

VOICE FOR ISRAEL

Violinist Itamar Zorman's new recording highlights the transition from European to Middle Eastern influences in the works of Paul Ben-Haim, as he tells Gavin Dixon

Itamar Zorman (b.1985) is a star on the Israeli music scene. The Tel Aviv-born violinist was joint winner of the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 2011 and has since established an international career as soloist and chamber musician. His new album, *Evocation*, focuses on his compatriot Paul Ben-Haim (1897–1984), a pivotal figure in the history of Israeli music who is now coming to wider attention abroad.

The Ben-Haim album is Zorman's second. On his first, *Portrait* (Profil PH 14039), he performed works by French, Austrian and German composers: Messiaen, Schubert, Chausson, Hindemith and Brahms. 'I'm really curious about all kinds of music,' he says. 'In French music, I am fascinated by the colours the violin can achieve. Back in my youth I had violin lessons with Joseph Steiger, the pianist for Mischa Elman. He was always saying, "More colours, find more colours!" – and that stayed with me. In German works, I try to capture the rhythmic essence and the clarity of the music.'

The new album is a personal statement, presenting music that Zorman has been exploring for many years. 'I fell in love with the music of Ben-Haim when I was about 19 or 20. I played a late piece of his (from 1973) called Prelude for string quartet. Somehow it really got to me. It combines a folk-like prayer tune with a very elegant sense of harmony.' But the recording was a team effort as well, Zorman collaborating with pianist Amy Yang for the chamber works and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under conductor Philippe Bach for the orchestral pieces. 'This was a very



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special project for me, and it meant a lot that these musicians made such beautiful music. They really played their hearts out,' says Zorman. He adds his thanks, too, to the Borletti-Buitoni Trust, which supported the project and brought the musicians together, and to Andrew Keener for his sensitive work in producing the recording.

Ben-Haim was born in Munich and was originally named Paul Frankenburger. He excelled as a pianist and conductor, rising to the position of first Kapellmeister of the

Augsburg Opera. Having been expelled from that post by the Nazi regime, in 1933 he moved to Mandatory Palestine, where he changed his name to the more Hebrew 'Ben-Haim' and spent the remainder of his life teaching and composing, striving to create a new vernacular for Israeli classical music.

'He had already written a lot of music in Germany, under the name Paul Frankenburger,' explains Zorman, 'so the classical tradition, especially German, was really a part of him.' But in the Middle East, he was quickly exposed to new influences. 'He was affected by what he heard around him; he couldn't avoid it. So when he heard Arabic songs in the street, they found their way into his writing.'

Zorman has programmed the recording in (roughly) chronological order, allowing the listener to hear the gradual changes in Ben-Haim's music – from his German roots to his deeper exploration of Middle Eastern styles. 'I really liked the idea that in the first piece, *Evocation* – a *poème* for violin and orchestra dated 1942 – there is very little of the Middle East. It is in the tradition of Bach. You don't hear any Middle Eastern scales – it could have been written in Europe, basically.' But in the following works, Ben-Haim's style begins to change. 'He was collaborating with a great Yemenite folk singer and ethnomusicologist named Bracha Zefira. He wrote arrangements for her and began to discover melodies of the Middle East.' One of the songs appears on the CD in a version for violin and piano: 'Ben-Haim calls it *Berceuse sfaradite* (1945). The melody is Middle Eastern, but the harmony sounds quite French. There is a recording of the piece by



Violinist Itamar Zorman and pianist Amy Yang 'played their hearts out' on the recording

Itzhak Perlman, so it is quite well known.' In the later *Three Songs without Words* (1951), again for violin and piano, the harmonic orientation is quite different. 'He makes the melodies the basis of the harmony, and they are not quite based on Western scales.

'That continues in a larger form in the concerto,' Zorman explains. The Violin Concerto (1960) is the major work in the programme; and here, true to form, Ben-Haim combines a Classical three-movement structure with various Middle Eastern styles. 'He had a hard time figuring out what to do with quartertones,' Zorman explains. 'Quartertones weren't part of his musical thinking, but the music of the region employs them.' His solution, demonstrated in the Violin Concerto, is to alternate between major and minor seconds, to approach the sound of the quartertones in Arabic scales. But the music still retains strong links with European traditions. 'When I play the concerto with a European orchestra, they get it easily. To them it is essentially German music.' European audiences also

connect with the work. 'The first time this happened, I was pleasantly surprised, but the more it happens, the more sense it makes. In Europe, people understand how this music works.'

Ben-Haim had a long relationship with the violin. It was his first instrument as a child, although from the age of eleven he focused his attentions on the piano. But a very late work, *Three Etudes* (1981) for solo violin, also presented here, finds the composer returning to the instrument. 'It shows that the violin had a special meaning for him – the fact that he was coming back to the instrument from the very beginning of his life for one of the last pieces he completed.' The *Three Etudes*, along with *Evocation*, appear here as premiere recordings.

The disc concludes with *Toccata*, an early piano piece (1943) arranged by the violinist's father, Moshe Zorman. In fact, it was a collaboration, with Itamar writing the violin part and Moshe providing the orchestral accompaniment. 'We thought it would work, because the original piece

emulates the sound of an Arabic stringed instrument called the *qānūn*. There is a repeated-note effect, a sort of bariolage, with open-string notes while the other notes are changing. We wanted something short and brilliant to end the CD – it turned out very well!'

Readers can watch a short video of Zorman discussing Ben-Haim's music at bit.ly/2BftFPa

WORKS Paul Ben-Haim *Evocation* (Yizkor) (premiere); *Three Songs without Words*; Violin Concerto; *Three Etudes* (premiere); *Berceuse sfaradite*; *Toccata* (from *Five Pieces for piano*, op.34 (arr. vn and orch by Moshe and Itamar Zorman)
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