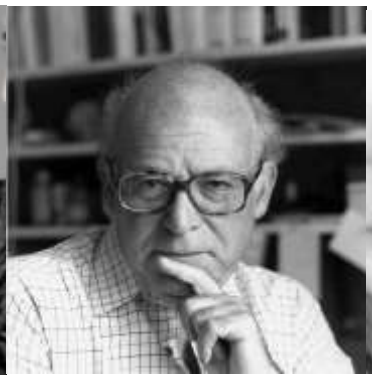
A Certain Idea of Music…
The Parallel Lives of Israel Adler, Simha Arom, and Gary Bertini

By Francesco Spagnolo

Author's Note

January 17 marked this year what would have been the 100th birthday of Prof. Israel Adler (Berlin 1925–Jerusalem 2009), founder of the Jewish Music Research Centre. I met Israel in 1986, and we remained friends and collaborators until his death. In 2002, I was fortunate enough to attend a series of events that celebrated his long tenure at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and its Jewish Music Research Centre. The public festivities were accompanied by private celebrations, mostly held at his home on Heleni Hamalka Street, in Jerusalem, where I had been a frequent guest. For the occasion, two of his best friends—ethnomusicologist Simha Arom (Düsseldorf, 1930) and conductor Gary Bertini (Britcheva, Bessarabia, 1927–Tel Aviv, 2005), friends of a lifetime—had come to Jerusalem. As I spent time with the three of them, I thought of gathering some of their thoughts and recollections.

What follows was first published in an Italian weekly (*Il Diario della Settimana*) in January 2003, following a request from its editor, Enrico Deaglio. I have translated it from the original, editing the text to consider that two of them are no longer with us, that a long time has passed, and that the audience has changed. The tone of the piece remains admittedly journalistic in its intent. And yet, revisiting these words 20 years later, the freshness of the encounters and the broader meaning of their intertwined musical lives still resound today.


Israel Adler Simha Arom Gary Bertini

If one consults the Bible, they all appear in it—in alphabetical order. I am not talking about Scripture, of course. I am instead referring to the Holy Book of music studies, once known as the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the music encyclopedia *par excellence*, which, just as the sacred texts of all major religions, is accessible online. There they are, three great protagonists of the international, Jewish, and Israeli music scene, in order of appearance.

First, Israel Adler, the French-Israeli musicologist who founded the Jewish Music Research Centre at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and who was a relentless music manuscript hunter in libraries across the globe, and an indefatigable gatherer of traces of a forgotten (at times by Jews themselves), denied, or vanished Jewish musical past. Then, Simha Arom, a resident of Paris, refined ethnomusicologist, the director of the epic LACITO (the Laboratory on Languages and Cultures of Oral Tradition at the CNRS, the French National Council for Scientific Research), a scholar of the intricate polyphonies and polyrhythms of Central-African tribes, whose research has inspired musicians ranging from György Ligeti to Peter Gabriel, and that was—with disastrous consequences for the "forgers"—surreptitiously sampled in an electronic "world music" collection titled *Rainforest*. Finally—but marginality is only alphabetical here—Gary Bertini, composer and orchestra conductor among the most established worldwide, who studied in Milan and Paris (Nadia Boulanger), founded the Israel Chamber Choir and debuted with the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra both 1955, and led orchestras around the world, based in Tel Aviv, Scotland, Paris, and Germany at once.

But what the Holy Book of our musical cultures will not tell are the stories I heard over a few dinners and inquired about during several hours of interviews, as well as in the ongoing frequentation with two of them (Adler and Arom): they have known each other for over half a century ("51, a few months, and counting," told me Arom at the time), and are the closest of friends. "Three Men in a Boat"—where the vessel is a "ship" that cruised the musical waters of three or four continents. Their relationship was rather peculiar, and due mostly to the quirks of life (or History). A friendship held together by red threads that are worth exploring for rather reasons: if it hadn't been for a War and the Shoah, followed by another War (for Israel's Independence), and if, if, if… so many things had and had not occurred, these three gentlemen, whom I met when they were at the peak of their professional/musical lives, would likely have had little to share with one another. The reason they met, as simple it is to understand as it is difficult to "digest", is that they each were survivors.

Having been born Jewish in central and eastern Europe before 1939 unequivocally implies—no matter what the individual path that pulled humans away from those lands— being human *dinosaurs*, witnesses to a world that is no more. A few such human specimens are still living today, especially in Israel, a land where one can still meet women and men whose lives fill many a book page and evoke entire worlds. In the case of Israel Adler, Simha Arom, and Gary Bertini, the "vanished world" is rather distant from the yellowing prints of photographer Roman Vishniac, or of the Hasidim busy arguing with their God depicted in books, Broadway shows, and movies. Do not let yourselves be fooled. Their vanished world is also our own, the world of men and women who were well integrated in Europe's cultures, albeit forced by the indignities of history to identify so much with the "other," the stranger, to no longer know where "home" might be for themselves. This is when home becomes music, becomes speaking seven or more languages, loving the same foods, and the same songs, and even more so—as Bertini told me at one point during an interview—"our shared *hasidut*: the ability, which the three of us partake in, of being in love, of feeling ecstatic for a simple idea." A certain idea of home, and a certain idea of music.

I managed to interview all three of them in Jerusalem in the span of a month. The idea had been jumping around my head for years. I was curious about what encyclopedias do not tell: memories, fragments of emotions, the boundaries of lives destroyed and then rebuilt anew. The chance to observe them enjoying each other's company, to observe their shared gestures, and to suggest that I meet each of them separately came at an impromptu concert by Sharon Bernstein at Adler's home, which followed a whole evening at the National Library celebrating his decades-long career. Hearing one Yiddish song after the other, I saw them moved by a music that, if asked, they would never admit being so central to their experience: a language that synthesizes many others and that none of them spoke but all kept in the intimacy of family recollections, and childhood songs that elicited clapping, cries, teary eyes—a subtle connection to a land, the *yiddishland*, that ended up existing only in their minds. As an unrepented "memory hunter," I was able thus to leverage their emotions to allow them to unveil a bit about themselves.

I met Gary Bertini last, but I begin by telling about him. He was in his dressing room, half an hour before an important concert: a "Mozart Marathon" at the *Liturgica 2003* Festival held in the Jerusalem Theater. The cabbie driving me there is mad. Not with the rush hour traffic, but with his wife, whom he says "is going to have fun with Bertini this evening, while I am stuck working. He is conducting Mozart's *Requiem*, a concert not to be missed!"

The conversation I had with Bertini was dry, with him speaking in his precise and spiky Italian. He had very little time, he said as an apology, as he had to be on stage within a few minutes, and then, two days later, he would have to leave for a long concert tour: Genoa, Paris, Milan, Tokyo… Talking about his friends means going back to 1951, "when we all met at the Sorbonne, under the guidance of Jacques Chailley. But, I beg you, do not rely too much on my memory, that sometimes works wonders, and other times fails miserably." Forgetting can be a good thing, I suggest: "Yes, a good thing, indeed…" Because Bertini was born in Britcheva, *Britcheveh* in Yiddish, a place that is not easy to remember:

> *It was a shtetl, in present-day Moldova, but back then it was in Russia. A small Jewish town that no longer exists, and about which I do not even remember all that much. My parents, who were born there, were Parisian by election, and at home we spoke very little Yiddish, and mostly Russian, Hebrew, and French. My childhood was spent away from this hometown, where we would go from time to time to visit my grandparents. We were an assimilated family, soaking in European culture. Once, years later, I asked someone if they could tell me about my village, and they told me that there was nothing left. It's not worth going back, because the place simply does not exist anymore.*

I met someone who remembered *Britcheveh*, once, in Paris—his name was Shaye, he was at least 80 years old and had the eyes of a child. I can still see him in front of me, almost yelling: "It's nearly useless for me to tell you about *Britcheveh*, you will never understand what that place was like!" Bertini, instead, did not yell, and he certainly did not mourn a past that had disappeared. He simply, and calmly, took stock of it. I asked him whether this lack of a past, of an ancestral birthplace, weighed on him: "No, really not. I have no interest in all of this. None. I feel much more connected to Paris, the city where my parents studied and lived in the 1920s." He'd

rather talk about his friendship with Adler and Arom, all in their 20s and with two wars behind them. The first, which he escaped by a hair, when his family brought him to Palestine as a child, and later found again, when it had just finished and was still so present:

> *In the winter of 1946, I left Palestine and was sent to Italy for the* Aliyat ha-no'ar [the illegal immigration of young Holocaust survivors to British Mandate Palestine]. *In Selvino, on the mountains above Bergamo, there was a villa that during the Fascist period had been a summer colony for children, and that, thanks to Milanese biologist Gianluigi Gorini, a member of the antifascist underground, had become a shelter for two to three hundred kids aged 12 to 18, all refugees from Eastern Europe. These were extraordinary months, years, for me. Gorini introduced me to composer Bruno Bettinelli (Milan 1913-2004), with whom I studied harmony and counterpoint. Two mornings a week, I left the mountains for Milan, where I was enrolled in the Conservatory. The rest of my time was spent with the young survivors, who were very close to me in age. I cannot fully recollect everything I experienced there, also because, after a couple of years, I returned to Palestine with the last group of them, and right after that, I joined the army for the War of Independence. What I have retained is the memory of the contrast and the contiguity between my two lives there. Being split between music—La Scala with Vittore Veneziani, De Sabata, the return of Toscanini, the opening with* Elisir *and Tito Schipa, the city of Milan reborn from the war—and these young people, so traumatized by brutal experiences, for me was foundational. I have stayed in touch with several of them for many years.*

In Paris, Bertini, Adler, and Arom—all three of them musicians, and citizens of the recently founded State of Israel, for which they all fought—were jointly in charge of a Jewish youth orchestra, while they studied composition, harmony, and the French horn, respectively, at the Conservatoire National. (Arom became a horn player because of a war injury, which would only heal years later, that had left his right arm paralyzed.) It is not hard for me to imagine how, in the winter of 1951, at the time of their first meeting, the three young men would already display well-delineated characteristics. And they each reiterated to me that, half a century later, they had not changed all that much. This seemed to be particularly true of Israel Adler. Twenty-six years old at the time, Adler was already completely entranced by "Jewish music." When I lived in Paris decades later, I was still hearing stories about him as the very young curator of Hebrew manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, he would rush to the delivery room of a clinic with a tape recorder, so that he could capture the primal sounds of Jewish newborns…

While they truly admired their friend's dedication and his genius in unearthing musical sources and incredible stories, Bertini and Arom told me that they did not share with him an unconditional passion for music as "Jewish": taking the stance of "pure" musicians, they were immersed in sound regardless of time and place, and, at the same time, they resisted defining Jewishness and its boundaries. I was left wondering whether the fact that they were both Eastern European Jews contributed to this. Adler, a Berliner, was of a different ilk. He owed his life to his father, an observant Jew who was also a staunch Zionist.

Everyone in our family in Berlin made fun of him, and of "his Palestine." So, in the end, starting in 1937, we were the only ones out of a rather large family to leave Germany and to survive. We left Berlin almost like thieves in the night, crossed into Czechoslovakia, and, after many a detour, reached Tel Aviv. I still remember my huge piano being unloaded from the ship with a crane.

Settling in Palestine was harsh. Tom Segev has captured quite well the *yekkes*, Jewish immigrants from Germany, and their traumatic encounter with the climate of the Middle Easter. Adler's family, caught in financial distress, was torn apart:

My father tried to make a living as best as he could, but we had no resources and no connections. He invested the little money he had in buying some ducklings, and I still remember how, with my brother, we would try to sell them at the shuq [open market] *near the walls of the Old City. My father eventually left for London, and my brother and I were sent to a yeshivah, where the first thing they did was shave our heads. Later on, in my life as a scholar, the two years I spent studying Jewish texts became an incredible resource. Unlike my colleagues, whose background was staunchly secular, I was able to study music in the context of the debates that Rabbis have continued to keep open for millennia.*

Arriving back in Europe after the War also meant feeling split between two worlds. Adler, too, witnessed, as an envoy from Palestine, the return to life of young victims of the Shoah. One of them, Elie Wiesel, who became a lifelong friend, wrote about the young Adler in his autobiography, describing his unstoppable energy, a passion for freedom, and a joy for life that singled him out in post-war Paris. It's an energy that I also knew very well, having met him three decades later: Israel Adler was always in pursuit of something new. I suggest to his friends that we could all understand his drive by comparing him to a soldier who never left the battlefield. A "soldier" intent on saving the memory of what is most volatile, and perhaps precious, in Jewish tradition: its music, transmitted orally via faint traces, as an emblem of Jewish memory.

Simha Arom, instead, seemed to have settled his score with memory. He told me that it was not an easy feat. Perhaps because he was a passenger on one of those ships that carried Jewish orphans from Europe to Palestine, a refugee like those that Adler and Bertini worked with after the Liberation. His arrival in Palestine dates from 1944, during the War, and was marked by dramatic and haphazard circumstances.

We reached Haifa from Portugal after a trip at sea that lasted ten days. Years later, when I saw some of the photos taken then, I realized that the ship, where those of us refugees with entry papers provided by the British authorities were squeezed like sardines, was a miserable vessel. I have no idea how it could cross the Mediterranean at the end of October. After Kristallnacht, my parents realized that we could no longer stay in Germany. My brother and I went to Belgium, and my parents joined us there, making different journeys. Following the German invasion of Belgium, we escaped Antwerp on the first available train to France and, after a week, we reached a village in the South, initially assisted by the Red Cross, which was keeping us in refugee camps. We managed to escape from there as well, but the French police were in close pursuit. We lived in hiding, and I

was the one who went out to find food in nearby farms, because my parents did not know a word of French. Then, my brother and I found shelter in an abbey. And one day, while I was visiting with my parents, the police came and loaded us onto a bus. My father was quick enough to push me off the vehicle, and this is how I was saved. They went through Drancy and later reached Auschwitz, and this is how it ended, and this is all.

While his brother found his way to Switzerland, Arom, aged 13, was able to connect with the clandestine network that brought him first across the Pyrenees into Spain, and then to Portugal and Palestine: borders crossed at night, chased by dogs, and days spent in hiding, with the fear of being caught.

I remember a man who crossed the border with us. The way was so arduous that we all kept leaving behind our few personal belongings. And he was left with nothing to carry, except for a violin that he clenched in his hand. Who knows, perhaps my attraction to music started then. It continued in a kibbutz, where I spent hours listening to the radio. After the War of Independence, at age 17, I was left paralyzed in my arm, and the Ministry of Defense offered me a license to be a cab driver (which I could still drive one-handed). I suggested that they could fund my studies at the Tel Aviv music academy. And this is how I showed up in the office of Paul Ben Haim, the famous composer, who admitted me to his school, where I learned to play the French horn. And, from there, I arrived in Paris.

Israel Adler never seemed to want to end his confrontation with the Past. He wanted it to speak, to resonate with songs and dance. Simha Arom, instead, told me how one day, years ago, he reached a point where he found closure and moved on. It happened after years of searching, traveling to Ukraine and visiting the villages where his parents and their Hasidic families were from:

It happened one morning while I was shaving. There, I looked at myself in the mirror, and I realized that I was older than my father ever was. And that this life is my own, and that it can no longer be related to his, to a life he did not have.

Simha seemed equally sure that the past cannot be fully archived, and that a memory sits in our depths despite all legitimate attempts to emancipate from a heritage so dramatically devoid of an explicit mandate, of a last testament. And he appeared to have rebuilt such a legacy in a sort of private Hasidism of his own making, in his clear and shameless ability to welcome the other, the stranger, with innocence.

Gary Bertini confirms to me the ineluctability of the end of the past:

I, too, have come to terms with all of this many years ago. I do not feel any emotional ties with the [East-European Jewish] world I was born into. My father did, and he even wrote a book about our shtetl. I have no need for that.

But he must have had some second thoughts about all of this, because two nights after our rather brief meeting at the theater, and on the eve of his departure, he called me at home to

continue on his own accord a conversation started in our previous, short, “interview.” We spoke for a good hour. I confess that I mostly listened, caught by surprise in this resurgence of thoughts—it felt as if my questions had not left him alone since we had last spoken. He, too, talked of “Hasidism,” of the never-ending passion he continued to share with his lifelong friends, of the love, free and boundless, for the *other*, a love that is the same regardless of whether the *other* is a traditional song from Central Africa, or that, closer to him only on the surface, of a synagogue cantor. A song that comes from the past and that does not appear to want to be silenced, firmly present in these men who continued all their lives to be torn between looking straight ahead into the future or risking, in looking back, to be turned into salt.

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