

Alexander Sasha Argov

Guy Bonné

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Advisors: Wendy Zierler, Ph.D.
Mark Kligman, Ph.D.**

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Alexander Sasha Argov

Number of chapters: 3 plus an introduction, conclusion and biography.

Contribution of this thesis: This work is a contribution to the Field of American Jewish culture.

Goal of this thesis: The goal of this thesis is to explore the life and creativity of the Israeli composer Alexander Sasha Argov.

How the thesis is divided: 1. **Argov's Biography**, a life story that unfolds over two main periods, childhood and adolescence in Russia and adulthood in Israel. 2. **Argov's Music**.

Here I will discuss Argov's different musical styles and the different musical niches he composed for and show his vast creativity and his enormous contribution to Israeli culture. 3. **Analysis of songs**. I will analyze two songs textually and musically: "*Shir Mishmar*" (Song of guarding), to the words of Natan Alterman and "*Bereshit*" (In the beginning), to the words of Chaim Heffer. It is my hope that these three sections will provide insight into Sasha Argov, the man, as well as into his magnificent and complex musical oeuvre.

What kinds of material were used: Primary sources include books on Israeli music as well as on Argov, Interview, Video recordings and musical notes.

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Introduction

Alexander (Sasha) Argov (1914-1995) is considered one of the most prolific composers of Israeli music and one of the most respected musical interpreters of Hebrew poetry. His music is regarded as the highest level of this genre and can be divided in two major groups: art songs and folksongs. His art songs present a wonderful combination of poetry and music that expose the very essence of the emotions and the dramatic progression of each poem. The folksongs he composed which incorporate much simpler texts with less artistic approach have become a "corner stone" of Israeli folk music. Yet, here too he remains loyal to his own significant way of "attaching" melody and harmony to words.

My choice to devote my thesis research to Sasha Argov is a response to the scant scholarly attention that has been accorded to his music, especially among American musicians. In addition to the love and appreciation I have for his music, I believe that Argov is one of the composers that gave Israeli music its unique character and one of the artists that shaped its musical landscape.

Argov was a prolific composer for over sixty years. From the very first year he arrived in Israel from Poland in 1935, he wrote music for different niches of Israeli culture. For more than twelve years, he composed for special events in the Kibbutzim in Israel. Among almost two hundred songs that he wrote for Kibbutz Hatsor, he composed the first

Hebrew Musical, *The Cricket And The Ants*, after a story by Benny Rosenberg. After the establishment of the State of Israel and the War of Independence in 1948, he began to compose songs for military music groups, which were sent to varied military bases all around the country in order to lift the spirit of the soldiers with music and humor. He wrote for regular musical groups, as well, and built a reputation as a composer of songs that were recorded and heard over the radio. Argov also wrote music for the theatre, work that excited him greatly, as he confessed many times. Composing for this genre gave him the opportunity to use his dramatic and text-oriented senses in their full capacity. However, the most profound, beautiful, and exciting compositions in my opinion, are his art songs, which he composed from the poetry of Israel's most distinguish poets, such as Lea Goldberg, Natan Alterman and Alexander Penn, and which were sung by such talented singers as Ofra Haza, Matti Caspi and Orah Zitner. Those esteemed singers had the vocal ability to bring this music to the highest level and they recorded and performed it with the accompaniment of Argov himself. In my opinion these art songs are equal in artistic worth to many of the "Lieder" of the great classical composers and are unique for their richness of colors, surprising, most exquisite harmonies and their melodies that expose the words in the most exciting ways.

As a part of my research I spent time in the Israeli Television Archive to see once more some of the special programs that were produced to honor Argov for his great contribution to Israeli music. One of those programs: "זר לסשה ארגוב" (A Bouquet for Sasha Argov)¹ best represents this phenomenal composer and his songs in the way I had always conceived them: a musical combination of humor and wit, joy and naiveté, together with more somber musical aspects that represent the Israeli admiration and gratitude for the young and beautiful souls of soldiers who gave their lives for their country. This magnificent music

¹ This television program was recorded in the Cameri Theatre in Tel Aviv on June 1984.

that touches the heart and moves the soul is the inspired product of a composer who was also blessed with a good sense of humor, as one can see from his television programs. Though his music is often hard and complicated to perform, challenging the singers and demanding high vocal abilities, the public always received it with love and appreciation.

The most exciting information about Argov that I gleaned for this thesis came from interviewing his wife Nussia. This warm and gentle woman opened her heart to me and with bright eyes and extreme enthusiasm shared her husband's life story. Nussia lives in Ramat Aviv, which is a quiet neighborhood north of Tel Aviv. She welcomed me with warmth and showed me some of Argov's manuscripts, including his last unfinished piece, written to the lyrics of his favorite poet Lea Goldberg. She allowed me to enter the room where Argov used to compose. This small and cozy room, decorated with many pictures on the walls that show Argov's achievements, and the piano, which I was allowed to play, where many songbooks and note sheets still rest, helped introduce me to Sasha Argov, the man, giving me insight into Argov's modest and unique personality and strengthening my admiration for him.

This thesis is divided to three chapters: 1. **Argov's Biography**, a life story that unfolds over two main periods, childhood and adolescence in Russia and adulthood in Israel. 2. **Argov's Music**. Here I will discuss Argov's different musical styles and the different musical niches he composed for and show his vast creativity and his enormous contribution to Israeli culture. 3. **Analysis of songs**. I will analyze two songs textually and musically: "*Shir Mishmar*" (Song of guarding), to the words of Natan Alterman and "*Bereshit*" (In the beginning), to the words of Chaim Heffer. It is my hope that these three sections will provide insight into Sasha Argov, the man, as well as into his magnificent and complex musical oeuvre.

Argov's Biography

Childhood, Adolescence and Adulthood

Sasha Argov spent his early years in Russia. He was born as Alexander Abramovitch, in 1914 in his grandmother's house in Bialystok, Poland. His father was a dentist and his mother was a professional pianist. They lived in Moscow, and at first, did very well financially under the communist regime.

At the age of three he began playing the piano. His mother arranged private lessons for him with some of her pianist colleagues. The child was very talented. He could harmonize melodies at the age of five and had great technique skills at the piano. The first songs he composed at this very young age were a naïve reflection of his childhood experiences. Naturally, playing the piano became his way of expressing his feelings and when, for some reason, he couldn't play, he became frustrated. Even though his technique skills at the piano were naturally good, Argov didn't devote enough time and effort to practicing. His piano teachers appreciated him for his ability to improvise music or to memorize the classical pieces he learned, but at a certain stage it was clear to all that he would not become a professional pianist like his mother because of his lack of discipline. However, the many singers and instrumentalists who came to their house and whom his

mother accompanied made an important musical impression on Argov and exposed him to the art of the "Lied". The unique art form of the "Lied" was prevalent in the eighteen and nineteen centuries and was the heritage of composers like Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms. These composers, among others, chose the lyrics of the most esteemed poets of their time, and as an antithesis to the grandiose style of the Opera art form, composed "Lieder", art songs, that had an intimate nature and delicate style that illustrates poetry through music in the best way. The element of the harmony in the "Lieder" that Argov absorbed in his youth was the one that mostly fascinated him.

As a child, Argov was exposed to Jewish life and observance insofar as his father used to take his brother and him to the synagogue every Shabbat and every holiday. He was fascinated, as a musician, by the synagogue music and was overwhelmed by the voice and the artistry of the Cantor.

Argov had a happy childhood. His family belonged to the bourgeois class; hence, they did not suffer from financial difficulties. Their house was full with music and artists and often Argov went to hear concerts in Moscow's concert halls.

Around the beginning of the 1930's however, the situation changed dramatically and the family underwent a few crises that eventually led them to immigrate to Israel. First, the communist government seized Argov's father's dental clinic, which placed the family in financial straits. Shortly afterwards, the government also seized control of their big and comfortable house as well as the bulk of their assets, compelling them to move to a one bedroom apartment. At that time, as well, Sasha was forced to join a communist youth group in order to demonstrate good citizen behavior. He had to "volunteer" to work in a factory after school. Sasha no longer had a piano to play on, but worst of all was his inability to

attend a music school. Only those, officially classified as "lower class" in Bolshevik Russia were able to send their children to conservatories. From that point on the situation became unbearable and even dangerous. The members of the family were experiencing the communist bureaucratic oppression in the full sense of the word, since the Russian government's institutions at that time were very much like in Franz Kafka's stories, totally indifferent towards its citizens. When they finally did manage to buy a second-hand piano and acquire a few assets, but were unable to show receipts for these new possessions, the government once again confiscated almost everything they had and left them no choice but to leave Russia. Since both parents were born in Poland, the Russian government allowed them to return to their native country. The family applied to get their certificate to Poland and for that end they gave their papers to the government office that was responsible for visas approvals. Unfortunately, close to the time they had to leave the country Argov's father became very sick and had to stay under medical care. Their citizenship, however, had expired at that time and staying in Russia became illegal. What saved them was the relationship they had with a Jewish doctor who had a lot of connections, serving as a private doctor to Kalinin, a highly esteemed member of the Russian government. This doctor arranged for the family to get the right papers and in 1932, they finally left Russia for Warsaw, Poland, where they moved in with relatives. After a short while, Sasha's parents and brother made Aliyah to Palestine. Sasha himself was too old at that time to be included in his parents' visas, had to stay in Poland a year and a half longer. He joined his family in 1934 when he was twenty years old.

In Israel

In Israel, at the age of twenty, Argov worked as a song composer and as an accompanist to ballet groups; his great ability to improvise music made him extremely successful in this field. That said, his livelihood came not from music but from his work as a clerk in the Industry Bank in Montefiore Street in Tel Aviv. Being free of the financial insecurity suffered by many musicians became one of his ideals. As he later reflected, "I was working also in times when I was earning enough in order not to be dependent on anything and not to maintain myself only from music. It is my principle. I do not want to make a living from music. Music is the "cream". It is something pure that was not meant to be involved with money".² These words reflect a remarkably gracious approach towards music. Argov strove throughout his career to keep his music separate from his need to support himself, and yet these two parts of his life never remained entirely distinct, for even in the bank setting, Argov the composer was frequently sought out: "During these many years of working in the bank, next to his little window in the small branch, two lines were formed: one of bank costumers who came to deposit and withdrawal money and the other, of poets, directors, and dreamers..."³

In 1946 Argov married Nussia Ables. The two knew each other thanks to their shared interest in piano playing. She was born in Krakow and when the Nazis occupied Poland her family was deported to Ghetto Bochnia, near Krakow, where she worked as a tailor, sewing uniforms for the S.S army. Nussia was medically diagnosed as a claustrophobic. She could not bear the "close environment" of the ghetto and she did every effort to escape. Luckily, in 1942, she managed to arrange false certificates for her mother and herself. For three years the

² Tsippi Shhori, "A conversation with a Pras Israel winner", (Gittit, December 1987), Page 9.

³ Yael Gvirats, "Thank you Sasha", (Yediot Achronot, September 28 1995).

two wandered across Nazi Europe using their false certificates until the end of the war, when they emigrated from Romania to Palestine. Nussia also played the piano, and once settled in Tel Aviv, she would practice every day, using the piano in the "Anglo-Polish Institute" where she learned English together with immigrants who fled from Poland to Russia during the war. After a while, the Institute closed and Nussia, together with three other students, decided to continue the studying in a different location. One of the three students suggested that they practice at the home of his uncle, who was Sasha Argov. Argov not only allowed Nussia to play his piano, but also even gave her the keys to the apartment so she would be able to continue to practice every day. After three years they got married.

Nussia became very involved in her husband's musical life. Often, she would suggest musical interpretation for lyrics he composed and Argov considered her opinion highly. When he would finish composing a song often he would ask her for her comments. When she would say that the song is nice, he would immediately throw it to the garbage. Only when she was overwhelmed with the music, was the song kept. Until the last year of his life he always built his music around already extant lyrics or poems. When he composed he sat next to the piano and tried to match the words to the text in the most convincing way possible. It was often a long process in which he would try different versions again and again until only one option, the "right" option, as he would tell Nussia, presented itself. He also labored to perfect the harmonic progressions in the songs he composed.

In the late 1940's, Argov began thinking about changing his last name (Abramovitch) to a more Israeli name. This was the time when the Prime Minister of Israel, Moshe Sharet, addressed the public, trying to convince the people to change foreign names to Hebrew names. Argov resolved to do so only after an embarrassing incident. It was during a

performance of the group: "הצ'יזבטרון" (The Tchizbatron). One by one, the singers presented themselves by name, in a humoristic manner, and finally when Argov did the same, using his name Abramovitch, that probably sounded so clearly "*galuti*", the crowd burst with laughter. At that moment he decided to follow the Prime Minister's exhortation. Following the advice of his friend, the author Binyamin Tamuz, whom he met one day on the street and asked his opinion about the subject, his name was changed to Argov, a name of a piece of land in Israel, mentioned in the Bible.⁴ Tamuz told him that he would be the only person in Israel with that last name, and Sasha was excited: the name was close enough to his previous name but also sounded very Israeli. After a few weeks he met his friend, the famous Israeli painter Michael Singer, who told him a humorous story. He had been considering changing his last name to a Hebrew one, and taking the advice of his good friend Binyamin Tamuz, his last name was changed from Singer to Argov. "You will be the only person in Israel carrying this name", promised Tamuz, who effectively promised the same "unique" last name to both his friends.

In 1959, after resigning from the bank in 1957, Argov opened a bookstore at Allenby Street in Tel Aviv called "Buleslavsky" where he used to buy and sell books of prose and poetry in Russian. Nussia worked with him, and for more than twenty years this store was a place of pilgrimage for Russian literature lovers.

Argov and Nussia raised two children, Itamar and Tali who followed in their parents' footsteps and also became musicians.

On July 25, 1995, Argov had a stroke. He was 81 years old. Only a few hours before the stroke, he was sitting at the piano and composing music to lyrics by the poet Lea Goldberg's: "על הנזק שבעישון" (On the damage created by smoking). This song was the last he

⁴ Deuteronomy chapter 3, verse 4.

ever worked on and remained unfinished. For two months Argov lay unconscious in the hospital until he died on September 27, 1995.

Sasha Argov's Music

Composing for the Kibbutzim

Argov started his musical career in Israel when he collaborated the artist Gershon Plutkin who was a translator, a playwright, a painter, and a producer. For about twelve years Plutkin arranged for Argov to perform his music in Kibbutzim in Israel, mainly in Kibbutz Hatzor, and to compose music for special events that took place there, like weddings, or ceremonies. During these twelve years Argov was unknown in Israel as a composer even though he composed over two hundred songs. He refused to accept any financial compensation for his musical activity in the Kibbutzim, for his enthusiasm came from the sheer love for music. In fact, he was even deeply insulted once, when the Kibbutz management offered him a small payment for one of the projects he worked on.

In 1945, Argov composed the first Hebrew musical, which was performed at Kibbutz Hatzor. The musical was based on the "The Cricket and the Ant" by Benny Rosenberg, who was tragically killed in the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Rosenberg was a big man red headed and freckled—so big that Argov used to call him "the Big Bear". He was also a socialist and worked in the Kibbutz in the kindergarten. In 1946, Rosenberg went to Tel Aviv with a few friends from the Kibbutz to buy some toys for his kindergarten; on their way there Arabs attacked their vehicle with machine guns. Everybody lay immediately on the ground.

Rosenberg, however, being an idealist, tried to speak to the Arabs and was shot dead on the spot.

At that time Argov still did not have a formal musical education and was not yet trained in musical notation. The music for this musical, therefore, was improvised during the rehearsal sessions. Benny Rosenberg's wife witnessed the process: "I sat next to him when he improvised on the piano the tunes for the musical and it was an amazing experience. The opening sounded like something composed by Handel and the rest just flowed under his hands".⁵ After this experience, Argov decided to take composition lessons with the Israeli conductor Noam Sarif because his lack of formal musical education started to disturb him. This attempt lasted only for a short while because Sharif felt Argov was talented enough to write music in his own unprofessional way, according to his heart and imagination, without the formal skills musicians usually have.⁶

Most of the songs that were composed for the Kibutzim were lost and the only book that was printed back then was צרור מנגינות (*A Bundle of Tunes*).⁶ This book, as well as the notes for the musical, is an interesting source for Argov's early musical work. It was written by hand and dedicated to Argov by his collaborator, Plutkin, who gave the book to Argov and to Nussia on their second anniversary.

At that time, Argov's music was based mainly on simple texts, and therefore was also simple melodically, harmonically and rhythmically. He used sincopal musical structures influenced from Yemenite or Moroccan rhythms, as well as the Jewish mode "Ahava-Rabbah"⁷, in order to give his compositions oriental or Jewish flavor. These musical

⁵ Noam Ben Zeev, "When Sasha Argov didn't know to read notes", (Haaretz, May, 1995).

⁶ Alexander Abramovitch, Tsrur Manginot, (Kibbutz Hashomer Hatsair Haeretsisraeli Gimmel Rishon Letsion -Gvulot, Shvat, Tav-Shin-Vav).

⁷ This musical mode, that similar to the priggish mode, was prevalent in European Synagogue Prayer in the

elements were incorporated in his work only in order to serve the text and not as a compositional method. Argov used to declare that he is not influenced and did not want to be influenced by any musical trend. He loved many styles and many composers but he composed from his heart and intuition and from his soul's "inner voice".

Composing for Military Musical Groups

During the War of Independence (1947-1948) five military musical groups were active in Israel. Naomi Polani (born in 1917), who was a singer and a performer herself, had the vision and the enthusiasm that brought to the establishment of those groups, the goal of which was to bring music and folklore to the soldiers all around the country in order to lift their spirits. There was a mutual professional respect between Polani and Argov who collaborated for many years; like many others, Polani greatly admired Argov's music.

The military musical groups actually shaped and molded the face of popular Israeli music as well as produced Israel's future singers and artists. The songs of the groups became the pillars of this musical niche and echoed the historical events in the first thirty years after the establishment of the state of Israel. Argov's professional connections with those groups lasted until 1979 when the groups were officially disbanded.

In 1948, Argov joined the army as the chief composer of the military musical group: "עמק איילון" (The valley of Eilon). He wrote the ten songs for the program, which was entitled "בלי תקן" (Without a proper way). One of the songs performed by this group was "הורח נגב" (A Horah to the Neggev). This song has the elements of an ultimate Horah style: the total symmetry, the sincopal pattern in the beginning of each phrase, and a chromatic harmony.

19th century and in the course of the years became to be identified with Jewish Music.

That same year Argov met the director Shmuel Bunim who was the director of the main musical group of the, "פלמח" (Initials for "smashing platoons"), one of the three military units that preceded the IDF. After the establishment of the state of Israel, David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, gathered these three units together to establish the IDF. The name of this musical group was: "צ'יזבטרון" (Tchizbatron) a combination of the words: "צ'יזבט" (Tchizbat), a genre of folklore story, and תיאטרון (Teatron): Theatre. Argov's compositions were not common or regular but unique and innovative, as this story will testify: The name of the song that Argov composed and then played for his audition to be accepted to this group as a composer and an accompanist was: "פלמחניק מחפש את המחר" (The soldier in the "Palmach" is eager for the next day to come). For his audition, Argov was asked to compose a song. At the audition was the poet who provided the lyrics to the song, Chaim Heffer, the director of the group Shmuel Bunim, and the musical manager Elyakum Sapirah. Argov's composition was so out of the ordinary, that when he finished playing, the three responded with great silence and embarrassment. After the long silence Shapirah asked Argov to play it once more. Argov did, however the group still couldn't relate to it. Years later, Chaim Heffer reflected back and said, "I heard a horrific song and didn't know how to pull myself out of there. Shapirah (the musical manager) asked Argov to play it once more and it even sounded worse..."⁸ In spite of this statement, Argov was accepted to the group for his talent was obviously very obvious.

Heffer, one of Israel's best-loved lyricists, collaborated with Argov for years, and their artistic connection was one of the most successful in Israeli music. Heffer who was born in Poland in 1925 and immigrated to Israel in 1936 wrote the lyrics for the song "בראשית" (In the Beginning), which is considered to be one of Argov's most artistic compositions. Working

⁸ Hanoach Ron, "Sasha Argov, One Person, who is a style", Music magazine, (1987), 31-33.

with this musical group was a turning point in Argov's career since it brought him to the public eye.

In the early fifties the most renowned military group was established: "להקת הנוער" (The band/ ensemble of the Military Pioneer Youth). Its success encouraged the establishment of other groups, all of which commissioned songs from Argov. Between 1954 and 1968, most of the songs Argov composed for those groups became big "hits". They were also noticeably different from the songs of other composers who were active in this field at the same time for they had a significant "flavor" that is unique to Argov. This unique "flavor" manifests itself by the rich and complicated harmonies, which accompany a melody that suits the text perfectly and exposes it in an ultimate way. Argov composed these songs during and after the War of Independence, when Israel was confronting danger and anxiety from its borders as well as pride in its success to defend it self. Therefore some "national" musical elements like marches or modality were incorporated in the songs as an interpretation to the lyrics that were written under these circumstances. A good example can be seen in one of the most beautiful memorial songs in Israeli music, the song "Elifelet" that was written for the group "גיסות השריון" (Recruits of Steel) to the lyrics of Natan Alterman. Alterman who is considered one of Israel's greatest poets was born in Warsaw, Poland, and came to Israel on the age of fifteen. He made a living as a journalist in his first years in Israel and was known for his sharp and ironic style that was aimed mainly towards the British soldiers during the Mandate. After the establishment of the State of Israel, he became focused in his songs on social and personal aspects. Argov's musical rendition of Alterman's "Elifelet" exemplifies Argov's ability to produce songs that are loved and appreciated by all in spite of being complicated melodically and harmonically.

Composing for civilians musical groups

From 1957 until the mid-sixties, Argov composed songs for musical groups that were established out side of the army but kept the conceptual heritage of the military musical groups. Most of these "civilian" musical group's singers were active in one of the military musical groups, where they started their career. In 1957, Shmuel Bunim, the director who established the "Tchizbatron" established together with the author Ephraim Kishon the musical group "בצל ירוק" (Green onion), for which Argov composed some of his most beautiful Songs. In 1960, Argov composed songs, together with other known composers like Naomi Shemer and Moshe Vilensky, for the first musical program of another group: "החרגולים" (The Roosters). This group brought Argov's songs to the main repertoire of Israeli song for almost all of the songs became big "hits". The group's second program from 1963, which was performed all over Israel, was based solely on his songs. These songs were heard very often in the radio and were eventually recorded on a record. In 1966, Argov was asked to compose songs to the group: "החמציצים" (The Sour Weeds). This group of four singers was established by Naomi Polani and included an accordion and a clarinet. Though their success was not as great as the success of other groups Argov worked with, his songs became known, were heard very often in the radio, and were recorded. On that same year Argov composed some songs for the group: "גשר הירקון" (The bridge over the Yarkon) who recorded them with an orchestra.

Composing for the theatre

"I love the stage. I can say about my self that I am a stage freak... They say there is drama in my music... I feel the movement on stage and not only the text and I incorporate it into the music. I am not sure if I have the influence of Kurt Weil but maybe in my subconscious there is a drop of Weil that sits there..."⁹ This statement by Argov about his love for the stage shows his inseparable connection and fascination with writing music for the theatre. His first fruitful collaboration was with The "Cameri Theatre" in Tel Aviv for which he wrote music for seventeen plays. Most of the songs composed for the theatre, however, did not become widely known outside of the theatre because they functioned well only in that context.

The biggest success Argov had with the Cameri Theatre was the 1964 musical: "שלמה" (King Solomon And Shalmay the Cobbler), which was performed by Eli Gorlitski and Yonah Atari. This play that was written by Sami Grunman and was translated by Alterman was premiered with background music only in the theatre "האהל" (The Tent) in Tel Aviv on 1943. With Argov's music, however, the play became one of the most successful musicals in Israel. The theatre won its first time prestigious prize for this musical and represented Israel in an international theatre festival in Paris, France in 1965, as well as in two other festivals in London, England and Montreal, Canada in 1967. After this huge success, the Cameri Theatre commissioned Alterman and Argov to write and compose a musical based on a biblical source. The musical: "אסתר המלכה" (Esther the queen), which included very innovative music, was one of the Cameri Theatre's most expensive

⁹ Hanoach Ron, "Sasha Argov, One Person, who is a style", Music magazine, (1987), 31-33.

productions but unfortunately, was a total flop. Both the lyrics as well as the music were brutally criticized.

In 1960 Ephraim Kishon, Gavriel Dagan And Amos Keinan, wrote the play: "יוסי חזקי" (The name is a combination of the names of this play's performers: Yossi Banai, Avner Hezkiahoo, and Yonah Atari). Some of the songs for this play were written by Argov and were recorded on a record. In his songs for this play Argov used some musical elements, like the Blues, that were new to Israeli popular music at the time.

In 1965, Alterman wrote a play called "שוק המציאות" (the Market of bargains) for the duo Yonah Atari and Eli Gorfitski. Argov contributed five of his compositions to this play, all of which were recorded. In 1970 Argov composed fourteen songs to a play by Leah Goldberg entitled "נסיעה מדומה" (An unreal trip), that were also recorded. In 1974, another play was produced, entitled "תפוח זהב" (Golden Apple), which incorporated some of Argov's best-known songs, re-arranged and performed by Israel's most talented musicians; this production too was released as a record. Argov supervised and approved all of the arrangements made for his songs for this program; it upset him very much if arrangers missed the harmonic delicacy he would labor to perfect.

Argov also composed for satirical drama. When he wrote music for this dramatic genre, the text that was structured from layers of different and versatile context had "imposed" on the music a specific kind of composition to illustrate its specific context. Like Kurt Weil, Argov's music for this artistic "niche" was characterized by the usage of tonal and chromatic harmonies that changed spontaneously, and by the usage of a moderate tempo accompaniment.

His first song that was performed in a satirical drama theatre was his composition to Bartold Brecht's song: "Ankash", which was translated into Hebrew by Alterman and sung by Arik Lavi on 1958 in "מועדון התיאטרון" (The theatre club). "כי תשים עליך מלך" (When you shall throne a king upon you) and "תמדאו" (A name) from 1959 were two other songs to be incorporated in a satirical drama in "הסמבטיון" (a theatre for humor and satire).

Argov also composed music for the Children's Theatre that was established by the actress Orna Porat. The first children's musical that Argov composed music for was: "הרפתקאה בקרקס" (An adventure in the circus), which was performed in 1965 and also released as a recording as well. Another play for which Argov composed music was: "אני פשוש" (I am a Sparrow) after the songs of the lyricist Ain Hillel. "The compositions of Sasha Argov, Naomi Shemer etc. are sweet as honey..."¹⁰, Raved one reviewer.

In 1988 the Minister of Education Zvulun Hammer, decided to grant Argov the most prestigious and important prize in Israel, the "Pras Israel" (Israel Prize). This prize is granted every year on Israel's Independence Day, in Jerusalem, to people who have contributed to the society in Israel, in different fields such as Jewish Studies, science, culture and music. The prize was given to Argov to show gratitude and appreciation for his tremendous contribution to Israel's culture.

¹⁰ Moshe Dor, "Songs for Little people", (Maariv, September 1974).

Analysis of songs

"שיר משמר" (Song of Guarding):

This beautiful and unique song is one of the many songs that Argov composed to the lyrics of Natan Alterman. The song was a part of the theatre play "תגינת קיץ" (a summer celebration) that took place in the Cameri theatre in Tel Aviv in 1972. The play was actually a collection of songs, all composed by Argov and connected together with some prose units. Alterman dedicated this poem to his daughter Tirtsa Attar (1941-1977), after she attempted to commit suicide. Tirtsa Attar was herself a poet who published five books of poetry, as well as an actress. She was known for her gloomy, depressive poetry and sensitive, fragile personality. Seven years after her father died, on 1977, she jumped from her sixth floor apartment's window to her death.

Analysis of Text

A notion of danger can immediately derived from the song's title, "Shir mishmar," (Guard song). The guard or the patrol was a feature of Israeli life dating back to the early settlements in Palestine; this remained the case at the time of the song's composition in 1972, when Israel was on the threshold of yet another war (Yom Kippur War, October 1973). It is interesting to note, however, how Alterman uses this element of guarding for personal rather than national purposes. Spoken by a father to a daughter, this has a special "tender",

"feminine" and prayer-like quality.¹¹ The song is structured in an A, B, A2, B, A-coda sections form. The context of the A sections is intentionally very different from the context of the B section in order to emphasize the tension and the tragic notion that the lyrics convey. In the A section, a notion of a Father's prayer for his daughter can be derived from the use of the feminine conjugation of the verb guard, "shimri," and is noticeable as a contrast to the masculine conjugation of the common liturgical context of this verb in the imperative form.¹² Alterman also uses a repetition of central words like: שמרי (Guard), נפשך (Your soul), חייך (Your life) to connote obsession.¹³ It seems Alterman is influenced by elements of the Biblical poetry, as the identity of the speaker is obscure and that adds mystery, as if the poem is being spoken by a divine "being" that has the capability to foresee the future. Another element Alterman uses to increase the tension in the song is onomatopoeia; the intense clusters of words that create squeaky, sparkly, unpleasant sound as if danger is in every corner: חייך (Your life), חותך (Cuts), שורף (Burns), אש (Fire), שיער (hair), רחש (Murmur), חשיכה (Darkness) etc, not to mention the negative meaning of those words that are scattered throughout the song.

In the B section the mood changes and Alterman portrays a pastoral picture. However, Using the word: לכאורה (It seems like...) and the repetitive structure in which this word is being used: "זה ערב קיץ לכאורה זה לכאורה רק ערב קיץ טוב" "It is a summer evening it seems to be, it seems to be..." reveals the cynical tone of this section and emphasize the notion of danger. Danger is actually closer then ever. The warm summer evening, that Alterman is describing, full of grace and compassion: "שבא לחסד ולרחמים" the evening that does not insinuate fear, suspicion or guilt: "לא למורא ולא לרחש חשדות ודבר אשם", is really an illusion. At the very end of

¹¹ As Dr. Wendy Zierler pointed out.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

section B, Alterman indicates that this evening actually withholds an immensely tragic potential, waiting to burst out and to harm everything in its way. He uses an element that seems to be naïve: a lightened lamp "מנורה אשר תאיר" until bedtime" "עד אם ננח ונישן". Sleeping, however, means that we would not be on guard and thus, a disaster might happen without our ability to prevent it. Secondly, Alterman declares it specifically: "רק ערב קיץ חם וטוב הוא לכאורה רק" "A good and warm summer evening, only seems to be a good and warm summer evening that one should not be afraid of". Lastly, the last sentence of section B seems to be connected to the first sentence of section A2 in a way, that if the word כי (because) will be added in between section A2 and B, we will get a full explanation why this summer evening is so threatening: "רק ערב קיץ חם שבא לא למורא (כי) הגה הרוח יד שולחת..." "Just a warm summer evening not to be frightened of (because) the wind extends its hand, a window is slowly opens in the dark..." As the song progresses the tone changes and now the speaker moves to a questioning mode. Even though he describes some fearful nature elements like sky, dust and water that have the ability to kill, he presents some naive questions to the woman who seems to be exposed to certain uncontrollable dangerous forces she can't control. It is as if he doubts the woman's ability to see reality clearly and insinuates that irrationality might have taken over her.¹⁴ The use of oxymoron—fearful-laughter, frozen-happiness—communicate a similar idea and suggest that the woman's life is no longer based on rational foundations, and therefore she is doomed.

¹⁴ As Dr. Wendy Zierler pointed out.

Analysis of Music

The music Argov provided for this song elaborates melody and harmony to serve the lyrics in a magnificent way. The recitative style the melody is written in, that matches the words precisely, enhances the Ballad's dramatic nature. Also the harmony serves the same goal. Argov is using only diatonic chords to give the harmony a minimalist flavor in order to concentrate on the lyrics. The **A** sections are written in D minor. The melody in those sections is brilliantly written to increase anxiety. It forces certain words to be attached in a way that purposely disregards the "right" grammatical float of those sentences. For example, the melody of the first sentence "Guard your soul / your strength O guard / Guard your soul", divides the sentence into "Guard your soul your strength / O guard guard your soul", and thus create an intense repetition of the word "Guard". The first four notes of the song create a pattern that repeats over and over through out the song, in various ways, and is reminiscent of the beginning of Ludwig Van Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: three equal notes that lead to an accented fourth one, that is known to be the motto of Beethoven's symphony: **fate**. Although Argov never confessed that he was influenced by Beethoven, considering the self-prophetic element in the song (The death of Alterman's daughter), and Argov's musical background, rooted in classical music, it seems reasonable to assume that he might have been subconsciously influenced from Beethoven while composing this fatalistic song.

The **B** section, like the notion of the lyrics, brings about a different mood. The element that symbolizes fate in the **A** sections is withheld. The melodic line stretches and curls in a lyrical manner. It becomes less intense, and unlike the manipulation of the melody in the **A** sections that emphasizes certain words, here, the melody remains loyal to the text. The notion of the calm, relaxed and even sentimental atmosphere is also conveyed by a

melodic "stretch" in the very first sentence of section **B**. On the word "Kayits" (Summer) the melody gradually ascends to the note **D** and gradually descends back in a way that may remind us of a yawn, or a lazy summer body stretch. However, the harmonies in the **B** section are bouncing between F major and D minor. This instability wishes to convey an uncomfortable feeling of contrast between the pastoral summer evening and the sense of hovering danger.

"בראשית" (In the Beginning)

During the first few decades after the establishment of the state of Israel, Biblical materials became a favorable subject for poets and lyricists. The miraculous return of the Jewish people to the "land of the fathers" inflamed a sense of pride and heroism in their hearts and invoked a vast spring of creativity, based on the Jewish heritage. Argov, however, chose almost to ignore this trend. Surprisingly, he composed only a small number of songs that drew their text from the Bible, and when he did, the lyrics he chose conveyed an obvious ironic tone. Such a song is: "Bereishit", Chaim Heffer's interpretation of the Biblical story of the creation.

Analysis of Text

Heffer structured the lyrics of the song in an **A B a** sections form. The **A** section is a poetic description of the Biblical story of the creation until the point man ("אדם") is created. Longer lines in the parts of creations (**A,a**) contribute a sense of majesty and divinity, while

the B section which details what happens after Adam is created includes much shorter, more abrupt lines.¹⁵

The B section is a bitter description of the human race that God created and its potential of eliminating itself by the advancing inventions of modernity. The fast progression of inventions gradually leads to the inevitable atomic bomb, to its usage, and to the total destruction of mankind. Though Heffer's poem does not mention specifically that the human race was eliminated we understand it from section a which is a brief repeat of the story of the creation, soon to be understood as a second creation, with a different, surprising conclusion: God does not create human beings in his world.

Analysis of Music

The song starts with an instruction to the singer to quote the first verse from Genesis:

"בראשית ברא אלוהים את השמים ואת הארץ והארץ הייתה תהו ובהו וחושך על פני תהום" (In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was without form or void and darkness hovered on the face of the abyss). Opening the song with a quote creates a special effect that gives a sense of religious authenticity and holiness to the song, only in order to increase the sense of irony. A turning point in the song occurs in the last lines, where one begins to see its harshly critical aspects. Another element that has the same function is the way the piano accompaniment is written in the sections of the stories of the creation (A and a); the accompaniment is written mainly in chords as to create a solemn effect of a churchlike atmosphere. This method appears also in the very beginning of the song, right after the

¹⁵ As Dr. Wendy Zierler pointed out.

spoken quote from Genesis, where Argov presents a theatrical element: the first sentence of the song is the quote of this chapter's second verse: "וביום הראשון הבדיל אלוהים בין חושך לאור" (On the first day God separated between darkness and light). Argov finishes the melody of this verse with a short pause. Right after the pause the quote continues: "וייהי אור" (And there was light). In incorporating the pause as well as the unique melody that comes afterwards, Argov emphasizes the responsive essence of the second sentence, loyal to the Biblical narrative.

The harmonic changes throughout the song are so frequenting, surprising, and complicated that this song can definitely be considered as one of the climaxes in Argov's musical legacy.

Argov uses three different melodies throughout the description of the first story of creation. (Section A) The first day and the forth day starts in E major and after a harmonic journey, this section is concluded very ceremonially. This conclusion incorporate the "classical" progression of tonic, dominant, tonic, on E major, when the Biblical words are quoted: "וייהי ערב ויהי בקר יום ראשון / רביעי", "and there was evening and there was morning first / forth day". In the description of the second and the fifth days we move from E major to G major by using its dominant cord: D79 as a pivotal point. This new and refreshing scale segues and concludes this section on B minor, the scale's third grade, using a diatonic modulation. Since this section does not conclude with a quotation from the Bible as in the description of the first and the forth days, Argov's choice of harmony to this non-declarative ending, is this B minor scale that comes after an authentic cadence. This B minor scale also opens the section where the third and six days are described. Following this B minor scale there is a chromatic descent that is used in the description of the third day as if to portray musically the geographical location of land the valley and the sea that are created on that day.

The same chromatic descent is also used in the description of sixth day in order to create a mysterious mood, as an expectation and a preparation for the "ultimate" part of creation, the human race, once again, with a sense of irony, for what is now described in such a majestic noble way, will be Expendable in the second story of creation.

A pause on an E augmented cord after the chromatic descent functions as a tensional peak and thus increases the ecstatic joyous feeling when finally the tension is resolved to the tonic, A major. On its first appearance, this A major cord is an introduction to the description of the creation of mankind, and on its second appearance, to concludes this section.

The B section describes the actions of mankind that leads inevitably to its destruction. This section presents a total change of mood since the words are very repetitive as to invoke the feeling of horror. The harmony is now E minor, a dramatic contrast to the E major the song opened with. In this section Argov is using a few elements to create a notion of anxiousness. First, an organ point on A is stretched throughout this whole section. Secondly the melody gradually ascends, with every repetition of the word "אדם"(man), accompanied with a constant crescendo until it gets to a final climax at the end of the sentence: "והאדם ברא את האטום", "And man created the Atom". Then, a big pause is set to increase the state of shock, as well as to prepare us for the second story of creation.

The a section is a short and concise description of the story of creation that was introduced in the A section. The shortness of the second story of creation that comes after a longer version seems to imitate the two stories of creation told in Genesis 1 and 2. The lyrics and music of the first day of creation in this section is the exact repetition of section A, using the same religious, solemn E major scale. However, In order to concise, the description of the second, the third and the fourth days are now gathered into one musical unit, and the fifth and

sixth days to another musical unit. Nevertheless, Argov is using the same music that was introduced in section A for section a.

The song concludes with the words: "וירא אלוהים כי טוב" "and God saw that it was good", after God creates a second world without mankind. This sentence is presented in a very dramatic, conclusive way with the musical, choral like progression of subdominant, dominant, tonic, and gives the impression of a "happy end". These concluding sentences however, incorporate a new scale that was not used before: D major, which appears on the words: "וישבת מכל מלאכתו ולא ברא את האדם", "and he rested from all his work and did not create man". It is as if Argov wants to convey the message that the second world created by God, a new world, lacking mankind, is after all "one scale lower" (from E major to D major) from the previous world, where human beings once lived.

[illegible]

- ה' אלהים עז-רבי-ה' יום - נ-ו-ט - ש-י - ש-ל-י-י-ו-ם-ק-ר-ב-ו-ה-י-ו-י-ר-כ-ע-ה-י-ו-י-י-ו-ם
 - YAM VAY-HI E-REV VAY-HI BO-KER YOM SHI-SHI U-VA - YOM HA-RVI-YI ET HA-

- כ-ו-כ-ל-כ-י-ם-כ-כ-ו-כ-ר-ל-ו-ת-ל-י-ב-ל-ה-ע-ח-ר-י-ו-ר-א-ב-מ-ש-ש-
 - SHE-MESH BA-RA VE-YA - RE-ACH A-LA BA-LEY-LOT VE-VOT KO-CHA-VIM KOL KO-

- ר-ב-י-י-ו-ם-ק-ר-ב-ו-ה-י-ו-י-ר-כ-ע-ה-י-ו-י-י-ו-ם - ה-י-ו-י-ל-ו-ת-מ-י-כ-ם-ר-ו-ע-ב-ו-ב-ו-ז-ל-מ-ה-ו-א-כ-כ-
 - CHAV IJU MA-ZAL SO-VE-VU VE-AV-RU BAH-SI-LOT VAY-HI E-REV VAY-HI BO-KER YOM R'VI-

- ב-י-ת-ה-ג-י-ם-ד-ה-א-ת-פ-י-ם-ד-ה-צ-י-ם-כ-י-ו-ם-ה-צ-ר-י-ה-ו-א-ש-י-מ-י-ת-י-ו-ם-ב-ו-י-ע-י-
 - YI U-VA - YOM CHA-HI-SHI IJU YA-TZAR CHA-YIM BA-MA-YM HATZ-DA-FIM ET HA-DA-GIM HA-TA-NI-

- ש-ה-נ-י-ם-ש-ש-ה-א-ל-נ-פ-כ-ה-כ-י-ח-ו-פ-ר-י-ו-ם-ה-ו-ו-א-ו-ב-נ-י-ם-ה-י-ו-ם-
 - NIM UB'-O - TO HA-YOM PAR-CHU BNEI HA-KA - NAF EL IJA-SHA-MA-YIM HAN-SILA-

- פ-י-ה-ל-ח-כ-י-ו-ם-ה-צ-ר-י-ה-ו-א-ש-י-מ-י-ת-י-ו-ם-ב-ו-י-נ-י-ם-ה-י-ו-ם-ה-י-ו-ם-ה-י-ו-ם-
 - RIM HA-SMU-NI-YOT VE-HA-YO-NIM U-VA-YOM HA-SHI-SHI HU YA-TZAR CHA-IOT BA-CHE-LED HA-PI-

- כ-ה-ו-א-ש-מ-מ-מ-י-ו-ם-ה-ת-ו-א-ו-ב-ע-י-ם-צ-ב-ה-ל-ו-ת-י-א-ה-ל-י-ם-
 - LIM HA-A-YA-LOT VE-HA-TZVO-YIM UB'-O - TO HA-YOM MA-MA-SH HU BA-

- ה-י-ו-י-ה-י-ם-ל-ו-א-ל-ם-צ-ב-ד-ם-א-ר-א-ב-ה-ו-א-ל-ם-צ-ב-ד-ם-א-ר-א-
 - RA A-DAM BE-TZE-LEM HU BA-RA A-DAM BE-TZE-LEM E-LO-HIM VAY-HI

- ש-י-ש-י-י-ו-ם-ק-ר-ב-ו-ה-י-ו-י-ר-כ-ע-ה-י-ו-י-י-ו-ם - א-ה-ו-
 E-REV VAY-HI BO-KER YOM-SHI-SHI VE-HA-A-

[illegible]

In the beginning
By Chalm Cheffer

In the beginning, God created the heaven and earth
And the earth was without form and void
And darkness was on the face of the deep.
On the first day, God divided between darkness and light
And there was light.
And the morning, clear, shined in the world.
And after it came the dark night.
And there was evening, and there was morning, one day.
And in the second day, God created the blue marvelous firmament,
the firmament that gushed out from the water
And broke through, and spread above, high and round.
And in the third day He created the land,
The valley, the mountains, and sea.
And planted many trees and flowers
And grass that were so beautiful to the eye.
And there was evening, and there was morning the third day.
In the forth day He created the sun, and the moon to rise up at night.
Thousands of stars, each one is a sign.
And all, circulating on their track.
And there was evening and there was morning forth day.
On the fifth day He created life in the water,
The fish, the crocodiles, and the seashells,
And on that same day, flew to the sky, the eagles, the swallows and the doves.
And in the sixth day He created the animals of the land.
The elephants, the deer, and the hyenas
And in that same day He created a man in His image,
He created a man in the image of God.
And there was evening and there was morning sixth day.

And the man tamed every beast. And the man plowed the land
And the man invented the wheel. And the man navigated boats on waves.
And the man restrained the steam. And the man flew above like a bird.
And the man conquered planets high above. And the man created the atom.

And the earth was without form and void and darkness
Was on the face of the deep.
And in the first day God divided between darkness and light and there was light,
And the morning clear, shined in the world and after it came the dark night.
And there was evening and morning first day
And in the second day He created the firmament
The firmament that gushed from the water and broke through.
And in the third day He created the land
And planted many trees, flowers and grass.
And there was evening and there was morning second day.
He created the great lights in the forth
And on the fifth He created life in the water
And in that same day flew to the sky the birds.
On the sixth day He saw that His deed was finished
And He rested from all His work
And didn't create man.
And God saw that it was good.

שיר משמר

Cantabile

[illegible]

Drum C7 F C9
RE E - 37 RA - 17 35 18 - 37 RE LI 1/4 - 37 RA PAE E - 37
RE E - REV RA - 17 35 18 - 37 RE LI 1/4 - 37 RA PAE E - REV

[illegible][illegible]

— סם — כס עמ רר ח טי תח ל — ים
- SHAM SHE - BA IN REY-ACH TAV - SII - LEM

י — צז יצב — אד ק — דו ה — יק — ז
VE - IN (SH) KA A - SHER TA - I - IR

טַע אֶל הַיָּם - אֶל הַיָּם - אֶל הַיָּם - אֶל הַיָּם
 AD EL HA-YAM - EL HA-YAM - EL HA-YAM - EL HA-YAM

רַב עַל הַיָּם - רַב עַל הַיָּם - רַב עַל הַיָּם - רַב עַל הַיָּם
 RAB EL HA-YAM - RAB EL HA-YAM - RAB EL HA-YAM - RAB EL HA-YAM

1) ה - נה -
 HI - NA HA-
 - רה - נפ - שד - פה - י - ע - שם - רי - שם -
 - RA ZSHIM-RI NAPH-CHECH HA - A - YEL-PHA SHIM-RI NAPH - SHECH SHIM- RI CHA

[illegible]

Song of Guarding
By Natan Alterman

Guard your soul, your strength O guard, guard your soul,
Guard your life, your reason, guard your life,
From a falling wall, from a roof inflamed, from darkening shadow,
From a slinging stone, from a knife, from nails.
Guard your soul from that which burns, which cuts,
Which is nearby like dust and like sky,
From which is silent, from which waits and pulls
And that kills like the water of the well and the oven's fire.
Your soul O guard and your reason, the hair of your head,
Your skin O guard, guard your soul, guard your life.

A summer evening it seems to be. It seems to be only a good summer evening,
familiar and old, that comes for grace and for compassion.
Not for fear and not with a murmur of suspicions and guilt.
That comes with the scent of cooked foods and with a lamp that will illuminate
Till we will rest and sleep. Till we will rest and sleep.
Only a good and warm summer evening seems to be,
Only warm summer evening that comes not for fear.

There the wind sends a hand and without a whisper
Suddenly a window slowly opens in the darkness.
O say why do you laugh like fear?
O say why do you freeze like happiness?
O say why is the world still remote
And fire and water watch it from every side?
O say why does your life twitch in it
Like a frighten bird in the palm of a hand?
O say why are you a flight and great trembling
Like a bird in the room that looks for a lattice.

A summer evening it seems to be. It seems to be only a good summer evening,
familiar and old, that comes for grace and for compassion.
Not for fear and not with a murmur of suspicions and guilt.
That comes with the scent of cooked foods and with a lamp that will illuminate
Till we will rest and sleep. Till we will rest and sleep.
Only a good and warm summer evening seems to be,
Only warm summer evening that comes not for fear.

Guard your tired soul, guard your soul.
Guars your life, your reason, guard your life,
The hair of your head, Your skin O guard, guard your beauty,
Guard your good heart, embrace it in your hands.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have discussed the life and creative achievements of Sasha Argov, and have attempted to show his immense contribution to Israeli culture. Israel has been blessed with many great musicians who have enriched the culture with their music, however, only few musicians can be regarded as the ones who really shaped its style and determined its essence. Argov, I believe, is one of them. Not only did he compose many of the most familiar and beloved songs that inspired younger musicians and hence formed the style of Israeli folksong, but he also contributed to other niches in Israeli culture like theatre, and especially art song.

Although I tried to be as broad as possible in my writing of his biography and I believe that my interview with his wife, Nussia, uncovered a lot of unique information, I am aware that there are many other facets of Argov's music yet to be explored, including analyses of his compositions for the theatre as well as the immense role he played in shaping the face of Israeli popular music.

Researching the music of Argov was a fascinating journey for me as I was exposed to elements in my own culture that enriched my artistic viewpoint. It is my hope that in the future, more Israeli musicians will take on the challenge of adapting and performing the compositions of Sasha Argov; I am certain both the artists and our culture would benefit greatly from this effort.

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