

Choral Traditions and the Choral Scene in Israel

Naomi Faran, Choir conductor and founder of Moran Choirs, Israel

In the Western world, the choral tradition rooted in the church prompted many composers to create works which formed the backbone of a rich musical heritage. In Israel, by contrast, the rise of choral singing is a very young phenomenon only a few decades in the making.

Choral singing in Israel started with the arrival of Jews from all corners of the world to the Land of Israel at the turn of the 20th century. In the 1930s and 40s, with the rise of Nazism in Germany, musicians, conductors, and composers from across Europe gave rise to both vocal and instrumental music. The notable composers from this period who formed the basis for this new vocal culture include Alexander Boscovich, Mordecai Seter, Eden Partosh, Paul Ben Haim, Nissim Nissimov, Yehezkel Braun, and Tzvi Avni. These composers wrote in a style which blended biblical texts from the Old Testament with the reality they experienced in the new country.

The kibbutz was central to the development of an Israeli singing culture. Festivals, communal events, daily life, war, and loss all formed the raw material for composers and a new Israeli creativity.

The Middle East, situated as it is at the centre of international politics and a politically and religiously sensitive area, is home to the three main Western religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Israel has traditionally been drawn towards the West whereas Egypt and Syria drew influences from the Soviet Union. In the musical melting pot

which defines Israel, Arabic music from Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon plays an important part. This is the music of the Arab citizens, and it is shared by the Jews who emigrated from Arab lands to Israel and have passed it down to their descendants. In Israel today there is a truly incredible and beautiful mixture of the different cultures from both East and West.



The National Israel Vocal Center HaBayit LeShira

In Israel there are around 120 amateur choirs and over 700 vocal ensembles which are called *chavurot zemer*, which loosely translates as 'singing groups'. There are four outstanding children's choirs in the country, plus school and community choirs.

The adult choirs concentrate on artistic singing of a European repertoire, the production of major works with an accompanying orchestra and also Israeli works and folk songs.

The *chavurot zemer* focus on simple, popular Israeli songs. Thousands of arrangements have been written by local conductors and are performed at gatherings across the country.

The children's choirs are the crown jewel of the choral scene.

Classic Israeli songs and specially adapted classical pieces are performed together with original works and new arrangements, and these represent Israel around the world.



Inside the National Israel Vocal Center Habayit LeShira

Israeli Folklore

The gathering of Jews from around the world to the Land of Israel created a mosaic of cultures, rhythms, melodies, harmonies, and texts. These songs have become communal property; they are enjoyed at giant community sing-alongs and are integral to folk dancing. A huge body of folk songs are associated with Memorial Day ceremonies; they commemorate the painful loss of soldiers from the never-ending battles and are filled with nostalgia for the Land. They sing of love and loss and combine the Hebrew and Arabic languages. These songs are threaded into the canvas of people's daily lives in Israel.

Moran Choir

I founded the Moran Choir in 1986. The year I set up the choir was truly the happiest of my life.

I was a music teacher in Beit Yitzchak, the *moshav* (village) where I still live. In the small music room, surrounded by earthenware instruments and instruments that the children had made themselves from natural materials, we created pieces and songs, and our imagination took flight.

Straightaway, once I had a choir, I set out to collaborate with composers. I realised that the inspiration for an Israeli children's choir needed to come from within folklore, together with original arrangements for the choir. I collaborated with Yehezkel Braun, Menachem Wiesenber, Haim Permont, Gil Shohat, Josef Bardanshvoli, Ella Sheriff, Shlomo Gronich, and many other wonderful composers. This connection with the composers has only strengthened over time and today the country's leading composers, young and old, create works for Moran Choirs.

Today, Moran Choir has grown to become like a pyramid of choirs:

- Cecilia Ensemble: an 8-strong vocal group, made up of professional, classically trained opera singers.
- The Moran Ensemble: 24 young, semi-professional, classically trained singers starting out in their musical careers.
- The Moran Choir: the children's choir for 11-18-year-olds. This choir frequently represents Israel at international events, most memorably at the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords.
- Young Moran and Moranchikim: the two choirs for young children, from kindergarten to age 11.
- Moran Parents: a choir for adults who love to sing.

Our motto, 'whoever sings is happy' underscores our connection with the community. The current, biggest project to date is the national Israel Vocal Center (HaBayit LeShira). When

complete, this purpose-built, accessible-to-all facility will be home to dozens of choirs, vocal groups and choral projects. In Israel, people understand that singing is a powerful tool for connecting people. It causes us to listen to one another, to be receptive and tolerant. It can build bridges between different cultures and nations and creates both an internal and external language that embodies safety, trust, and a willingness to communicate love and joy.



Naomi Faran is the founder of the Moran Choirs and its conductor and musical director since 1986. She is a graduate of The Buchmann-Mehta School of Music, Tel Aviv University. She is the recipient of numerous awards, among them Outstanding Conductor at the first International Choir Competition in Israel, the Israeli Ministry of Culture Arik Einstein award for Established Artists (2021) and the Israel Artists' Union Lifetime Achievement Award (2022). Naomi is frequently invited to judge prestigious competitions and has given advanced master classes in conducting at International Symposiums in Slovenia, Denmark, Hong Kong, China, South Korea, Italy, Spain, and as part of the Europa Cantat. Her vision and energy are expressed through successful results. Moran Choirs currently comprises six separate choirs, with singers between 6-35. Many alumni have forged careers as professional singers on world stages. <https://www.moran-choir.co.il/en>

The Moran Choirs perform on radio and TV and with Israel's top orchestras – The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (IPO), the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, Israel Chamber Orchestra, and the Rishon LeZion Symphony Orchestra. They have performed in China, Kazakhstan, the USA, South Korea, and throughout

Europe.

Intrinsic to this vision is the goal of combining musical excellence with community involvement. Each choir is involved in numerous community outreach projects, such as working with adults and children with learning difficulties, working with marginalized youth, and performing for patients in the Paediatric Oncology Department of Israel's Schneider Hospital.

Moran Choirs' unique ethos is that the act of singing together is a vehicle for social change. Naomi has presented her working model at academic forums worldwide, including a conference at Yale University.

Other projects of Naomi's were aimed at promoting peace. Naomi Faran and the Moran Choirs are remembered for their iconic performance at the Peace Concert in Oslo in 1994, where Israeli children were joined by Palestinian children singing together for peace.

Edited by Karin Rockstad, USA