



Photo: Haramaty

Peter Gradenwitz

A WARM RECEPTION FOR "JOSEF" by Josef Tal and Israel Eliraz

To commission a work of art – a painting for a great hall, a theatre piece for a drama festival, a symphonic opening "for the inauguration of a house" (as Beethoven named his Overture op. 124, not one of his greatest works), let alone an opera that combines drama, visual arts, movement and music – has always been and remains a hazardous undertaking: will it conform to the expectations of the person or group that asked the artist to create it, will it be accepted by the viewer or listener, will it survive the days in which it was first performed? History has proved that some of the greatest masterworks of art came into being as a result of commissions, creations of great sculptors and painters, dramas by some of the most eminent playwrights, sacred and secular music by Johann Sebastian Bach, the operas of Mozart, the string quartets of Beethoven and many other immortal works in the course of our twentieth century. Much of commissioned music and many commissioned and temporarily successful theatre plays have mercifully been forgotten – and these are the works that make some rash critics, professional and lay viewers and listeners, shy away from premieres of commissioned works. A not uncultivated friend of mine after hearing a commissioned orchestral piece premiered at a recent Salzburg Festival vowed that he "would never again attend a concert at which a commissioned symphony or concerto will be played". I could not convince him that this means he would forego the experience of listening to much of classical and romantic music, not to speak of Bach's compositions, Beethoven's chamber music, and also, of course to Mozart's and Verdi's operas.

It was quite daring on the part of the New Israeli Opera to commission an opera for the festive close of its tenth season of operation and the final performance of its first season at its own new opera house in Tel Aviv. It commissioned the Jerusalem poet and playwright Israel Eliraz and the 85-year-old composer Josef Tal to write the festive opera. Eliraz and Tal had already in the past successfully cooperated in text and music for a number of works, yet this commission presented a very special challenge. The libretto would have to be particularly meaningful for an Israeli audience but also have international appeal; the music was required to speak first of all to a large audience of the kind that is, in principle, not inclined to listen to contemporary sounds and is particularly skeptical in its attitude to Israeli composers – all this, of course, without bowing to what is called "popular taste".

It was therefore quite an unexpected experience that the Eliraz-Tal opera JOSEF, based on an unconventional libretto set to starkly expressive music, should have been welcomed and accepted with understanding by the local public who warmly applauded the work and its meaningful production by the New Israeli Opera.

It is not easy for the viewer – or the listener – to follow the reactions to situations the protagonist of the opera has himself created: his breaking out of an apparently normal family life, his leaving the security of a steady job as a bank clerk, his severing the bonds with his girl friend, his identifying himself with his biblical namesake, Joseph the interpreter of dreams, and to sympathise with his nightmares of catastrophes-to-come – until a world catastrophe does indeed come with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand that leads to the World War of 1914-1918. Israel Eliraz's expressive prose creating twenty four curt scenes of suggestive impact and Josef Tal's music speak a language of stark dramatic power for which we could hardly find an equal in any of Tal's previous operas though a promise of it was apparent in his early operatic work on a biblical theme SAUL AT EN DOR. The quintole motif that opens – and closes – the music of JOSEF binds the scenes together; it can sound sombre and threatening or dreamy, even lyrical; it imaginatively accompanies nightmarish, eerie scenes and arresting moments of Josef's search for deliverance, till it is sounded in thundering fortissimo in the apocalyptic final bars of the opera. This, possibly, the opera's single weak musical point – albeit a very important one. Israel Eliraz's thoughtful dramatic libretto contains a moral: the personal

catastrophe of Josef the protagonist, out of which there appears to be no way out, develops within the context of an ever-growing danger of a universal cataclysm leading to the destruction of all humanity because man will not learn from history – wars still break out and cause ruin bringing no victory. The audience at Tal's opera who witnessed and listened to two hours of human tragedy – no flight from life's realities for the opera's Josef, no escape to other worlds for the poor and the oppressed, no prevention of war – are made to ponder after the frenzied ululation of the masses shattered by the news of the outbreak of war. The fortissimo chord ending the opera leaves the audience emotionally excited, but to make it pause and think a moment or two on the moral of the drama, a soft low-voiced chord or two might have followed the outcry. The soft "Think it over" sound alternating with the harsh chord might be far more effectively repeated before an apocalyptic finish (the final sequence in Richard Strauss' "Elektra" may serve a comparable example).

A novelty in Tal's opera was the Mediterranean musical mood of the love duet in the tenth scene – an unreal-lyrical intermezzo in a sort of valse-movement.

SCENE X. LENA'S ROOM

(Lena, Josef)

(A small coffee table on wheels with a coffee set and a birthday cake with 30 lit candles on it. On the side, on a shelf, a big gramophone. A waltz record. Josef and Lena dance. She wears thin gloves. Occasionally he whispers something in her ear and she laughs. The dance continues for a while.)

For the important premiere the New Israeli Opera assembled an ensemble of unsurpassable quality. Gary Bertini, greatly experienced in conducting Josef Tal's music, was an outstanding interpreter of the rich score. Gabi Sadeh, tenor, gave the difficult part of Josef vocal and dramatic stature. Of quite special beauty was the voice of Sharon Rostorf, and Robin Weisel-Capsouto's stage presence was wholly admirable. In fact, all roles were excellently sung and acted by Yaron Windmuller, Linda Pavelka, Monte Jaffe, Vladimir Braun, Yevgeny Shapovalov, and Denis Sedov.

David Alden's stage direction impressively attempted to reveal and interpret the reasons for Josef's actions, dreams, nightmares; his own and the community's tragic fate. The sparse but strongly illustrative settings by Paul Steinberg and Niv Sadeh's lighting effects fitted well the prevailing mood of each scene. Alden's oft repeated underscoring of a disturbed society on the move effected by letting actors carry chairs across the stage seems rather primitive – one remembers the same staging mannerism in his direction of "Wozzeck" for the Israel Philharmonic.

It can well be imagined that JOSEF – in an appropriate translation of the libretto into an European language – could be of interest for opera houses and audiences abroad. The subject of this opera is ever topical and the music has a lasting dramatic appeal of its own.

Peter Emanuel Gradenwitz's "The Music of Israel from the Biblical Era to Modern Times", first published in New York in 1949, is due to appear in a substantially enlarged and updated edition in 1996, as is the English version of his Leonard Bernstein biography (Its fourth updated Swiss-German edition has just recently been published).