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Making Music Out of the Box

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There are those who say the feminist revolution is over. In the realm of music, by extraction, this should mean that women composers are equal to their male counterparts. So, in the name of pluralism and enlightenment, why is it necessary to have a concert of works exclusively by women composers (at the Hateiva Studio in Jaffa, on Wednesday, at 8:30 P.M.). What is the point of creating a "ghetto" of this sort - and, indeed, what is the relevance of a forum of female composers (for whom this is the annual concert) within the Israeli Composers League?

The new chair of the Women's Composers Forum, composer Dganit Elyakim, thinks this is obvious: "The Israeli musical scene is entirely male dominated," she explains. "The feminist revolution will be over not only after men realize the importance of caring for children, of education and of looking after the home and the family - but also when they become involved and do these things themselves. In the meantime we have to be seen and to make our voice heard - the voice of women composers who only find time for their creative endeavors after all the other things they do."

The forum was established in the summer of 2000, at a difficult time when 60 active women composers - all of them excellent musicians - took part in only 5 percent of the classical music scene here in terms of commissions of works, performances, recordings and broadcasts. At that time, furthermore, not a single one of them was a university lecturer on composition, a house composer or the

musical director of a large mainstream organization.

Elyakim: "Now our aim is to produce as many projects as possible, to provide a stage to women composers, to create collaborative efforts with organizations and with women musicians from other cultures - and at the annual concert, to enable those of us whose works haven't been performed during the year to have them played, as well."

Thus the idea for the Maximum-2 concert in Jaffa was born: an evening of nine works by nine women composers, for ensembles of no more than two musicians. The works include "Big John Campbell's Last Song" by Ivana Kis for solo guitar; piano pieces by Irena Svetova and Tali Assa; works for solo instruments like contrabass and bass clarinet by Gila Karkus and Maya Dunitz; songs for solo vocalist by Anat Pik; plus works for instrumentalists with electronic recordings by Hagar Kadima and Dganit Elyakim herself; and even one piece without any performers: "Masks," for tape recorder, by Yasmin Tal.

The styles are varied, the origins are multicultural, the composers are from Croatia and England, Israel and Russia - although the means of performance are limited.

"Until now it had been customary for one ensemble to play all the works, and this has several disadvantages," Elyakim notes. "These include the unchanging color of the sound and the great amount of rehearsal time required if we want to present many works, as well as the absence of an individual treatment of the work of each and every composer.

"Limiting the means of performance solves all this - and also the budgetary problem. The performers here are enamored of and trust the composers, demand little pay or even appear on a volunteer basis. Performances involving a single instrument, creating a sort of austerity, lead to a completely different level of communication than that offered in the beautiful sounds and harmonies of an orchestra."

Dganit Elyakim was born in 1977. She studied at Rimon in Ramat Hasharon, and did her B.A. at the University of Haifa with composer Arik Shapira, before going on to the National Conservatory in The Hague in Holland, where she encountered great enthusiasm for contemporary music, and even entire festivals of it.

"There's no notion there of 'someone else should do it for me' ... [Over the years] I have learned to overcome my shyness and my tendency just to write music and remain anonymous," she says of her role as head of the women's forum. "I didn't leap at the job. At first I refused to accept it, but I realized it's part of the struggle to change the way this society looks - [to create] a place where we and those who come after us will be able to live in a truly cultural climate."