

Three Thoughts About Arie Shapira

1.

Arie Shapira was my composition teacher from 1999 until 2003. I say composition teacher even though we usually ventured no further than Beethoven's music, and mostly stuck to that of Bach's. His teaching-method was to dissect, through incessant repetition and endless assignments, the musical language of Bach, and try to exemplify how a self-imposed style could manifest in a manner no less than deterministic.

Looking at the chorals, our bread and butter during those sessions, was a very telling exercise. Here, Bach reduced his language to its bare essentials, revealing hundreds of 'types' that repeat time and again. I recall with what joy I slowly began recognizing more and more of these types, and later even noticed Bach himself breaking a self-imposed 'rule' in order to emphasize an important word of text, or facilitate the *cantus* that was handed down to him.

Later I also started recognizing the deterministic approach Bach took towards modulation, which presented itself most clearly when the voice doubling started shifting towards the new home-key, and how much acoustic sense that soon made to me (i.e. as precursor to the new tonality, the tonic, dominant and sub-dominant of the new home-key take precedence to the old ones).

Even later, I noticed that almost every time Bach created a moment that could be considered 'off', bizarre, or a deviation from his style (seemingly, a mistake), he would almost always at some point in that same choral repeat this exact moment. Shapira would get especially animated on encountering one of these repeats, and shout - "You see! He's trying to convey to you, the listener, that he's aware of this special moment; that it was a conscious decision; a choice, not a mishap!" And stories of this ilk could go on indefinitely...

So why do I refer to Shapira as a composition teacher all the same? I mean, I did only once show him an original piece that I had composed, and all he said was - "good, write another."

Well, I guess my first reasoning would be that he himself referred to these meetings as composition lessons. He would always say that there are few subjects he deems important to teach a young man intending on becoming a composer, and that this method of analyzing Bach was sufficient as far as

harmony and counterpoint were concerned. And my reply in the form of a question could have been - "but what about orchestration for instance?"

"Orchestration?" Shapira would reply, "Take a Debussy score and learn how to orchestrate like him; or why not take a Strauss score and do what he does? Don't you see," he would continue, "the orchestration is as much a part of the compositional process as are the notes themselves! If you are intending on writing whole-tone music, by all means, look at a Debussy score. If yours is late romantic music, leaf through Strauss. No!" he would reject resolutely whilst lighting his umpteenth cigarette of the day, "you must invent the orchestration in the same manner you invent the notes and form; they are a whole! Otherwise why are you composing? If you, born 1978, bred in Haifa, speaking Hebrew, have the same to say as a person born 1862 in Saint-Germain-en-Laye and speaking French, then something is wrong, and I ask you kindly not to say it; it will be embarrassing."

Harsh words, I thought, but I honestly couldn't come up with any retort. Finally, he was right. He didn't advocate ignorance of what a violin or flute could do. In fact he would constantly remind me that I must pick up as many instruments as I could, and use that knowledge as basis for orchestrating rather than the Berlioz manual I had just acquired.

I later realized that what he was trying to say was that one's tastes are ever present, but shouldn't be the main force driving his compositions. In fact, Shapira would constantly ask his students why they wrote this or the other passage in an assignment, and if you were to ever reply "because I liked it", he would look at you sternly and immediately say - "so what? I like my cat, and my daughters, and smoking... so...?"

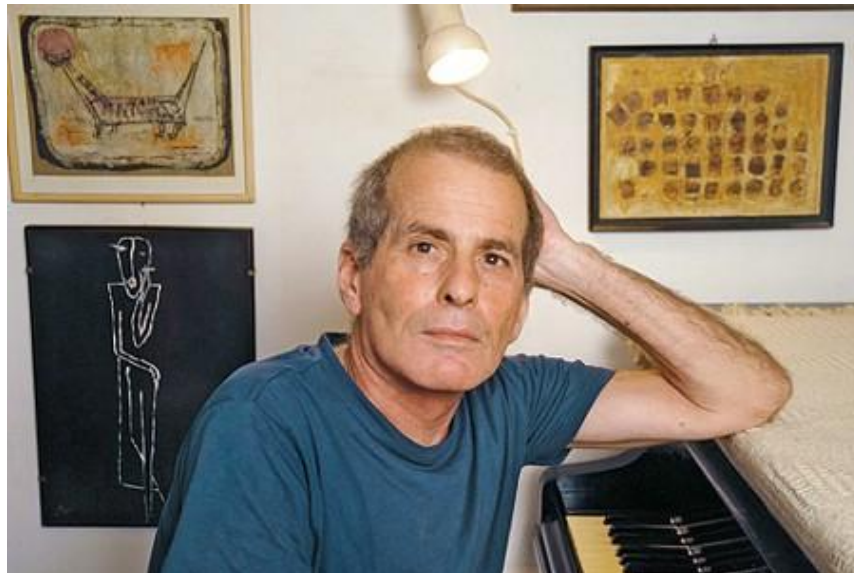
Such outbursts, of which there were many, exemplify best what Shapira is all about. He used to constantly remind me, as we were pouring over a Bach score, that the intention of these lessons was not for me to assume his (Shapira's) own ideas, in the same manner it would be quite odd for me to assume Bach's. The intention was to study carefully how a great composer such as Bach created his own musical syntax, and remained true to it throughout his oeuvre; then try, at least, to apply the same to my own work, using my own set of self-imposed deterministic 'rules'.

Shapira would almost always add - "if you will not eventually reject my ideas and assume your own, then we have both failed, I as a teacher and you as a student. Your music and ideas must strive to be as recognizable and unique as

your face is to a friend. If we are both walking down the street and your friend thinks that you are I, what progress have we made...?”

It wasn't long before it dawned on me – Shapira wasn't teaching me anything about Bach at all. He was in fact teaching me more about the music I had at that point not yet written.

Almost 10 years have passed since those smoky sessions in Shapira's studio, and nowadays we meet as friends and colleagues, who are at ease with one another. Our conversations encompass so many other topics that recalling the days when we spoke of nothing but Bach is almost impossible. However, I cannot help but think what a gift it was to have met him, especially every time I occasion upon the theme of a Bach fugue I don't know, and almost instinctively assume – if this is what the theme is like, the *stretto* will surely be slow...



2.

One might realize that Shapira has always had a love/hate relationship with European music and tradition. On one side, it is this fertile musical ground that he has nourished himself on. On the other, Shapira could never see himself as a part of Europe. Well first off, he wasn't. He was born and bred in Israel; the far Levant, and certainly not Europe!

Shapira was raised in Israel of the 50s and 60s, where a macabre musical practice was taking form: Immigrants, all of which were educated in Europe, were attempting to impose Bartok's revolution of Hungarian folk music, on that

of Israel. Alas, Israel did not yet have folklore, as it was never a unified culture, so the same composers went on to invent what was referred to as the Mediterranean Stream. The latter style can be summed up thus (with changing geographical variables): A musical Jew, raised in Berlin, educated in Paris, evicted to Palestine (if he was lucky!), applying all of the above to supposed Arab music, which he knows nothing of. Now if that's not enough to give you the shingles, by all means, seek that music out and it surely will.

Shapira claims to have always been disturbed by this apparent inner conflict: Composers trying to impose the culture of the continent from which they were evicted, onto a new, desert society. Not only that, but also to 'borrow' along the line some cultural attributes from their Arab neighbours as a means of creating an historical folklore.

Shapira, like most of the Israelis of his generation, had lost great parts of his family to WWII. And indeed, nothing vexes Shapira more than the young European composers and artists of his generation, who immersed as reactionaries, but would prove unable to let go of their traditions, which he saw as violent, and deadly.

These traditions, as he sees it, manifest in a constant search for beauty coupled with order, a cultural ideal that Shapira associates with xenophobia that leads to violent madness. This also explains the aggressive, dry and shambolic nature of Shapira's own music, which he often refers to as Israeli music, Hebrew speaking music, or desert music.

Consequently, Shapira is also one of the most vocal critics of Israeli politics. One of his pieces was even banned from Israeli radio performances due to its criticism of illegal settlement activity. All the same, he is convinced that his art is teeming with Israeli characteristics, and believes himself to be one of the forefathers of what will be heralded one day as true Israeli culture. It is not a chance occurrence, I think, that Shapira was the youngest ever composer to be awarded the Israel Prize - the highest honour bestowed upon an artist in that country.

Regardless, the avid listener and Israeli contemporary music aficionado will not be able to deny the fact that Shapira was, luckily not anymore, one of the only true modernist composers of his generation. As such, he chose to pick up the musical discourse vis-à-vis European and American composers of his time, rather than take on, as did most his contemporaries, the local Mediterranean/folk/Mahler-induced style.

So as you see here – a sea of contradictions, which to me, exemplify best the ever-present conflict of the artist living in a province.

However, perhaps it is this anecdote, which Shapira himself enjoys recounting, that can most poignantly manifest his views about the European topic: The Israeli poet [Oded Sverdlick](#), whom one of his poems Shapira set to music, had programmed this same electronic piece, Tsipor (bird), at a [PEN](#) conference in Lisbon.

Amongst the attendees was the free Ivory Coast's first president, [Félix Houphouët-Boigny](#), a poet himself. As the conference concluded, Houphouët-Boigny marched up to Sverdlick in order to congratulate him for having programmed the piece, and perhaps receive some more information regarding the composer. Houphouët-Boigny chose to open the conversation with a funny little remark: "I liked the piece," he said, "because one could immediately hear that it was not European music..."

3.

Shapira recounted to me once, that at the Rubin Academy in Tel-Aviv of the 60s, teachers encouraged students to follow the compositional routes of Schoenberg (serialism), Bartok (national folklore) or Stravinsky (neo-classicism). Shapira recalls that none of these avenues resonated in him, and even though he had not yet developed his unique compositional style, he knew that following the pre-determined path of others was not the path he need follow.

Finishing his degree, Shapira ventured upon the composition of a few short pieces, and was concerned at discovering that he was constantly recomposing his education rather than inventing. Disconcerted, he took almost 10 years off composition, during which he dedicated himself to the study of Bach's musical language, and teaching.

His first pieces immersed in the late 70s, ushering-in a new style deriving its force from the contemporary music Shapira finally realized he related to:

"Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartok? This music meant absolutely nothing to me. They represented an era past, to which my teachers could perhaps relate. I

chose, if anything, to argue with those composers, but realized that even that was not relevant. The composers I should have been arguing with were Stockhausen, Boulez, Berio, Reich; these were the voices of my time, whose music I didn't agree with either, but who were at least relevant..."

"... I believe that my only compositional reference, if any, could have been the post-war European composers. They were able to understand the tragedy, but decided to continue with the tradition of beautification. Hence my ongoing musical argument with them..."

The music department at the Haifa University decided to honor Shapira, its most prominent professor, with a concert on the occasion of his 60th birthday. The now disbanded New Israeli String Quartet, performed some pieces of his, including *String Trio*, written for his graduation from the Rubin Academy in 1968.

Shapira mentioned to me that students at the time were allowed to venture upon an original composition only at the conclusion of their studies, and after having proved proficiency in past techniques and pastiche. The trio was performed in an official concert on which some of his teachers' music was programmed as well. Shapira still recalls with noticeable glee the confused and perturbed faces of his tutors as they were listening to the first original composition from one of their top students.

Having personally heard the same piece almost 40 years later was quite a shock: A short, two and a half minute gesture, revealing much of what will become the style of Israel's most delightfully extreme composer.

Listen to my radio broadcast, An Hour, with [Arie Shapira \(pt. 1\)](#) & [Arie Shapira \(pt. 2\)](#)