



## JOSEF TAL

### The Hand

Dramatic scene for soprano and violoncello (1987; IMI 6659)

Text: Israel Eliraz

Israel Eliraz

### Words, Words and Music

1

The story of a palmist who, while reading the palm of a woman who has asked to learn what does the future hold for her, realizes – to her horror – that what she sees in the palm is her own doom and her own death.

This is the subject of THE HAND. It differs from all the other works which Josef Tal and I have written together and let me say a few words about that.

2

In the opera ASHMEDAI (1968; IMI 109) I had in mind the Jewish legend "King Solomon and Asmodeus" and have made universal and relevant use of it. I wanted to expose the horrors nations tend to perpetrate using the "evil" wearing a mask of the "good". Did I intend to "teach a lesson"? Yes, unashamedly and clearly: Yes. I did not want to do it in the Brechtian manner, but in many roundabout artistic ways which need not be discussed here.

In MASSADA 967 (1972; IMI 240) I have strayed far from the historic sources of the fall of Massada and have stressed the surrealist element (the dead participating in the action), but, once again, I wanted the spectator to learn something: Man cannot exist unless he lives according to his own credo without which life itself loses all value and is not worth living.

In THE TEMPTATION (1975; IMI 292) I tried to make the audience consider the crucial question: do we have the right to create a man as we should like to have him be, in accordance with the ideology we have chosen to serve? Every attempt to create a human Golem ends by the creature rising upon its maker. Man, even in the 20th century, does not have the licence to assume the right of God the Creator. In this opera I have distanced myself from a specific historic message. I turned to a theatrical metaphor which is based on imagination, but this imagination has its feet planted firmly on the ground of today's reality.

In ELSE – HOMMAGE (1975; IMI 383) I have contrived a portrait of the poet Else Lasker-Schüler. I tried to draw a portrait (arbitrary, poetic) based on "information" (letters, interviews), as well as on quotations from her own poetical writings. I used the methods of collage. "Else" also has a few "messages" to share with us.

In THE GARDEN (1987; IMI 6582), the fourth opera we have written, I turned to the ancient and best known myth of all: the story of Adam, Eve and the Serpent. I used it as I pleased – how else could it be done? In the first act the pair go out into the world to conquer it. In the second, having conquered the world and created a civilization, Eve longs to return to her first love – the Serpent. They attempt to go back but fail. Eve discovers, to her frustration, that the Serpent has not remained the eternal young lover she remembers. It too has aged, time has taken its toll of it and of the Garden. Adam and Eve prepare for their return to the world.

3

In all that we have written up to THE HAND, there had been drama, plot, dramatic personae – either in a "conventional" or in an "avant-gardist" manner. The dialogues were meant to tell the audience something that reached *beyond* music. I have attempted to say something about Time; about the links between Man and his place in the World.

In THE HAND I entered, for the first time, the world of pure fantasy emboldened by its complete autonomy. Here the dream is more strongly present than in any of our other works. For the first time, only one character is on stage, quite solitary, and its aloneness is part of the subject matter. The verbal texture reaches almost the density of poetry, which gives the prose a very special quality.

In THE HAND we have abandoned completely any theatrical aids. Even if the singer (the Palmist) can act and does so, the acting is of no importance. THE HAND materializes in the mind's eye of the spectator-listener through the singing and the musical ability of the cellist.

4

All our joint ventures, prior to THE HAND, started with a telephone call from Josef, telling me: "I have been commissioned to write an opera – do you have anything?" and it would transpire that, indeed, I did have "something", or "something" would take shape in a series of conversations between us. These conversations, which have lasted on and off for over twenty years, served me as a fount of knowledge in establishing the relationship between words and music; between music and the stage; what is modern opera; the interdependence of political message and music et cetera.

Unlike on other occasions, no commission has been received for THE HAND. In 1988 Tal told me of a new short piece he had written entitled SCENE, from the Diary of Franz Kafka, June 25, 1914, for female voice without accompaniment (1978; IMI 6164). After hearing and seeing the piece performed at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, I realized that in fact, any piece of writing can be put to music even if it was not originally meant to serve as text for a musical composition. I then suggested that he add a piece for the same singer on a text of mine to make up the second half of the programme.

When I made this proposal to my composer I had no idea what text I was going to offer him. The notion of THE HAND popped up much later, after I have been toying around with ideas – something which has never been possible before as the formal structure is a *sine qua non* for opera libretti.

Only after THE HAND had been written did I find analogies between it and the drawings of Escher in which one climbs up stairs which go down and in which the fishes swimming from the right turn (how?) into birds flying to the left. Later on I came across an untitled story by Julio Cortazar, which tells of a man who reads a story about a murder and realizes, towards the end of it, that he himself is the intended victim. The fantastic tales by Borges and Marquez evoked a maelstrom of thoughts and emotions in me. One day I suddenly recalled a story which for years has been resting deep in the recesses of my consciousness: A detective in charge of an enquiry into a horrible murder case discovers, to his utter amazement, that it is he who is the murderer – ergo, the famous story of Oedipus Rex.

5

THE HAND is a tale of an amazing metamorphosis. Is this not also the *nature of all art*? We can but propose a starting point to a work of art, but in the course of creation it takes shape and form inherent in it, so that the end result is a surprise to the artist himself. Indeed, that is what is happening with this article; I have set out to say a few words about THE HAND and have, in this final sentence come to wherever it is I have come to and I must thank you, Reader, for coming along with me.

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Israel Eliraz was born in Jerusalem in 1936. He began publishing his works in 1963 and, the same year, won the National Council of Culture and Art Prize for his play "Three Women in Yellow". Since then he has written ten plays, numerous radio plays and three novels. His poetry, published since 1980, comprises eight books of verse and recently, a tome of selected poems (MIDDLE 1980–1990) has been published by Sifriat Poalim, Tel-Aviv. Apart from his close collaboration with the composer Josef Tal, Eliraz has written texts for compositions by Morris Cotel, Aharon Harlap, Mark Kopytman and Shulamit Ran. He is at present director of "Kerem" College for Teachers in Jerusalem.