

## Totalitarian Tendencies in Music Education: The Israeli Case

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The call for papers on the theme of 'Music traditions in totalitarian systems' opened with the following concise description:

In totalitarian systems, music traditions have been subjected to many forms of pressure to realise specific social projects. Due to the processes of selection and reduction imposed by social, political and cultural institutions, traditional music takes on new meanings and functions, helping to create the new musical forms and genres which, from the point of view of the totalitarian systems, best fulfil its political, social and educational functions.

At the center of the statement, then, stands the function that music fulfils in society. Since every human society has what it recognizes as its music, the musical phenomenon is an integral part of human social nature. The call for papers assumes that totalitarian systems manipulate music traditions for their own purposes, that is, divert these traditions from their natural functions and turn them into a tool for achieving 'new meanings and functions', according to their specific ideologies.

While I have no quarrel with this statement as such, I would like to suggest that this admittedly well-accepted view may require further introspection, amplification and possible re-definition. Consider the following scenario:

As a result of fully democratic elections, a new government comes into power in a non-totalitarian, democratic country, say Britain, Australia, the United States, or my own country, Israel. A new government is formed. The

new Minister of Education reshuffles the top echelon of his ministry, bringing in a new general manager. Some new chief professional supervisors are appointed, among them a new national supervisor of music education. She is an experienced music educator, critical of what has been going on in music education in the last decade and armed with strong convictions as to the direction national music education should take. Being a new broom, she sets out with energy and enthusiasm to turn her vision of national music education into reality. After a period of study and preparation, new songsters are printed to serve as source materials for music teachers in elementary schools across the nation. They are widely distributed and reach every music teacher in the country. These songsters are the result of effective committee work. The committee was naturally appointed by the new national music supervisor. The songs selected are overwhelmingly in a style and tradition of folksongs favored by the supervisor. Other songs, in other traditions or styles, are hardly represented. The supervisor herself might have written a persuasive introduction, addressing music teachers, in which she explained the ideology behind the project, and strongly recommended the assimilation of the songs in the school curriculum.

I hope my point is now clear: the pressures which 'help to create new forms and functions' for musical traditions, are not unique to totalitarian systems. They could very well appear, and even thrive, in democratic political systems. The reasons and convictions for implementing the pressures may vary, but the end result may still be very similar, if not identical: the pressures applied to musical traditions may indeed lead to changes in the meanings and functions of old musical traditions.

In themselves, totalitarianism and democracy are merely two theoretical concepts of social-political organization. Their realization, however, gives rise to a bewildering range of shades, variations and combinations of the theoretical concepts. This is why discussing the influence of 'totalitarian' or 'democratic' regimes on a certain cultural activity is meaningful only within the context of the specific social-political blend prevailing in the country in which this activity takes place. Even though Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and

Stalin's USSR were all totalitarian regimes, they differed in their resolve, extent and success in controlling artistic production (Arieli-Horowitz 2009: 29).

Although the scenario I've just described could materialize in most democratic frameworks, it is more likely to appear in non-totalitarian political formations in which nationalist goals are high on the agenda. Among these, political entities struggling to achieve formal independence are especially interesting to follow, for in them many educational aspects are channelled towards national, even nationalistic goals. In such national formations, manipulating existing musical traditions or even creating new, instant myths are hardly surprising. After all, the emotive power of music has long ago been recognised as a highly effective, unifying social force.

Even though the attempts to attain, and implementations of, educational and artistic aims vary considerably among totalitarian regimes, their central goal of indoctrination is always clear. On the other hand, defining the aims of education and their means of implementation in a democratic society is a more complex issue. Even if the stated goal of practically all democracies is to produce free-thinking, rational and critical citizens, it is questionable to what extent this goal is achievable, and whether the transmission of knowledge can or should be totally divorced from values and opinions. It has been repeatedly shown not only that ideology regularly creeps into humanistic areas of study such as history, literature, art and music, but inadvertently even into the supposedly 'objective' life sciences.

### **The case of pre-state Israel**

Israel achieved statehood in 1948. In the three decades preceding the establishment of the state, a rich variety of euphemisms and clichés were employed to describe and promote an educational approach that today would be characterized as outright indoctrination. Among the more frequently used phrases employed at the time one finds 'education in the spirit of the homeland', 'shaping national consciousness', 'fostering a preferred cultural style' and the 'educational ideal of the new Jew'. Hayim N. Bialik, our 'national'

poet and a great partisan of Zionist-national indoctrination, preferred to call it 'sub-conscious ideological learning'. While it is true that elementary-school children do not yet possess fully-formed conceptions of time and place and learn best by experiential rather than purely cognitive approaches, it is nevertheless obvious that the sayings quoted here promote nothing less than brain-washing and emotional conditioning, direct and indirect, that are foisted on the young in the name of the ideology they serve. The statement of Y. Tabenkin, a central figure in the influential labour and kibbutz movement, is a representative example. In 1942 he declared: 'Striving for a non-tendentious school [...] is a worthless goal. A school of indifference, of objectivity, of rationalism, is not a school in our movement' (Almog 1997: 55). Such statements ought to be considered in the context of Marxist criticism against 'objective', disengaged education and against 'l'art pour l'art' which in the 1920s gave rise to extensive debates concerning the positions educators and artists should/should not express vis-à-vis central social issues.

Under the British mandate, Jewish Palestine enjoyed considerable freedom in educational matters. Throughout that period (1917–1948), great efforts were invested in instilling in the young the basic tenets of Zionist-socialist national ideology which was hegemonic at the time. The influential political left of the Hebrew Zionist movement felt a great affinity with the Soviet Union, and admired its effort to shape 'the new Soviet man'. Anton S. Makarenko's *The Pedagogical Poem* (1938) was translated into Hebrew and became an inspiring best-seller, and the stylistic earmarks of Soviet 'Socialist Realism' were adopted by Hebrew authors and painters and adapted to their unique ideological desiderata.

Russian songs were always popular in Jewish Palestine since most of the Zionist immigrants hailed from eastern Europe, many of them from Russia. The Second World War brought along a new wave of Russian songs, among them those celebrating the victorious Red Army and its heroic generals. Translated into Hebrew by first-rate Hebrew poets, these songs were sung enthusiastically in the youth movements and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I found such popular Russian songs even in the songster of 'Beytar', the revisionist, right-wing youth movement.

Hebrew youth movements, especially the left-wing 'Hashomer Hatza'ir' (the Young Guard) preached and practiced attitudes and doctrines honed in the USSR, where the young were indoctrinated in the Komsomol to strive for the creation of a social reality diametrically opposed to that of Czarist Russia. Likewise, in Jewish Palestine, the pioneering youth movements instilled in their young members the revolutionary ideals of the abandonment of the diaspora and rejuvenation in Palestine by means of a new individual and communal Jewish life. The 'new Hebrew man' had many points of similarity with the 'new Soviet man'. In both communities, the rejection of rationalism – a fundamental tenet of western liberalism – was a direct outcome of recognizing its ineffectiveness in achieving the desired educational national goals.

This brief account of historical-cultural background is provided here as a necessary context for understanding the educational activities within which Hebrew folksongs played a major role.

The Jewish National Fund (henceforth JNF) was an important Zionist organization founded at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the purpose of raising funds for purchasing land from Arab landlords and for settling on it Jewish pioneers in new communal-agricultural entities (known as *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*). The loaded, religiously connotated term 'redemption' was widely employed to describe this act. 'Redemption of the land', 'redemption of the Jewish people from their shabby diaspora fate' – these were typical slogans upon which generations of Eretz-Israeli-born children had been raised. Youngsters were taught – some would say 'programmed' or 'conditioned' – to identify with this interpretation of national redemption and to internalize it as the sole solution to what was known as 'the Jewish problem'. In a recent book entitled *An agent of Zionist Propaganda. The Jewish National Fund 1924–1947*, the working methods of one of Israel's most revered institutions of nation-building are shown to be largely based on indoctrinating the young generation to the Zionist cause (Bar-Gal, 1999). It must be added, however, that in those pre-Second World War days the term 'propaganda' did not yet have the pejorative connotations it acquired during and after the war as a result of its gross abuse by both the Nazi and the Soviet regimes. On the

contrary, the JNF had an active section officially entitled 'The Propaganda Department' which sought to spread the national message by producing and distributing pamphlets, photos and new songs celebrating Zionist resettlement in Palestine. In order to widely disseminate such Hebrew songs among Jewish communities around the world, this department produced postcards featuring the notation and the full text of a song instead of a picture. The caption of Figure 11.1 (side B) is 'from the songs of the homeland'.

In the early 1920s, a few enterprising teachers created the 'teachers' council for the Jewish National Fund', and sought to develop a comprehensive *experiential* program of study in order to impart national, ideological messages through emotional identification. The concrete means for achieving this goal – songs, dances, stories, holiday ceremonies – did not exist; they had to be created from scratch. Hence, a fast-growing repertory of national educational materials was at first written, composed and taught by a fairly small group of dedicated teachers, and later disseminated with the institutional assistance of the JNF, the Jewish Agency, the pioneering youth movements, and, in its early years, even the IDF, the Israeli army. I stress again the fact that this was initially an act of purely voluntary organization, fed solely by the ideological conviction of individuals within a society largely homogeneous in its national aspirations. It was a bottom-up movement, not a top-down dictate.

The most remarkable feature of the first songs composed in Palestine was their language – Hebrew. Kindergarten and elementary school teachers were in dire need for songs in the Biblical tongue which for millennia was used only for prayer but was now miraculously brought back to life by an accelerated process of renewal through daily usage. These songs were meant to fulfil both everyday functions and festive occasions, especially holidays whose religious traditional content underwent radical transformations in order to make them relevant to the secular ideology of pioneering Zionism. New Hebrew texts were fitted to European children's tunes or to similar, locally composed melodies. Towards the end of the 1920s, educators and musicians have begun to express growing dissatisfaction with the sung repertory and objected to the wide-ranging use of such foreign-style tunes, even though they were sung in Hebrew. This was the moment of birth of the new mu-



sical style of Hebrew songs. In full accordance with Zionist ideology, the new style, developed by a small group of folk composers, turned its back on many tenets of the European musical tradition and in turn opened up to the orient. Many of the musical characteristics of the new style were either adopted from surrounding Arabic music, or from Jewish oriental Biblical cantillation. They included a small range, mainly stepwise motion, movement within tetrachordal and pentachordal formations and a clear preference of modes over the major-minor system. The early songs of Yedidya Gorochov-Admon (1894–1985) were the first fruits of the new style. His 'Eliezer and Rivka' ('Eliezer and Rebecca'), whose text paraphrases a Biblical scene (Genesis, ch. 24) is a typical example (see Figure 11.2).

ח. אליעזר ורביקה  
ליון קמניס

המנגינה: יודייה אדמון

נַעֲמָה וְסָמַר	מִן־בְּתוּלֹת	הָאָרֶץ	וְעָמְרָה	וְרִבְקָה	וְלֵאָנָה
וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה
וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה	וְנָעֳמָה

Figure 11.2 Y. Admon, 'Eliezer and Rivka'



As this example makes clear, the new melodic style is best sung unaccompanied. Western functional harmony does not fit it well at all. Yet, the European harmonic conception, which the new songs suddenly rendered inappropriate, was ingrained in the psyche of members of the Jewish-Palestinian community, most of whom were born and raised in eastern Europe. Nevertheless, they were now expected not only to learn these songs and adopt them as their instantly-formed folk musical tradition, but also to pass them on to their children. Popular chordal instruments such as the guitar and accordion continued to be used, to the dismay of the new style activists; these diluted both the oriental effect and the musical intentions of the composers. Admon himself had no illusions concerning the way his songs were to be performed:

People originating from the west will hear oriental songs harmonically, according to the manner to which their ears are accustomed. An oriental song [in the new style] will be distorted by inappropriate harmonization foisted upon it (Admon 1942).

It is only against this backcloth of an – admittedly over-simplified – complex cultural-historical context that the authoritarian tendencies of early Israeli music educators and folk-music activists gain coherence. They were highly aware of the ideological potency of a simple children's song as an effective means for instilling in the young the values of pioneering Zionism, and for combatting foreign musical influences (mainly western popular music) they considered harmful and even decadent.

Binyamin Omer (1902–1976), a kibbutz music educator and a composer of songs in the new style, wrote the following in a brief 1948 pamphlet entitled 'The aims of our music education':

Musical activities have an important role in providing an emotional foundation for national and socialist belief, in deepening the link with the land, with the homeland, with the working class both here and abroad. We have found that even in the ideological realm, the power of emotional influence is greater than that of pure reason. If this is true in adults, it is doubly so in children (Omer 1948: 230)

Omer devoted himself to composing mainly children's songs because he was convinced of the supreme importance of nurturing a

musical mother tongue, by means of the nurse singing to babies and the kindergarten teacher singing to her children [...] songs engrave essential motives which sink into the depth of the soul and determine the nature of human musical experience for life (Omer 1944: 23).

Like Admon before him, Omer was painfully aware that

the song of our diaspora is ingrained in our souls deeper than our diaspora tongue [Yiddish]. In spite of our great efforts to create new musical dialects of our own, the music of our old country still reigns supreme (Omer 1944: 23).

Omer and other cultural agents of the new folk style were convinced they should not sit back and wait for the slow natural processes of creating a folk musical tradition to take its course. They believed in shaping reality along desired ideological lines. Accordingly, in the introduction to one of the songsters he edited, he wrote:

[In this songster] we did not fall prey to the pretty song, and many beautiful songs which could be well-liked by the audience were rejected because they were found unworthy to serve as a foundation for a song repertory of a Hebrew community seeking to renew its culture. . . .<sup>2</sup>

The need for creating and disseminating a new 'musical mother tongue' and his acute awareness of the harmonic barrier blocking smooth acceptance of the new folk style, led Omer to his radical operative conclusion:

As a desired goal, I require an exposure of 95% to originally composed music for children below elementary school age. Even at school age, we should differentiate between the lower and upper grades. In all grades we should encourage and develop an intimate close feeling towards our original music – on the occasion of holidays, parties etc., – as this music expresses our mental strivings and emotions in original, rather than borrowed foreign ways (Omer 1942).

Omer, a musical educator and admirer of western art music, nevertheless recommended suppressing the exposure of young children to the musical heritage he admired in order to enable the newly invented style of Israeli folk-songs to take root in the souls of the young. This is indeed a strong medicine, and it could have been offered, let alone administered, only in a community convinced that ends justify the means. Indeed, his educational ideas were a

<sup>2</sup> B. Omer, 'Hag umoed' [Holiday and Festival].

logical extension of his full identification with the thesis that the kibbutz is a total communal framework where social concerns always take precedence over individual considerations.

Omer did not concoct this extreme educational recipe out of his head. Being attentive to international developments in music education, especially within a European national context, he was well-aware of Bartók's and Kodály's long-standing project of collecting, analyzing and disseminating the Hungarian folksong legacy. Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967) strongly advocated basing the musical education of Hungarian kindergarten children on their folksongs because 'between ages three and seven their [musical] fates have already been decided. That is where intervention is required' (Kodály 1974: 149). When Kodály placed the term 'mother tongue' at the center of early education, he meant both spoken native language and musical language. Moreover, Kodály frontally attacked parents of the upper Hungarian classes who were inclined to hire foreign-born, usually German, governesses for their children, wanting their young to learn thereby an important European language in addition to their own national tongue: 'the basic layer of the soul cannot be made from two different substances. A person can have only one mother tongue, musically too' (Kodály 1974: 131). This was based on his belief that learning spoken language and learning music share the same cognitive process.

It is evident that Omer, the Israeli music educator, was influenced by Kodály's ideas, and adopted his approach to national indoctrination through music. It was Kodály who stated that 'at the kindergarten age, the implantation of subconscious elements of being Hungarian and then their gradual development are our duties' (Kodály 1974: 130). Furthermore, he claimed that 'folk traditions, first of all with their singing games and children songs, are the best foundations for subconscious national features' (Kodály 1974: 131). Likewise, Omer's attack on the foreign repertory of songs sung in Israel reminds one of Kodály's similar attacks on foreign – mainly German – songs sung in Hungarian kindergartens. Because Omer acted in the revolutionary, pioneering zeitgeist of pre-state Israel, he was willing to employ extreme measures in implementing these ideas. Differences in nuances notwithstanding,

ing, the clear fingerprints of ideological indoctrination are obvious in the statements and deeds of both music educators. It is worth recalling that indoctrination is widely understood today as an authoritarian intervention in the life of other human beings, akin to brainwashing and taming, and that its aim is to establish control over the contents of their consciences and to shape their habits and beliefs. From today's liberal point of view, such approaches as those of Kodály and Omer – and they are only the tip of the iceberg – do not fare too well, to say the least. However, their thoughts and acts must be viewed against the background of their era, not ours.

Similar to Omer's was the position of Emanuel Amiran (1909–1993), who, in addition to being one of the founders of the new Israeli folksong, stood for many years at the helm of national music education. Like Omer, he too saw in the quick development of a new folksong tradition a national mission of the first order. In order to achieve this goal he was ready to forgo the slow, normal development of Israeli musical folklore from its roots up, and instead advocated a national musical folk style dictated from above by appointed cultural commissars.

This issue of artificially and quickly creating a folk repertory of songs and dances has occupied many Israeli cultural activists. Those objecting to such measures and advocating a slow, natural evolution of a new tradition, made use of Stalin's notorious statement that the artist ought to be the 'engineer of the human soul'.<sup>3</sup> Amiran, who in general was not as extreme in his political-ideological positions as Omer, nevertheless hinted at that statement when he declared in 1966:

We have learned through experience that works of art which are supposedly the fruit of a 'spiritual laboratory' quickly become true folk assets if they are constructed upon natural, healthy foundations. Just as a life-giving medicine is injected into a person's blood and causes him to recover, so cultural, artistic products are capable of being absorbed in the nation's blood, to flow in it naturally and to fertilize the nation's spirit (Amiran 1974: 246).

In order to efficiently disseminate the newly invented songs, Amiran proposed ideas such as frequent broadcasting of selected songs on the (then) sin-

<sup>3</sup> Made in the 1934 convention of Soviet authors.

gle radio station, or teaching a new song during each and every intermission of a film screening (Amiran 1974: 251).<sup>4</sup> He further advocated the creation of professional committees 'that will strive to enhance good taste in both adults and children', and will 'defend Israeli audiences against shoddy tunes and saccharine-style melodies aping the mundane style of cheap recordings. A great responsibility rests on the shoulders of those doing the sacred work of instilling culture in the nation! Even more so in our generation, the generation of national revival and integration of the exiles' (Amiran 1974: 250). Amiran's convictions and their forceful implementation inspired my semi-fictional example of the newly appointed national supervisor of music education referred to at the beginning of this article. Typically for his time, Amiran never considered his position problematic, and rejected anticipated attacks of 'Zhdanovism'.<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, I would like to re-phrase my opening argument: once someone attains a central position of influence, it generally speaking ceases to matter how they have gotten there; in both totalitarian and democratic setups they will have the authority and the power to put into effect whatever they deem important, at least for the duration of their tenure. If they are the determined national supervisors of music education, they could exert significant influence on existing musical traditions and influence their fate for years to come. The Israeli case, reported here in necessary brevity, is but one example among many of the wide-ranging authoritarian social or political frameworks that may have an effect on folk music in non-totalitarian countries.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to the Prime Minister, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> Amiran referred to Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov (1896–1948), the influential cultural commissar of the USSR and the relentless backer of 'Socialist Realism'.

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