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### JOSEF TAL

Josef Tal's position as Israel's preeminent electronic composer, noted by Alexander Ringer in 1965, is a designation of continuing validity despite the increasing involvement of his younger Israeli composers in this medium. Tal (originally Gruenthal) employs electronic media as an integral facet in much of his compositional output, which includes numerous operas, symphonies, concerti, and oratorios as well as solo and chamber works. He began his lifelong association with the twelve-tone method of composition through his teacher Heinz Tiessen, who "belonged to the small but radical group at the Berlin Academy associated with Schoenberg."<sup>1</sup> Ringer observed that "Tal's numerous works for traditional media defy classification as part of any 'school,'" noting a variety of important influences, including dodecaphonic principles, oriental melodic sources, and biblical inspiration.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Ringer provided a more detailed description of Tal's style:

The characteristic features of Tal's music are broad dramatic gestures and driving bursts of energy generated, for example, by various types of ostinato or sustained textural accumulations. Complex rhythmic patterning is typical of the widely performed Second Symphony and of a number of notable dance scores. But Tal's marked dramatic and philosophical propensities find total expression only in opera, particularly in the large-scale 12-note opera *Ashmedai*, commissioned

and first performed by the Hamburg Opera. The libretto, originally in Hebrew, relates a post-biblical Jewish legend in the form of a morality play, with allusions to the perversion of power in Nazi Germany. It is a profoundly expressive work, drawing on a wide range of media and styles.<sup>3</sup>

Philip Bohlman has called Tal "the most individualistic composer of the immigrant generation from Central Europe," and one who exemplifies the progressive, pluralistic trend among Israeli immigrant composers: "Throughout his career he has maintained that the unique character of Israeli culture was not its unity but its diversity, its openness to numerous cultural streams. At times he has defended such a position against the onslaught of considerable criticism. Tal's position, nevertheless, has endured and persists as an acculturative response that embraces change in Israeli culture, rather than eschewing it."<sup>4</sup>

Tal has been awarded the Yoel Engel Prize three times, received the Israel Prize in 1971, and was awarded the Arts Prize of the City of Berlin in 1975. He is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 1983 he shared the Wolff Prize with pianist Vladimir Horowitz and composer Olivier Messiaen.<sup>5</sup> Tal has received many awards and honorary distinctions in Germany, where his works are frequently performed. His music is also available on numerous recordings. In addition to his career as a composer, Tal is well known as an educator, pianist, and conductor. The composer's autobiography was published in Germany in 1985.<sup>6</sup>

I interviewed Josef Tal at his home in Jerusalem on June 20, 1986.

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I was born in a small village that today is in Poland. At the time I was born there it was part of east[ern] Germany.<sup>7</sup> But I moved with my parents as a child of a few months to Berlin in 1910. I lived in Berlin, went to school and the Academy of Music, and finished my training there. I started to work on my own and then came Hitler, and I decided immediately to leave. I came to then Palestine in March 1934. I couldn't immigrate as a musician because according to the British-mandate rules this was regarded as a freelance profession, and in this country there was a danger of becoming a social case with such a profession. So they demanded a minimum of one thousand pounds sterling in the bank from which I could live comfortably on the interest. I hadn't any possibility to get this money, which at the time was a huge sum of money.

So I found out it was much easier to come here on a “certificate of craftsman.” And just for this reason I decided to learn a craft, and as a hobby I always loved photography. So I saw nothing bad to learn that and to do it properly. I managed to get a sponsor, to let me learn. I did it in a quick, very concentrated course in Berlin. This school doesn't exist anymore, but at this time it was a famous art school with a department of photography. They behaved very nicely to me. The director understood the reason I did it. The normal course would take four years, but I told them that I had no more time than maximum one year, and they all agreed to it. But they told me it's at my own risk, and I did it. So I came to this country as a photographer and started as a photographer. You can't do everything in your life, but I love it still. I worked also on a lot of experiments in photography, I was also very much interested in the chemical side of photography. I made my own developers. All this fascinated me very much. And I was very much interested, always, in theater. There was even a time I wanted to become an actor. In Germany, in school already, I was known as an actor.

Photography was not regarded as an art but a useful craft for daily life. And they were right. Indeed, I was asked for by some man in Haifa who had the money to put up a studio, but he wasn't a professional photographer. So he took me in. But it was very difficult also at this time. I went to a kibbutz [Gesher] and in 1936 started with the Palestine Broadcasting Service in Jerusalem. And they needed, of course, a musician. So I came over to Jerusalem, and since then I lived in Jerusalem. As soon as I could express myself as a musician, I started as a pianist. I started to give concerts at the settlements, the kibbutzim, traveled a lot in this country. In 1936 or 1937, I was already an established musician. There were only a few professional musicians at this time in the country. Neither composers nor pianists. It started then in 1936, when the Philharmonic Orchestra started. There was a big influx of professional musicians of all kinds, and this changed the picture entirely. Then they started with the real education in music, and all this had been before but in a very improvised amateurish way, not really professional. But then it started seriously. At the beginning there was only a school for amateurs, a so-called conservatoire. And in Europe, Vienna for instance, a conservatoire was also the academy—it's the same. Here they named it like in Germany—a conservatory for the amateurs and academy for the professionals. These are just names.

The [Jerusalem] Academy started about 1936 or 1937; I immediately became a member of the staff. From 1948 to 1952 I was the director. In 1951 I was appointed a lecturer at the Hebrew University and since then was connected to this university. In about 1966 I started with the Department of Musicology and was the first chairman of the department, for six years. And now I'm an emeritus of the university. I was also the director of the Centre for Electronic Music. In fact, I was the first one who started with this activity here in the country. It was not so easy to do that, but I did it. Today it's common for each university to have its own electronic music studio. I started that here. They make a fuss over it, but I don't do that exclusively. It's part of my general music activity. In fact, I started with electronic music already as a student in Berlin in 1927. As far as I know, they had the first electronic music studio in Europe. There were wire recorders, they had sound generators, amplifiers, this kind of thing. It started with the play of overtones, to make combinations of harmonics and to imitate an oboe or a clarinet. For us today, it was the most primitive way, but at this time it was something sensational. It thrilled me from the beginning. I was fascinated by the possibility of working with that medium, playing with the different possibilities.

Well, that was a start, but I couldn't go on because of the political circumstances. After our War of Independence I started to look around in the world, learning what happened meantime in this field. I found out that in order to really know what is going on in technology—it developed so quickly during the world war—I couldn't follow up here in this country. I had to go abroad to study, for which I didn't have the financial means. I managed to get a UNESCO fellowship and twice I went to Europe and the States, and came back and founded here the first studio for electronic music with some equipment, which from time to time developed but was always behind because of financial reasons. But I went on and on and today I am very busy with a research project on electronic notation for electronic music, and this is, of course, in the computer field.

[Karlheinz] Stockhausen's scores were very primitive. From any of those graphic notations and diagrams, you never could reconstruct a piece, never. At best you could follow something. And this in my mind is a great problem. Because the information is of such complexity that it's impossible to remember all those details. For instance, imagine you would like to write a symphony by Mahler and you wouldn't have had the notation for it. I'm very doubtful if ever such a symphony would

have been written. So I think the artistic level of electronic music today has much to do with the lack of a proper notation. Because there are not enough criteria, not discipline, not references, and so on. I know how they work. You go to the studio, you tune up, and you are fascinated, rightly so, by the sound. But you go the next day and you forgot at least 50 percent of all that you've done, and I've done that myself. I don't blame anybody. This is the situation. But I forced myself to try to solve this problem—anyway, to make a contribution to this subject. And we've advanced quite far. I hope that next year, at the latest, I will come out with the first publications. And this will, in my mind, change basically the whole thing.

My idea is to write the score for electronic music at my desk, at home—and I don't need any equipment for that. I'm writing and I'm going the next day to the studio. And I realize it because everything is written down in an economical language, with still quite a lot of possibility of changing, improvising even. But a composer is his own interpreter, he has nobody who plays it. I know also from experience that equipment is developing quickly, also the quality of the sound. The quality of loudspeakers is still very backward, the other equipment advances much quicker. But I'm sure that one day the loudspeakers will be of a quite different acoustical level. And therefore it's quite possible, let's say in another hundred years, that a piece will be reconstructed that has been written down today and you will come much nearer to the reality as the composer imagined it. On this I am working right now.

I've written a number of operas. And the theatrical part of my operas is equal to the musical part, absolutely equal. So I saw to it—so far I've succeeded—always to have a stage director who understands that music and stage are not two different things but are going together and inspiring each other. This is a story in itself, and there are many very interesting stories from this chapter. I even wrote one opera that is entirely electronic—there was no orchestra. It's an opera on Masada. And right now there are negotiations. They want to make a film—not here, in Europe—and it might go onstage also in Europe. It was written for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the state of Israel and was commissioned by the state. It has been performed here in Jerusalem. I will have performances next year in Europe in the 750th-year festival of Berlin.

I am going on, as you see. I'll tell you frankly, the word "retire" is just a word for the administration, but not for me. I am much busier

now than before. I never made a distinction between teaching and composing. I love to teach because I explain to myself what I don't know. Good students ask proper questions. Nothing is more fruitful than that. So I never regarded an hour of teaching as a lost hour of composing—never, never. It might be that I would have composed more in quantity with fewer hours of teaching, but that doesn't bother me. I'm busy composing, I'm still lecturing quite a lot, and so on. I don't draw lines between the past and present, it's just a continuation.

Now, the issue of being an Israeli composer—well, this is the very famous question about national music. You should know the answer from your point of view as an American composer. What does it mean to you? I just looked at some scores of yours, and I couldn't find any American expression in that. It could have been everywhere. It means you are, so to say, a cosmopolitan, yes? But now on the other hand, you know from your experience, you live in a society, you live in a certain environment, and it's impossible not to be influenced by it because you can't isolate yourself completely. It would be artificial to do so. So you listen and you speak, and you hear questions and you give answers. And, of course, you are interested that people could understand you, what you are speaking. And it's the same in music.

Music is a communication, and if you communicate you speak to somebody. If somebody can't make any sense of what you are speaking then you are speaking to the walls, right? But music is not a language with words in which every word has a determined content. This you can't have. You can't say in music: "Please sit down." So we call that abstract—which is not at all an abstraction because it's not an abstraction of a word's reality. It is a reality in itself, it's a different language. English is not an abstraction of Chinese, or vice versa. So music is not an abstraction of spoken language. It is a language in itself. It has its own grammar, its own rules, its own organization. It has its own feelings. It creates its own emotions as any language does. It has in itself both elements, the emotional and the discipline. The question is, how can you make yourself understandable to a listener who hasn't known music methodically, who isn't a professional? Because over the hundreds of years, in music, certain expressions have been accepted as general. Let's say, for instance, major and minor. To have a funeral march in major, although there are exceptions—or to write a wedding march in minor—would be grotesque, would be something for comedy. Why is that so? What's the logic in it? Only because the minor third makes me automatically sad?

Israel is a fact. The state of Israel is a fact since 1948. But the people of Israel are facts for thousands of years. So they are two different things. And, of course, the people of Israel remember their past and in the case of, let's say, an observant Jew, sings old traditional melodies. Sure, and there are some, they are formulated on the musical language of hundreds of years before our time. And then, this was a time when the Western music was consolidated into what we call classical music or romantic music or any other term for it. And, of course, this became a traditional music. So if you go to the synagogue to pray for Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah, then, of course, you sing the traditional melodies and they are near the major-minor scale, or the ecclesiastical modes. And quite understandably, when we started here with Israeli music in 1948, we started consciously to create Israeli music as a national expression. Then, of course, there were many people who said we have to write in the old scales—in Dorian, Phrygian, and so on. Because they were regarded as exotic things from ancient times, which they are not so much, certainly not from the biblical times. So unfortunately we don't know what King David really sang. As we don't have any notated music of this time, we don't know. So the Israeli music in Phrygian, or Dorian, or Lydian, or Aeolian modes is quite European, and anything else, but not Israeli.

Now, of course, the big problem was to start something which is the present and to disconnect it from the past, which in itself is an artificial process. You can't do that, it really doesn't succeed. Take today all the young composers, they don't have these problems anymore. They only attach themselves to what's going on in the world, as Japan did with regard to Western music. Now what is going on in Japan, is it Japanese music? They are writing like Stockhausen, [Iannis] Xenakis, [Pierre] Boulez, you find all that in ultra-extreme expressions in Japan. Still they are going on with their traditions, and why not? Well, this is what you have here too. You can take the old traditional tunes, let's say, and to quote them in your music and harmonize them modernly has always been done here. Yemenite songs have been harmonized in Western tradition. The question is, should you do that? I question it, but you can do it. There will come a day when you will give a blessing to it or you will say it destroys the melody. But to do those experiments is understandable, and I wouldn't just laugh at that. I myself didn't do that. I mean I'm not above all that, I tried to make my own experiments. I didn't think that I shouldn't try that, shouldn't participate in this struggle which was just a humanistic struggle, so to

say, in music. For instance, my Second Piano Concerto was written on an old Jewish-Persian lamentation that I found extremely interesting as a piece of music—not at all old-fashioned, quite modern. I took out of the piece certain motives, and I used them as the basis for this piano concerto. Of course, here and there you can recognize it, and if I analyze the piece I can easily show this. So I made my own experiments with that, but very few.

Actually, I don't think that a national expression ends with a quotation of old music. There are national elements and there is the behavior in the street, how the people behave. What's their morality? What is their degree of aggression? And so on. And this is a nationality. This should come out in the music, you see, because I live it and I'm confronted with it day by day. If you start now to translate those things, then already you are on the borderline between language and music, common language and music language. Because to speak about music in itself is principally an impossibility. But I did it for many, many, many, many years because I had students—I had to speak about music. And I tried hard not to speak only about music, but also to *speak* the music, which is difficult. But I think you can do it. At least you can manage to bring the student nearer to what you are meaning, to fire his imagination so he can participate in your own way of thinking. But if you put me down to examples, show me—"Here on page twenty-three and bar fifty-six, you have Israeli music"—that you cannot do.

Now look, I'll give you another example. About the same time were living three composers well known in Europe, and their names were Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Not only about the same time, but even in the same region geographically. And they traveled quite a lot and they saw the same places, lived in the same places, came into contact with the same people. But what can you point to in any bar of those three composers? Only if they quote. If they quote the most popular behavior in Vienna—let's say there is a waltz—then, of course, you can recollect the Viennese waltz, or anything else. Or in the German dances by Mozart, or these kinds of things. But take a piece, I mean any string quartet by Mozart or Beethoven where there is no quotation. Even if you take the Russian quartet by Beethoven, the Razumovsky quartet—well, there is a quotation of a Russian song, but this poor song, what remains from it that is Russian in the piece? You just can't do that.

And this is what they always demand from you, because then you can write about it and you can speak about it. And it returns in each



interview, every interview wants to nail me down to the Israeli motives in my music. And there is no question they are in it, no question. And if I wouldn't have decided to go to Palestine in the early 1930s, or would have gone to London or New York, I don't think I would have written the same music. I don't think so. Let's say, from the technical point of view, the interest in twelve-tone music would be the same, and from this point of view there would be the same elements of twelve-tone music in it, or electronic music, or any other thing. This would be common. But this is what we call today cosmopolitan. You can't change it because in your TV box you have the whole world every day, and you are not disconnected from it. So my environment is not only Israeli, my environment is absolutely international. You can't avoid it. Even if I don't want to do that, I have to do it. I listen to the radio, I look at the TV, and I read newspapers. I'm a normal human being, not a pathological artist, you see. So I am a member of the whole world, but I am living in a certain country which is called Israel and very near to all that interests us—our fight in life, our struggle in life. And this certainly comes out in the music, no matter if it is written for piano or for electronics, or for whatever you want.

I'm also of the opinion that the Jewishness in Mahler is in his symphonies, without mentioning sentimental things. And he quotes quite a lot of Austrian melodies, quite a lot. And it is part of his Jewishness in this work. But if you know where he had lived as a young boy and what education he got, I think it's not difficult to make the translation, or to make the bridge, from his traditional songs to his way of melodic thinking as, for instance, in the slow part of the Fifth Symphony, the famous part that became the film music for *Death in Venice*, which is built entirely on the Fifth Symphony by Mahler. And not so wrong, not at all. I don't know that they knew that consciously. But it's the same conflict, the same basic Jewish conflict in a different society, and all that comes out in this story in the struggle between two people. It was not so silly to take this music as movie music. It did a lot for the movie. And I have seen this movie several times, just to concentrate on the relation between the music and the picture. I did it just to study it. It's tremendous.

Now, you can analyze the music by Mahler in regards to his Jewishness quite easily, without any associations to his becoming a convert Jew or any other thing. Not just the programmatic things, which you can immediately translate. This is an approach, an amateurish approach, to tell stories—science fiction—but not the real

thing. The real thing is really in his building of melodic motives, and to expand them. And you can see in that the Jewish quality, which is environment, of course. He learned his music in lessons, but he was injected with all Jewish liturgical music. And this is crossing of two cultures, and out came something that became Mahler's music.

Schoenberg too, certainly. No question about it, no question. The whole idea of twelve-tone method is a very Jewish idea, the big role that number plays in life. So the twelve-tone music is anything else, but not mathematical play around with numbers. And Schoenberg's music itself is the best proof because there is no twelve-tone music with so many licenses as in Schoenberg's twelve-tone music. And to study why does he make a deviation in this certain place, from the twelve-tone method—why does he do that? Here you can learn the real meaning of twelve-tone music, from his deviations and not from the words of systematization. This you can learn in ten minutes, no problem.

I met him, but I studied with Hindemith. Hindemith was at the Academy of Music, but Schoenberg was at the Academy of Arts. This is a different institute. The Academy of Arts is an institute like the Académie Française, or the Royal Society or the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In those academies, you don't teach. The Academy of Music was not called an academy, but in German, the Hochschule für Musik—"high school" of music. Even today they call it that. Academy is a different thing. Schoenberg only gave master classes. But this is in effect not a school, the Academy of Arts. In America—well, that was his destiny. He wanted to come here. He wouldn't have been very happy here because the situation was way too backward and too primitive for him. Today it's different. Today he would have the means to build up something. At this time, it was very, very primitive.

I was twenty-three when I left Berlin. When you're twenty-three you're already a human being. The first time I visited Berlin I escaped, I couldn't see it. Because it was still in the stage of havoc at this time, few things had been rebuilt. This was a nightmare to see. But then in the course of my musical doings I visited it again and again. And then, of course, today it is all very different from what it was.

There are always changes, always. I never go on with the same thing. I mean this is part of our century. We all went through so many different periods. I still remember my examination to enter the Academy of Music. I had to improvise on a given subject in sonata form, on the piano. Franz Schreker—you may know the name—was

the director then. So I played it. I was very strong in improvisation, so I did it with pleasure. And when I finished he said to me with a certain smile, "Well, my young man, it was somewhat like Beethoven." I was impertinent enough to reply to this remark, "Herr Professor, shall I take this as a compliment?"

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Among Israel's most prolific and celebrated composers, Josef Tal remains extraordinarily active in his ninth decade. He wrote in 1990:

After the completion of my last larger scores, the opera *The Tower* and the Fourth Symphony, and the intense work on the iconographic notation for computer music, I am fully aware of the process of fundamental change in musical composition. The full length of the twentieth-century dealt with more or less radical changes of systematization in the world of sounds. With the introduction of the computer as a music-realizer, the entire pitch concept moves toward a different music perception. This point is now my main interest. In addition to smaller works, I am now working on the score for my Fifth Symphony, commissioned by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra.<sup>8</sup>

In 1991, Tal read a paper on "Iconographic Notation and Its Consequences" at a symposium sponsored by the Institute for New Music at the Academy of Arts in Berlin. He finished his Fifth Symphony, received a commission for his Sixth Symphony and completed a number of smaller chamber works.<sup>9</sup>

Tal's music is frequently and widely performed. Since 1991 his works have been heard in Romania, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, during International Festivals of Jewish Art Music held in Odessa (Ukraine) and Vilnius (Lithuania), as well as in Israel and throughout Germany (including the opening of the 1992 *Documenta* exhibition in Kassel). In 1994, Tal's Piano Quartet was performed by the Cantilena Piano Quartet in New York and Washington, D.C. His orchestral works have recently been performed by the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, the Israel Chamber Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the North German Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, and Niederrheinische Sinfoniker. Among the conductors leading these orchestras were Zubin Mehta, Daniel Barenboim, and David Shallon. In Israel, Tal's works have been performed during the Israel Festival, the Eleventh International Harp Contest, and at the opening concert of the 1992 Zimriya choral festival.

Tal's opera *Josef*, commissioned in 1993 by the New Israeli Opera, was premiered in 1995 under the baton of Gary Bertini.<sup>10</sup> Other 1995 performances included the composer's Sixth Symphony (1991), given by the Jerusalem Symphony under the direction of David Shallon. The same year, Tal was one of three recipients of the Johann Wenzel Stamitz Prize, awarded in Germany.<sup>11</sup>

## CHAPTER 2: JOSEF TAL

1. Oskar Gottlieb Blarr, "Homage to Josef Tal: On the Occasion of His Winning the Johann Wenzel Stamitz Prize (Mannheim, Germany, March 28, 1995)," *IMI News* 1995, no. 2: 12.
2. Ringer, "Musical Composition," 288–89.
3. Alexander L. Ringer, "Tal, Josef," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980.
4. Bohlman, "*The Land Where Two Streams Flow*," 203, 207.
5. William Y. Elias, "Josef Tal—80th Anniversary," *IMI News* 1990, no. 1: 1–2. The Israel Music Institute compiled a catalog of Tal's works in 1989 as part of its "Mini-Monograph" series.
6. Josef Tal, *Der Sohn des Rabbiners* (Darmstadt: Kuadriger Verlag, 1985).
7. Tal's birthplace, Pinne, near Posen, was an eastern province of Germany rather than a part of Europe that became East Germany.
8. Letter to the author, 30 May 1990.
9. Letter to the author, 17 May 1991. See Habakuk Traber, "Thoughts on Josef Tal's Symphony No. 5," *IMI News* 1992, no. 4: 3–5.
10. See *IMI News* 1995, no. 2: 1–8 for several related articles, including Josef Tal, "The Opera in the Life of the Composer." *Josef* is the fifth operatic collaboration between Tal and librettist Israel Eliraz, with whom he has created several additional works.
11. In *IMI News* 1995, no. 1: 19. See also Blarr, "Homage to Josef Tal," 12–13.