

Avner Bahat

OEDOEN PARTOS 1907-1977

Oedoen Partos was a pioneer of Israeli concert music and among the few Israeli composers who had won it international acclaim. From his arrival in Eretz Israel (Palestine) in October 1938 and until his death almost forty years later he played an extremely important role in the musical life of the country as composer, performer, teacher and organizer.

Oedoen Partos was born in Budapest on October 1st, 1907, to a Jewish upper middle class family. His father was a furniture dealer, his mother a music lover and amateur pianist. A child prodigy, Partos began to study the violin at the age of 8 with Eugen Blau (later known as Eugene Ormandy); at the age of 12 he entered the Liszt Academy of Music where he studied violin with Eugen Hubay and became the youngest member of Zoltan Kodaly's composition class (which included at the time Matyas Seiber, Antal Dorati and Geza Fried).

In 1924, at the age of 17, he was appointed concertmaster and violin soloist of the Lucern Orchestra. For the next few years he continued to fill the position of concertmaster with different orchestras in Hungary and Germany, where he lived between the years 1929-1933. After another period in Hungary, he lived for two years in Baku, Azerbaijan, where he taught violin and composition. In 1938 he was invited by Bronislaw Huberman to join the Palestine Symphony Orchestra (later to become the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra) as first violist. Partos accepted and with his move from Europe to Eretz-Israel he also moved from violin to viola, to become one of the world's leading viola players. For eighteen years, until 1956, he led the viola section of the orchestra. He also performed as soloist with the IPO most of the repertoire for viola: Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*, Hindemith's *Der Schwannendreher*, Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* for violin and viola (with Lorand Fenyves) and later in his own concertos for viola and orchestra. Partos was also the leading musician of the Israel Quartet, which included the violinists Lorand Fenyves and his sister Alice, and cellist Laszlo Vincze (and later Thelma Yellin). The Quartet was of the highest quality and toured in the 1940s and 1950s all over Israel, thus setting a very high standard for chamber music playing for its own time and for future generations. At this time he also arranged some works for viola solo with string quartet.

In viola Partos found the real means for profound expression. Although in Europe he developed a successful career as a violinist and had won some prizes, when he turned to the viola, he found that the color and tone of this instrument expressed his innermost feelings far

better. His numerous compositions for viola solo are an important contribution to the world repertoire of the viola.

Partos began composing in his teens, but the only work that remained in his repertoire from the European period is his first string quartet, known as *Concertino* for strings, written in 1932.

Partos was fascinated by the Middle Eastern folk music he encountered for the first time when he came to Eretz-Israel and took up the challenge popular among musicians at the time to achieve coalescence between Eastern and Western music, or rather combine occidental technique with oriental melos. For some years he collaborated with the singer Bracha Zefira and arranged several traditional Yemenite and Sephardic songs for her. At the same time he became established as an outstanding teacher of violin, viola, chamber music and composition. He was one of the founders of the Israel Conservatory and of the Academy of Music of which, in 1951, he was appointed director – a position he held until the end of his life.

In 1956 Partos retired from the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra to allow himself more time for composition. The years 1957-1962 mark the peak of his creativity. He continued composing until his death, although a stroke he suffered in 1972 forced him to stop working for a year. After his recovery, in the four years prior to his death, he wrote some of his finest music. He died on July 6, 1977.

Partos divided his compositions into four periods. The first – up to 1956 – he called "extended tonal" or "Jewish" or "Israeli". The most significant works of this period are *In Memoriam (Yizkor)* for viola and string orchestra (1947), *Song of Praise* – Concerto No.1 for viola and orchestra (1949), *Ein Gev* – Symphonic fantasy for orchestra (1951/52), *Lamentation* (1956) and several choral works, among them *If They Had Locked (Im Ninalu)* 1952) – a rhapsody on Yemenite themes for choir.

The second period – from 1957 to 1960 – Partos called "modal-chromatic". He maintained that the most characteristic works of this period are: *Visions* for flute, piano and strings (1957), *Concerto No.2* for viola and orchestra (1957) and *Maqamat* for flute and strings (1959).

The third period – between 1960 and 1962 – he defined as "dodecaphonic". The main works written in the course of these years are: *Psalms* for string quartet (1960, rev.1970), *Images* for symphony orchestra (1960) and *A Legend* for viola, piano and percussion (1960).

The last period, 1963-1977, Partos defined as "free serialism", a contradictory term that characterizes Partos' attitude throughout his life and work towards any system: he used the

system but never became its slave. It was a useful tool to help put order into his work but was never allowed to limit his creative powers.

To this last period belong some important works: the cantata *Rabat Tsraruni (Many a Time They Afflict Me)* for choir and orchestra (1965), *Nebulae* for woodwind quintet (1966), *Paths – Elegy* for symphony orchestra (1970), *Mizmor* for harp (1975), and the short chamber works of his last year (1977): *Ballad* for piano quartet, *Fantasia* for piano trio and *Invenzione a Tre* for flute, harp and viola.

Throughout these different periods runs the thread of Partos' distinctive style. Though he changed techniques and ideas, his personal style can be traced in all his works from the *Concertino* of 1932 to the *Invenzione* of 1977. Transition from one period to the next was never abrupt or revolutionary but a gradual process in which he developed new means of musical expression.

The most significant early influences in his life as a musician were Bartok and Kodaly, especially in the following two aspects: first, respect for folk music as an art to be studied and used as a source of inspiration for his own compositions; second, in composition technique – developing a personal style not by inventing something new but by enlarging European tonality through exploring different modal, oriental, chromatic and other elements.

Partos grew up in a thoroughly assimilated family and the only Jewish memory of his childhood were rare visits to the synagogue with his grandfather where, as he recalled – "all sang and spoke together" – an allusion to heterophonic sound of Jewish communal worship.

When Partos came to Eretz-Israel he consciously sought his Jewish roots. These he found here in music totally different from the Jewish music of his native land. In an interview in 1968 he confessed: "Israel was a profound challenge to my creativity. First, the feeling of being home as a Jew and then the discovery of the oriental melos – the monophonic melos, without harmony and resisting any harmonic relationship."

In a lecture before American musicians and musicologists in 1964, he described the process as one that affected his generation: "We composers felt that this venerable folklore of the Orient was so much a part of the landscape that it might be the common denominator for a new direction in Israeli music." Classing Israeli composers in groups, he continued: "To the first group belong those composers who tried, consciously or subconsciously, to absorb the elements of oriental material. Among them are Paul Ben-Haim, Alexander Uriah Boskovich, Mordecai Seter and myself."

Partos wove oriental elements into his own musical language not by quoting whole melodies but by internalizing the manner of expression of these elements, or – as he put it – "the phrasing and the gesticulation" of this music.

The musical techniques that Partos used in order to approach the oriental mood were mostly heterophony and improvisation. For him harsh harmonies were not a means in itself but were connected to the Jewish tradition of heterophony, found mainly in synagogue music.

In the 1960s and the 1970s Partos found some interest aleatorics and experimented with it in some of his works. Yet, it was the principle of oriental improvisation that provided the basis of this technique in these compositions.

In the 1950s, serialism ruled European music. Partos was never a worshipper of any fashion. He always studied new music thoroughly and picked out the innovations that appealed to him. Dodecaphony and serialism attracted him just because they were so non-European. As he said in the 1968 interview: "I find the combination with serialism very useful for the expression of the Oriental melos and of biblical Cantillation".

For a few years Partos employed the dodecaphonic technique in some of his best compositions (for example in his *Psalms*, 1960). He used it, however, just as he would use any other technique – not fanatically, but musically and undogmatically. The best way to use it, he found, was by breaking two of its most important rules: 1) repetition of tones within the row – three to six of them, used as motifs or melodic cells; 2) duplication by octaves, thus creating a hierarchy of sounds.

Partos never succumbed to formality. His ear was his prime judge. He looked for expression and explained: "I cannot write unless I am truly stimulated. Construction on the paper does not interest me. The construction as a means, a tool for expressing something – that is really interesting".

Partos did not pamper his audience and that may be the reason why his music lives on in the concert halls on its own merits. Both performers and the public respond to its sincerity and expressiveness.

(Based on Avner Bahat's book in Hebrew **Oedoen Partos, his Life and Work**, published by Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1984)