Jewish and Middle Eastern folk music. His new nationalist style was pleasantly arid and shared similarities with European pastoral writing. Ben-Haim was a craftsman rather than a genius; not everything he wrote was divinely inspired, but it's always a breath of fresh Mediterranean air, and what follows are my highest recommendations.

I've previously covered the String Quartet and Quintet (Carmel Quartet, Toccata Classics, Issue 248) and the Second Symphony and Concerto Grosso (Issue 279, about which anon). The quartet is one of Ben-Haim's most extroverted pieces, warm and friendly in some places, slashing and obstinate in others. Though his new style hadn't fully matured, the winds of Palestine were clearly carrying the heart of this culturally German composer eastward. For Chandos, the ARC Ensemble turned in a fine performance of the Clarinet Quintet (1941, revised 1965); it may be the most skillfully integrated of the chamber pieces. The instruments are often audaciously independent of each other, and the most dissonant moments still dance. *Flute and Strings from Israel*, on the Music in Israel label, contains the vivacious Serenade for Flute and String Trio (1952) along with pieces from other Israeli composers.

Pianist Gila Goldstein's two discs for Centaur cover all of Ben-Haim's major keyboard pieces; she brings more spunk and humor to the music than I thought possible. Particularly recommended is the first volume with the wonderful Sonatina from 1946. The ornamentations in the first movement loop around from the Middle East and meet up with Scarlatti somehow. The rhapsodic slow movement is like a once-in-a-lifetime sunset with a procession of chanting worshippers moving into earshot and vanishing just as quickly, leaving a transformed scene behind them.

CPO has released Ben-Haim's two symphonies with the NDR Philharmonic and Israel Yinon in fine performances and sound. The First Symphony (1939-1940) reflects the events of World War II while remaining non-programmatic. Some parts almost equal the national angst of Shostakovich's war-time symphonies. The slow middle movement leads to a triumphant peak (which Shostakovich would never have portrayed, given his experiences under Moscow's own knout), then to a blissful coda. Foreboding increases in the finale's *tarantella*; the dance reaches a standstill, however, before being subsumed into a celebratory *hora*.

The Second Symphony, completed in October 1945, can barely contain Ben-Haim's joyful optimism in the first two movements. The

Andante begins with an exclamation from the strings and soon turns into an elegy for the victims of the Holocaust (including Ben-Haim's sister). A sharp outburst marks the beginning of the closing Allegro Deciso, and drama reigns as the *hora* ultimately conquers the more serious, aggressive themes.

Violinist Itamar Zorman and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales recorded *Evocation*, a BIS SACD on my Top Ten Best-Sounding Albums of 2019 (Issue 309). The title work looks back at the turmoil Ben-Haim had left behind in Europe. It is austere yet sympathetic, its marching rhythms contrasting with more overtly emotional passages. Zorman shines in the tuneful, radiant, and brainy Violin Concerto of 1960. For sacred music, try the *Kabbalat Shabbat* on *Sacred Services from Israel* on Naxos, a semi-liturgical cantata filled with jubilant devotion.

Also fascinating is *Sweet Psalmist of Israel* for harp, harpsichord, and orchestra, commissioned by Leonard Bernstein. It is available in Sony's “Royal Edition” series of Bernstein reissues. The three movements depict David calming the distraught King Saul, meditating as he speaks his final words, and living on in the “Song of Degrees” sung by generations of pilgrims and priests. The acoustics are dry, but they end up giving the winds and brass an eerie antiquity, evoking the flutes, trumpets, and *shofars* of the Hebrews' heritage. Once again, Ben-Haim proved to be a master at combining ancient traditions with contemporary techniques, creating something timeless in the process.

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