

MORAN CHOIR (Barry Morag)



Hope springs eternal

The cultural roots of 'Hatikva' are revealed in concert

• By BARRY DAVIS

We all know "Hatikva," right? I mean our national anthem, not the pop group (for those familiar with pop-reggae outfit Hatikva 6). We all sing it on occasion, although we may not know all the words to all the stanzas. For anyone who came up through the Zionist education/youth movement ranks, it has been a staple of life over the years.

But how much do we really know about it? What do we know about Naftali Herz Imber, the Ukrainian-born poet whose poem "Tikvateinu" (Our Hope) provided the textual basis for what became the national anthem of the Jewish state-in-waiting.

Classical pianist and educator Astrith Baltsan has been on the "Hatikva" trail for some time now – 18 years to be exact. On Monday (5:30 p.m.), the Israel Culture Prize and Tel Aviv Prize laureate will join forces with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra for a festive program called *Hatikva – The Mystery of the National Anthem*. The concert,

at the Charles Bronfman Auditorium (Heichal Hatarbut) in Tel Aviv, is part of the Philharmonic for Children series, with the upcoming event tied in neatly with the advent of Independence Day later in the week. Baltsan and the IPO will be joined on stage by a stellar performer lineup, including conductor Ronen Borshevsky, cantor Shai Abramson, and the Bat Kol Choir and choral conductor Anat Morag. Baltsan will play piano and emcee the show. The repertoire includes works by Tchaikovsky, Elgar and Smetana.

Baltsan's original anthemic epiphany occurred in 2000 at her debut appearance with the IPO. It was the last concert her then ailing father attended. Baltsan relates how her wheelchair-bound father struggled to focus on his daughter's performance until she began playing Smetana's symphonic poem *Vltava*, which incorporates part of the melody of "Hatikva." Baltsan's father's emotional reaction to the piece moved her and set her on a path of research and discovery which eventually spawned a book and concert called *Hatikva –*

Past, Present and Future.

After completing the writing stage, Baltsan made a presentation of her findings to then minister of education Gideon Saar and director general Shimshon Shoshani. It proved to be anything but a cut-and-dried session.

"I saw they were crying," Baltsan recalls. "That was in 2009. I realized that if they were crying, it wasn't because it was such a well-written book. I'm not Shai Agnon, and no one is going to be moved to tears by my writing. I thought there must be something special in the material when it is conveyed live."

And so the show format came to be, original as a program for adults, which was later adapted for younger audiences.

On Monday, the young spectators and their parents will learn about the various stages of the national anthem's creative and cultural evolution, from the time when Imber wrote the initial lyrics in Romania in 1878, to the development of the work's musical strata. The latter began when a young Romanian oleh named Shimon Cohen married a couple of melodies to the



first two stanzas of “Hatikva.” As Baltsan points out, the musical synergy was an apt reflection of the ingathering of Jews from all over the world and all kinds of cultural backdrops.

The melodic kick-starter, it transpires, comes from the *Prayer for Dew of Sephardic Jewry* written by 15th-century Spanish sage Rabbi Yitzhak Bar Sheshet of Toledo. Following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the melody began to make the rounds of other communities across Europe. Romania, once again, enters the “Hatikva” picture and, as Baltsan explains, the musical underscore for the second part of the anthem, which starts with “od lo avda tikvateinu” – our hope is not yet lost – takes a decidedly Western musical turn and a dramatic octave surge, negotiating a transition from minor to major chords in the process. According to Baltsan’s research findings, the melodic inspiration for the change of musical tack came from a Romanian folk tune dating to 1830, sung by farmers while navigating their ox-drawn carts across their fields.

Intriguingly, the textual and musical components of “Hatikva” developed into a national anthem for a country that was still far beyond the horizon of the foreseeable future.

“Hatikva” has been sung by all manner of Jews all over the world for much more than the 70 years of the modern State of Israel. It was sung in protest at the 6th Zionist Congress in 1903, in protest against Herzl’s proposal to make Uganda the Promised Land, and by survivors of the Bergen Belsen concentration camp as they were being liberated in April 1945 by the British army.

It was finally officially arranged for an orchestra in 1946 by Italian conductor Bernadino Molinari, who came to Palestine to conduct the then Palestine Orchestra on the occasion of its 10th anniversary. Possibly most famously, “Hatikva” was sung at the declaration of the State of Israel in May 1948, and there have been numerous emotive renditions over the years.

Baltsan’s young audience next week should leave the auditorium well entertained and better informed about the origins of our national anthem.

For tickets and more information: (03) 543-0771/2 and <http://www.hatarbut.co.il/>