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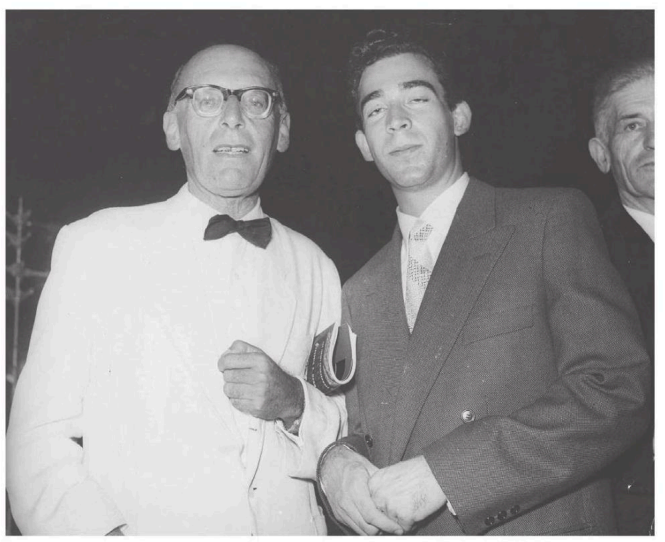
Noam Sheriff's 'Akdamot': My work will survive

Ella Milch-Sheriff on life with two composers under one roof, and what the book leaves unsaid

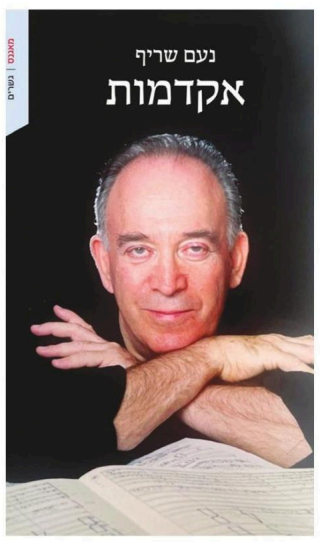
• By LIRAN GURKIEWICZ



ELLA AND Noam Sheriff. (Dan Porges)



SHERIFF (RIGHT) with his teacher Paul Ben-Haim (Private Collection)



SHERIFF'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 'Akdamot' ('Preludes'), published by Magnes Press in 2024. (Muki Scwhartz)

'He who does not go down to the people cannot rise from the people."

Few words capture Noam Sheriff as well as this credo. He was one of the most prominent Israeli composers, widely regarded as a leading figure of his generation, a status earned through a prolific career that spanned the most intimate chamber works to large-scale compositions for orchestra and choir, as well as theater and cinema.

He also came to the public eye through television programs such as Kol Ha'manginut, and through numerous arrangements for artists ranging from Sasha Argov to Arik Einstein. Sheriff refused to isolate himself in the ivory tower of high art.

In 2024, Magnes Press published his autobiography, *Akdamot*, named after his debut composition. But it is an oral memoir, not a book written in the usual way: over several years, Sheriff recorded his life story on tape – sporadically, as he remembered it.

"It was important to Noam to preserve his unique conversational style," explained his widow, Ella Milch-Sheriff, herself one of Israel's leading contemporary composers. "He was articulate and fluent, with a distinct way of thinking and expressing himself. It was vital to him that this voice be reflected in print."

How a spoken life became a book

The final text was transcribed and edited from long hours of Sheriff recounting his life into a recording device. Yet it is a carefully crafted narrative in which every word was chosen with the awareness that it was being handed down. Alongside his life story, Sheriff unfolds his views on art and the creative process.

In one revealing passage, he admits that in old age he can no longer remember his earlier works, some of which were never performed, and must look at the scores. Rereading them, he is at times astonished by pieces for which he was "hardly responsible," works that conquered him in a storm.

"Now I understand that the work is stronger," he writes. "It wants me, takes me over, and I lose my existence for its sake."

Sheriff was endowed with exceptional self-confidence, as he attests in the book, and it is evident in his music as well: "I believe that my work will survive."

Two composers under one roof

Sheriff's household was, by all accounts, unusual: two leading composers, each with a distinct voice, under one roof. How did that work?

"You don't compose it with someone else," said Milch-Sheriff. But she clarified that "Noam was always the first to see my scores. And sometimes, when I hit a wall, a problem, or even at the very, very beginning, when I had a musical theme but wasn't sure about it," she would go to him and ask, "What do you think?"

"Noam was never my formal teacher, but in fact, he was the greatest teacher I ever had," she shared. "To live with a musician of that scale, of such immense stature, and not learn from him – you would have to be an idiot or completely closed off. So, I am clearly neither of those things, and I learned an enormous amount from sharing a life with a musician like that."

The fact that both were professional musicians took an interesting turn in Sheriff's later years. Nearly blind later in life, he relied on his wife and their youngest son, Aviv, to write his final pieces.

"He would sit beside us, and we, taking turns at the computer, would have him dictate the notes to us. Then we would play it back for him on the computer, and he would correct it, make additions, subtract things, and so on," Milch-Sheriff recalled.

This went on for the last five years of his life, during which, she added, "he wrote at least two of his finest masterpieces," such as his "Missa Terra Sancta."

An Israeli composer by nature

In many ways, Sheriff continued the path of the first generation of composers who emigrated to British Mandatory Palestine, patriotic and Zionist, ideologically and musically driven to express the Jewish and Israeli heritage. Chief among them was Paul Ben-Haim, whom Sheriff studied with and revered throughout his life.

The book is filled with fascinating memories of their time together. Sheriff also discusses his personal and professional relationships with other key figures of Israeli art music, including a tense relationship with Alexander Uriah Boskovich, an obvious adversary of Ben-Haim, and his immense appreciation of Yosef Tal.

Sheriff mediated between East and West. How did he come to assume the role of an Israeli composer? "Noam did not assume a role; he did not decide, 'I'm going to be an Israeli composer.' It was something innate to his nature," Milch-Sheriff clarified.

Where the Munich-born Ben-Haim consciously studied the music of the Middle East, "Noam was born here. Arab music was part and parcel of his being."

It is worth noting that alongside Sheriff, figures like Ami Maayani and Ben-Zion Orgad also helped define this generation, continuing to expand on the techniques and motifs introduced by the founding fathers of Israeli art music, such as Ben-Haim, Boskovich, Marc Lavry, and Menahem Avidom.

Throughout the book, Sheriff unfolds his perspectives on issues that still preoccupy researchers, composers, and journalists, such as the attitude toward Israeli music of the 1930s. Of his Sinfonietta, composed at age 18, he writes that it may bear the influence of "Mediterranean music, which everyone today loves to hate." And he adds: "Today, I am no longer ashamed of it."

That openness is evident in his large-scale compositions too, such as Revival of the Dead. He admits it was commissioned as an eclectic piece, yet it weaves Ashkenazi cantorial music together with Samaritan and Moroccan Jewish melodies, and even the singing of Sheriff's own mother, to awe-inspiring effect.

"I did not know how to start the piece," he recalls, "so I asked Ella's son what 'Jewish music' is. He answered, 'Vehi She'amda.' I decided to start the piece with that song." Other large-scale works, such as A Sephardic Passion and Psalms of Jerusalem, are similarly eclectic. His more intimate compositions, by contrast, are considerably more homogeneous in style.

What does the book leave out?

Despite her own successful career, Milch-Sheriff has been very active in preserving Noam's heritage. What should younger generations take from it?

"I hope they will find at least historical interest in how Israeli concert music grew through Noam's life story, which is so different from life today, global life, the internet, our ability to open up to the world, which in his era – most of it at least, most of the period – was different," she said.

There is no doubt that much of Sheriff's life and music is missing from the book.

"If you noticed, Noam focuses on his early years. The final years, the last 30, he touches on in certain details, but very little. It's mostly the Israel of the past, the Tel Aviv of the past, the music teachers of the past, the Philharmonic of the past," confessed Milch-Sheriff.

It is in that sense that Sheriff was a product of his time, deeply influenced by European culture, which was so prevalent in Israel then.

The relatively short autobiography also says little about the works themselves, including the intimate chamber works in which his greatness as a composer comes to the fore.

Still, much of the man is present: his philosophies on music, his iron will, his commitment to music. As the actor and director Oded Kotler remarked at an evening marking the book's publication, it is precisely the direct, simple writing that comes from the heart that also penetrates the heart.