

THE INTERNATIONAL HARP CONTEST IN ISRAEL HAS TURNED 53 YEARS OLD

H a n n a P a l m o n (Jerusalaim)

Every three years, in the fall, Israelis get a rare chance to listen to the next generation of outstanding harpists, who come to Tel Aviv to take part at the **Israel international Harp Contest**; this year, on November 22nd, the 18th international harp contest set off to its two weeks course. The concert hall of the music center in Jaffa – in which the opening ceremony and recital took place – wasn't the best choice for the event and the contest: many concert halls in Israel can serve the special acoustics of the harp sound in a better way; the limited budget has doomed the opening event to modesty, but at the same time – to a spontaneous freshness: for example, the opening speeches were short and informal; the musical director of the contest – **Judith Lieber** who had been the first harpist of the Israeli Philharmonic in 1963-2000 – congratulated the contestants from her seat among them and not from the stage; and only the flags of the contestants' countries decorated the stage itself.

But, musically speaking, the 26 contestants – who had arrived at Israel during a war time, before the ceasefire was announced – had come to take part in one of the most appreciated and fastidious harp contests in the world. The first contest took place in 1959 – as a fulfillment of a third creative idea of **Aharon Zvi Propes** (1904-1978), the director of special events at the Israeli ministry of tourism since 1949; his two previous cultural initiatives were the “Zimriya” (World Assembly of Choirs in Jerusalem) and the Israel Festival – both still alive and well. Propes chose to found a harp contest because until 1959 there had been no international harp contest in the world, and because the Jews (like most of the other peoples of the world...) claim to be the first “promoters” of that therapeutic and sleep-inducing musical instrument – at least in the hands of **David Ben Yishai**; David, the young and musical shepherd, was urgently called to play his “Kinor” for **King Saul** and soothe the king's agitated soul, which he did very successfully – although God Himself had doomed Saul to bursts of despondency (see book of Samuel 1, chapter 16).

“**Kinor**” means a violin in Modern Hebrew, but according to many archeological discoveries the biblical word “kinor” meant a lyre-harp. The Hebrew name of the Sea of Galilee – “**Kineret**” – was derived from the word “kinor”, because its shape brings to mind the shape of a harp.



A “Kinor” on a coin from the years of Bar-Kokhva revolt (132-135 A.D.)

The bible attributes the invention of the harp (“kinor”) and flute (“ugav”); the biblical meaning of “ugav” – flute – is different from its modern musical meaning: organ) to **Jubal**, Cain’s descendant. The biblical references to the harp are numerous, among them:

1. the description of prophets performing their spiritual “task” – in the first book of Samuel, chapter 10:

“As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, timbrels, pipes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying”.

2. the highly respected role of the harp in the orchestra at King Solomon’s Temple (as described in Chronicles 2, chapter 5); there’s an assumption that many harpists and lyrists played in that orchestra, in order to “amplify” the gentle and soft harp’s and lyre’s sounds; the cymbals, trumpets and shofars were most probably used only to emphasize specific points – like the ending of a prayer’s “chapter”.

3. The moving description of the Israelites hanging their harps on weeping willows, after being exiled to Babylon around 600 BC. This symbolic expression of mourning and pain has an additional aspect, as mentioned in Psalms 137:

“Upon the willows in the midst thereof we hanged up our harps

For there they that led us captive asked of us words of song, and our tormentors asked of us mirth: 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'

How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land?”

So, the Israelites hanged their harps on weeping willows in order to be excused from singing joyous

songs for their captors.

Talking about willows: the composition “**On Willows and Birches**” for harp and symphony orchestra, by the American composer **John Williams**, has been performed in the closing concert of this year’s contest by the three contestants who have reached the final stage; It has been an Israel premiere of that work, which John Williams composed as a gift for (and to be performed by) the former principal harpist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra - **Ann Hobson Pilot**, who had retired in 2009 after 40 years with the orchestra. “On Willows and Birches” is in two contrasting movements, and the meditative “On Willows” movement has been inspired by the biblical description “Upon the willows in the midst thereof we hanged up our harps”.

The Israelites’ harps hanging on a willow –
a page from the Chludov Psalter
(Constantinople, most probably from the
9th century A.D.)



The history of the harp

The history of the harp is fascinating, considering its evolution – from a bow and arrow to the current “model” of the double-action concert harp and the new MIDI harp.

One of the earliest discoveries of musical instrument shows a harp-like instrument on rock paintings in France, dating back to 15,000 BC. Pieces of a real 5,000-years-old harp and three lyres from the **royal cemetery of Ur** in Mesopotamia were found in 1929 by the team of the British archeologist **Sir Charles Leonard Woolley**. Illustrations of such angled harps (with 12-15 strings) were discovered in a Babylonian temple, and they show that the angled Sumerian harp was played “upside down”, with the tuning pegs on its lower arm. later depictions (coins, seals, murals in tomb chambers, bas-reliefs, drawings on vases, statuettes, etc.) of arched harps without a front pillar, and of angular ones with or without a front pillar - were found in Persia, Egypt, Phoenicia and the

Cycladic islands in the Aegean Sea (3,000 BC and on), and of lyre-harps with two vertical arms – in Samaria (dated to around 3,000 BC) and Greece (around 600 BC).

A Cycladian statuette - 2,800-2,700 BC



The Egyptian harps were mainly arched (bow) harps without a front pillar; one type was a small harp – played while being held on the arm or the shoulder, and a later type – from the New Kingdom – was as high as 2 meters, played by a seated or standing up musicians (women too). Many drawings and engravings show such large boat-like harps, highly ornamental, with an animal’s head, played by harpists - amidst a bigger moving procession of musicians or as members of an entertaining “band” in front of Egyptian kings:



Homer (8th century BC) wrote the following description in the ninth book of his **Iliad**:

**“Amused, at ease, the god-like man they found
Pleased with the solemn harp’s harmonious sound,
(the well-wrought harp from conquered Thebes came,
Of polished silver was its costly frame);
With this he soothes his angry soul, and sings
About immortal deeds of heroes and of kings”**

This description teaches us that in ancient Greece the harp was considered to be a soul-soother on one hand, and on the other – an instrument solemn enough to supply musical accompaniment to epic poems about wars and victories.

The harp and musical culture in general, seem to have dwindled in the **Roman Empire** and into the **Dark Ages**. What we know about **medieval harps** is that they were small lap harps - used by troubadours and minstrels, that usually they had **metal strings** and a very **narrow sound boxes** (made of hollowed wood logs), and that the “**harmonic curve**” of the harp’s upper arm (the “neck”) started to replace the previous straight upper arm – to better match the changing desired length of the strings along the harp. Meanwhile, in the **British Isles** – the harp kept on “starring” and evolving; the Greek historian **Diodorus Sicilus** wrote (around 50 BC) about the islands of the Bretons and the Celts – “in which almost everybody was plucking the harp”... The social position of Irish harpers ranked at the top of the class of nobility; interestingly, many blind children were trained to be harpers, like the most famous harper in Irish history, **Turlough Ó Carolan**, who lived in 1670-1738. Welsh and Gaelic wandering harpers functioned as a kind of national emblem, and therefore they were considered by English kings as inciters of uprisings against the English crown; their performances were often banned, so by the late 18th century almost no traditional Irish harper was left. However, in the last decades (mainly since the 1970’s), harp-luthiers in Wales, Ireland and Scotland have been busy again, as the interest in playing and listening to the clarsach (wire-, gut- or nylon-strung) has started growing bigger. As for the harp evolution in Europe: towards and during the renaissance in music history (14th-16th centuries) – the **gothic harp** appeared; it was narrow and relatively high and had around 24 low tension **gut strings**; its common companion was the lute – with which it was played in a consort. The **Wartburg gothic harp** (from around 1400, from Tyrol) was unique among the standard gothic harps, since it had a set of brays which were used to sharpen the strings by a semitone; that was a rather problematic advantage: how could tones be sharpened while the harp was being played with both hands, when the music piece had an occasional accidentals?...The first solutions to that problem were given in the late renaissance: the **cross-strung harp** in Spain (with the chromatic strings forming an x with the diatonic strings), the **double-row harp** in Italy (with a left-side parallel row of strings, tuned to be the sharps of their neighboring strings in the right row), and a bit later the **Arpa Doppia** – a **triple harp** (still being played in Wales), with two parallel diatonically scaled rows of strings and between them – a chromatic row of sharpened strings. The late **Spanish Renaissance harps** arrived at **South**

America, and there they evolved in different ways than in Europe.

The first **pedal harp** was a **single-action harp**, i.e. pressing the pedals could only **sharpen** the strings, not flatten them; its primitive version was built in the Austrian Tyrol region in the late 1690's; early single-action harps were produced by **Hochbrucker** in 1720 in Germany, and most of the following evolution took place in France, thanks to harp builders like **Naderman** (who was also a composer of harp music) and **Cousineau**. The **double-action pedal harp**, in which every pedal could either **sharpen or flatten** its string, had an important advantage: for the first time in the history of the harp, there were **21 pitches** in an octave (including **enharmonic** notes – like D sharp and E flat – which could be played on different strings). As a result, every scale could be accommodated on the double-action pedal harp. The Frenchman **Francois Joseph Naderman** manufactured such pedal harps in Paris, and French-German **Sebastian Erard** – in London. The modern concert pedal harp – the descendant of those first double-action pedal harps - has 47 strings.

The repertoire

The repertoire for the pedal harp was quite limited until the invention of the double-action version. **Handel, C.P.E. Bach, Albrechtsberger, Mozart, Beethoven, von Dittersdorf, Dussek, Eichner, Paisiello, Krumpholz, Petrini, Spohr and Boieldieu** were the main composers for the single-action pedal harp; among the numerous composers who wrote for the double-action concert harp in the 19th-21th centuries: **Salzedo, Andres, Saint-Saëns, Berio, Debussy, Ravel, Tailleferre, Fauré, Milhaud, Tournier, Hoddinott, Roussel, Jolivet, Renié, Stravinsky, Britten, Bruce, Thomas, Damase, Stockhausen, Hasselmans, Hindemith, Bochsa, Reinecke, Villa-Lobos, Glière, Hovhaness, Cowell, Piston, Schafer, Labarre, Rodrigo, Ginastera, Parish-Alvars, Rautavaara, Dohnányi, Rota, Liebermann, the Israeli composers Tal, Natra, Ben-Haim, Avni, Ma'ayani, Sherif, Permout, Braun**, and many others.

It is impossible to summarize the history of the harp without a special mention of **Carlos Salzedo** (of Jewish Sephardic descent) – the marvelous composer, pianist, harpist and harp teacher – whose originality, virtuosity and highly innovative approach to performing and teaching harp are considered by many harpists as unmatched. Numerous outstanding harpists came to study with Salzedo in the summer harp colony which he had established in Maine, USA. Salzedo and his wife – the American harpist **Lucile Lawrence** – were among the jury members of the first contests in Israel, thanks to Aharon Zvi Propes who had toured the world before the first harp contest in Israel

in order to meet, personally, the most prominent harpists of the 20th century, among them – besides Salzedo – **Marcel Grandjany, Nicanor Zabaleta, Pierre Jamet and Vera Dulova**; they have agreed to sit on the jury, and by doing that they bestowed an exceptional prestige on the newborn contest.

The first winner, in 1959, was the famous Venice-born harpist **Susanna Mildonian**. At present, 53 years later, Susanna Mildonian is a Professor of Harp at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels, at the International Summer course in “Accademia Musicale Chigiana” in Siena, and at the International Course “Centro di Cultura Musicale Superiore” for Perfection in Venice, Italy.

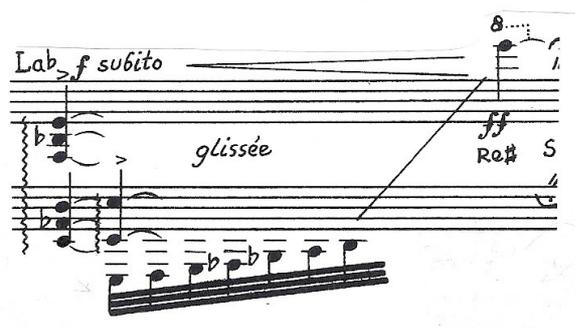
In the opening event of the 18th contest, the Israeli harpist **Sivan Magen** – the first Israeli harpist to win the first prize in that contest (in 2006) – gave a recital that achieved two remarkable goals: First, It was a musical “link” to the first international harp contest in Israel; part of the pieces which Sivan performed were the same as – or related to – the music played in that first contest. Second, it was a brilliant example to the validity of the Jewish traditional saying: “Don’t look at the jug (the concert hall, in this case) but at its contents (the music which is reborn there)”. Magen’s playing was a spring of pure musicality, without any traces of ostentatiousness, and with plenty of precise, technically faultless and deeply moving expressiveness. The recital’s repertoire – enriched also by Magen’s new marvelous arrangements of works originally for harpsichord or for piano – was extremely diverse and yet very harmonious as a whole.

As for the repertoire of the opening evening:

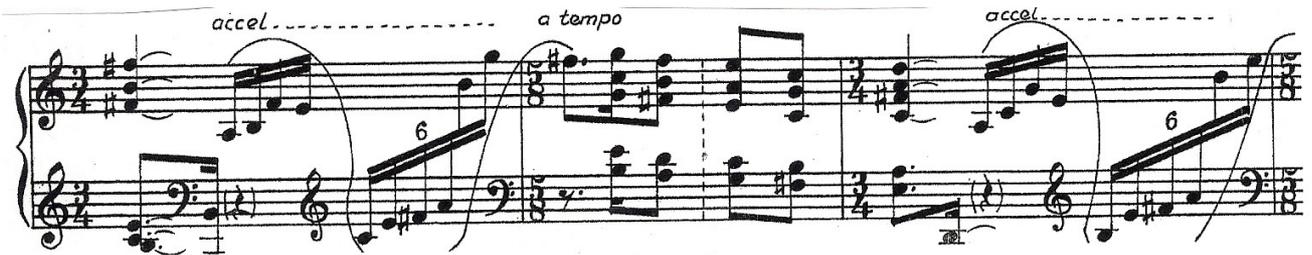
Paul Ben-Haim (1897-1984) was commissioned to compose an obligatory piece for the first harp contest in 1959, which he did in his characteristic way: an attempt to integrate the musical elements of the east with the western musical traditions he was very familiar with (having studied piano, composition and conducting in Munich before immigrating to British Palestine in 1933). The “**Poème for Solo Harp**”, which he composed for the contest, was based on a song that Ben-Haim himself had composed for the Israeli singer **Bracha Tzfira** in the 40’s ; Bracha Tzfira (1910-1990) was a daughter of Jewish immigrants from Yemen, and after her parents’ death she was educated in youth villages and adopting families from different Jewish diasporas; therefore, she became acquainted with an extensive repertoire of Sephardic, Jewish-Persian and Jewish-Bukharian folk

songs, as well as folk songs of other Jewish musical traditions. Her outstanding musical talent brought her to Berlin, for music and acting studies in Max Reinhardt's school. Having been highly appreciated by the classically-trained Ashkenazi composers in British Palestine – like **Paul Ben-Haim**, **Oedoen Partos**, **Marc Lavry**, **Alexander Uriah Boskowich** and **Nachum Nardy** (who all considered the middle-eastern Jewish traditions to be the most “purely-Israeli”) – Tzifira familiarized them with those traditions. Thus, Partos was under the spell of the Jewish Yemenite music and Ben-Haim – with the Sephardic Ladino ballads. Ben-Haim prepared many classical arrangements for her songs, and accompanied her solo recitals as a pianist. Many elements of those eastern Mediterranean, North African, and Near Eastern Jewish repertoires (like the **Maqams** in their Jewish interpretations, the unique asymmetric meters, and others) found their way into Ben-Haim's compositions, including his **Poème for harp**. Another example of Ben-Hayim's “west-east integration” can be heard also in his **Three Songs without Words for Flute and Harp**.

Ben-Haim's short Poème is full of motion and drama: with many accelerandos, and subito dynamics changes – the piece is a stormy “*piu mosso*” almost until its end. It starts with an introduction - *Largamente Rubando* – which presents one of the two main maqams of the piece (the term “maqam” is different than the term “scale” or “mode”, since a maqam, like an Indian raga, is much more characterized, musically, than just a sequence of intervals) but also blurs its tonality towards the following *Andante*:



After the first two measures, the *Andante* “acquires” a Phrygian-like maqam with a distinct wavy melodic unit that circulates within a small pitch range:



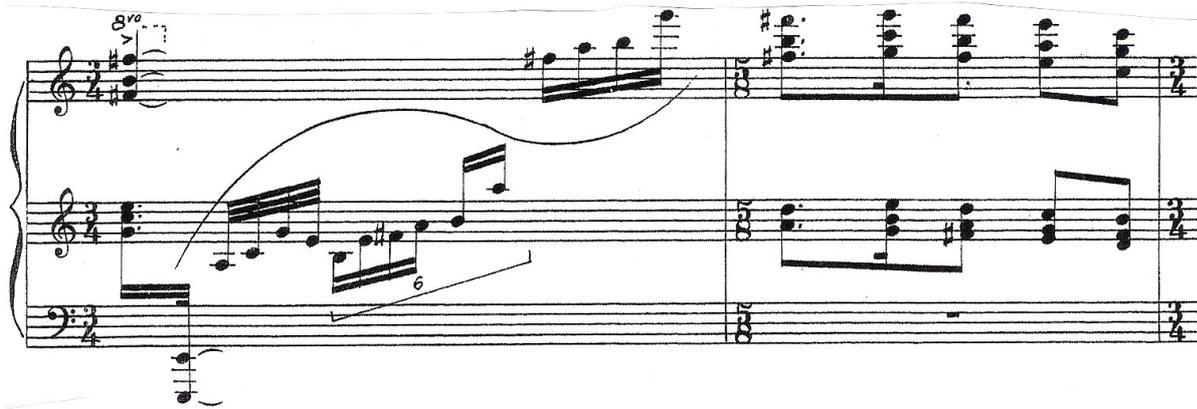
Interestingly, the Andante’s ending glissando incorporates two accidentals into that maqam – one of them turns a second in the original sequence of the maqam to an augmented second, which takes us closer to the folkloristic harmonic minor, be it Hassidic or Sephardic:



Then, a short passage blurs the phrygian tonality, and leads to the Allegretto; here we’re reminded of the first maqam, which has been introduced by the Poème’s opening measures; this time, the maqam puts on the stage an ecstatic, embellished, intensifying movement – which switches to the previously introduced Phrygian-like maqam when the repetitive “trans” reaches a climax; from here the pitches soar higher, the Accelerando leads to presto, and the Crescendo to fortissimo:



An Andante movement takes us back to the wavy melodious profile, still in the same maqam:



The closing *Largamente e molto Rubato* calms down the storm in an unclear tonality.

The texture of the Poème is mainly homophonic, with tense harmonies, and the meter alternates very frequently; in the Allegretto movement the dominant meter is two quarters at first but then the weigh shifts towards three eighths, and that meter starts to gain more and more repetitions; this gives the whole part a chaotic character – of clashing waves and instability:



When Sivan Magen performed the 53-years-old “Poème” by Paul Ben Hayim, his interpretation

reminded me of a fierce and proud flamenco piece; like Ben Hayim, Magen turned his attention to the exotic aspects of the “music of the east” – binding together the familiar with the **subjective image** of the unfamiliar. And by playing this piece, Magen showed that the new compositions which Israeli composers contributed – every three years – to the contest, enriched not only the list of obligatory pieces in the contest, but rather the entire harp repertoire.

Another link to the 1959 contest was Magen’s performance of **Nicolas Flagello’s harp sonata** from 1961: Flagello (1928 – 1994), an American-Italian composer, conductor and pianist (a graduate of Manhattan School of Music and of St. Cecilia Academy of Art in Rome), usually composed within the realm of the late romantic tradition; his music is emotional, restless and densely textured, dressed in classical forms; but this sonata, which Flagello dedicated to a harpist who had been a contestant in the first harp contest in Israel, is unique in his body of music: its second movement brings to mind the neoclassical music of Satie, and the third – the “floating” textures of Debussy... Magen succeeded to play this work with magically contrasting moods: one - thick and volcanic, the other – soft and almost transparent.

Magen performed the following pieces too: **Liebermann’s “Music for Harp”**, **Bach’s “Chromatic Fantasy in D Minor”** BWV 903 (which Magen arranged for harp), **Brahms’ “Intermezzi Op. 116 no.2 and Op. 117 no. 1 and 2”** (arranged by Magen), and **Walter-Kuhne’s “Fantasy on Themes from Eugene Onegin by Tchaikovsky”**.

And...the winners of the 18th harp contest in Israel are **Anais Gaudemard** from France, **Agne Keblyte** from Lithuania and **Mai Fukui** from Japan. But there are, in fact, much more winners: all the harpists and listeners who are going to perform and listen to the new harp music – a **Fantasia** - which has been composed especially for this contest by the famous Israeli composer **Zvi Avni**. When a contest consistently contributes new music to the repertoire of a musical instrument – it turns to be much more than an exhausting Olympian race to the summit...

Elsa Lasker Schiller, the Jewish German poet, wrote the poem “**Reconciliation**”, which brings to mind the atmosphere and meaning of Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement: the desire to wake the night and open the gates of Heaven, to utter the words of prayer as if they are plucking the strings of the soul’s harp, to reconcile even with the darkest time, and to witness the miraculous overflowing mercy of God. Here is the beginning of “Reconciliation”:

We want to wake the night,

Pray in the tongues

Which are shaped like harps.

We want to reconcile with the night —

So much of God overflows...