

The Musician as Librettist

Hans Keller from OPERA, XXXV (1984)

Apart from myself, composers who wrote their own librettos—Wagner, Pfitzner, Schoenberg, Tippett, etc.—are the only musicians I know who have written operatic texts, whence the present musician-librettist's relation to the two composers in question may perhaps be of more than purely personal interest. My most important discovery had been one which could conceivably have been anticipated: my relationship to each of the two composers for whom I have written a libretto bore distinct resemblances to the endo-psychic relationship between librettist and composer in the case of Wagner and Co.

In the case of Benjamin Frankel, for whom I turned John Whiting's play, *Marching Song*, into a libretto, this parallel even went so far that in one or two places, he wrote a singer's melody first and I then fitted in the appropriate words, adjusting the verbal rhythm to the music's on the one hand—and yet, on the other, establishing the degree of tension between the melodic rhythm and the verbal stresses at which, I divined, Frankel would have aimed at this particular stage in the structure's build-up.

I had, by the time we arrived at any such juncture, accumulated quite some experience of Frankel's structural needs for tension or also relaxation between the two categories of rhythm, verbal and musical, with the result that so far as I remember, I always hit it off first time when I 'composed' words into an existing melodic line. Come to think of it, this, as it were, endo-psychic relation between composer and librettist was one of the only two traits which my relationships with the two composers shared at certain stages—though, as will be seen later, by no means always. But Josef Tal, the (Israeli) composer of the other opera (whose action I invented myself, accepting Tal's suggestion of a modern Babel), never reversed the relation between text and music, never provided me with melodic lines into which I had to fit words: he is, of course, an experienced musical dramatist with internationally successful operas to his credit, whereas Frankel had never written an opera in his life.

The other trait which the two relationships shared was a deep, unambivalent friendship with either composer; it extended far beyond music, even though in either case, it had, of course, been music that had started it all off—and, in particular, musically fortified agreements about controversial questions of the day. They usually were (and, in the case of Tal, are) whole-hearted and whole-minded agreements disagreeing with composing fashion, with trendy compositorial attitudes, with what 'has to happen' at the present stage (or, to be creatively realistic, the numerous present stages) in the history of musical composition.

But so far as our actual work was concerned, there was a third, all-important common element distinguishing the two collaborations: in either case, it was the composer who had decided what the opera was going to be about. Frankel's first question was, in fact, whether I liked the idea of turning Whiting's play into a libretto, whereas in the case of Tal, the question of such

an arrangement did not arise—unless you wish to regard the translation of Babel into modern times as an operatic adaptation.

Tal went further or, if you like, yet less far: he left the interpretation of the biblical story (whose meaning is by no means obvious) and its modern equivalent entirely to me, whereupon I promptly decided to make mutually exclusive interpretations part and parcel of the story of the opera. In Tal's case, then, the story of the opera is mine; in Frankel's, it was not. Needless to add, *The Tower* (*Der Turm* in German) is multi-lingual—though I needed Tal for the purpose of translating a few sentences into Hebrew, since my own Hebrew is confined to what I learnt at school, where twelve years of Hebrew lessons—the obligatory subject was 'Religion'—produced no more than the knowledge of a few psalms and prayers.

It will be remembered that Frankel's opera could be heard last year in a Scottish radio production, prior to which the ENO had shown marked interest—until their budgeting proved the project too expensive. Tal's opera, whose basic language is German, will almost certainly first be staged in Germany, where various relevant quarters have already evinced at least as much interest as Tal's previous operatic work had aroused: he was born in Berlin, and the German musical world has, of course, re-started being proud of him. I would indeed go so far as to say that at the present stage, Germany fusses more about him than Israel. In Israel, that is, he is simply regarded as the country's leading composer who was every outstanding musician's teacher, and that is it. But in Germany, his operas are being performed (none of which have been staged in Israel), as is much of his other music. He receives commissions—to write not only music, but also his autobiography, upon which he is currently engaged, having finished more than two thirds of it. In a word, week in, week out, Germany's and especially Berlin's cultural conscience keeps his name before the public.

All of which is beside this essay's point, but so closely beside it as to remain relevant: Berlin's pride in Tal produced not only my fee, but two joint working periods in the city; in addition, we met both in London and in Jerusalem. The circumstance, then, that Frankel and I lived in the same city, whereas Tal and I did not, did not produce close collaboration on the one hand and collaboration by remote control on the other; in fact, during my work on the respective operas, I may have seen more of Tal than of Frankel.

In one respect, the two creative characters were straight opposites: Frankel would discuss current compositorial problems for hours on end and invite support, whereas Tal would emphatically invite criticism, the harsher, the better—criticism which I was unable to supply, for almost invariably, I was stunned by his imaginative solution of what I, for one, had considered major problems, without, of course, conveying my fears to him.

Frankel, likewise, would surprise me again and again with unexpected explosions of his invention; my enthusiastic reactions—the more specific, the better—seemed more profoundly needed than in the case of Tal, whose greater assurance and self-confidence were proportionate to his immeasurably wider theatrical experience. His own interest in praise was very limited, though as soon as you really talked shop and specified your enthusiasm minutely, including, of course, details of orchestration or instrumentation and, above



Drawings by Milein Cosman: (l.) Benjamin Frankel; and (r.) Josef Tal

all, of what I regard as his specific historical and historic achievement, to wit, the structuralization of texture*, he found it difficult to hide his joy at his concrete compositional intentions having succeeded.

In an age in which it is possible for an individual of distinctly limited musicality to become a composer of international repute, my elation about both Frankel's and Tal's subtly developed ultra-musical imagination is certainly something to write home about: many have been the occasions in the past when I was unable to continue a collaboration with a composer in view of his defective musicality. When, conversely, I wrote the music for a radio play, I found that the poet who had written it and had asked me to provide the music was, in fact, more musical than quite a few composers whose names the reader knows as well as I do; that he cannot recall their music is not his fault. For the rest, this kind of comparison would have been impossible at any previous point in the history of composition.

Frankel and Tal were musicians first and foremost, spontaneously musical thinkers, in whose invention no theoretical preoccupations interfered—and let us not forget that even a composer of Webern's stature allowed himself on many occasions to be theoretician first and composer *after* the first, distinctly theoretical creative step. What was so overpowering in my collaboration with these two, drastically different creative characters was not only the wealth of their invention, but also its concreteness and aural clarity—the way they heard their thought crystal-clearly in the most complex textural circumstances; I cannot remember a single instance in either opera where either blend or

* In my submission, he has proceeded and progressed far more consistently in this dimension than György Ligeti.

balance had to be adjusted, and while Tal's work has not yet proved itself in sound, I know the score well enough to be able to say that no such adjustment will prove necessary or desirable at any stage: it is, without doubt, one of the best-heard scores of our time.

So far in this report on my two operatic collaborations, I have confined myself to the creative and practical advantages that flowed from the circumstance that the librettist was a musician. Let it not be thought, however, that this unique situation did not produce disadvantages too—for the librettist, at any rate. They cannot arise if the composer writes his own libretto which, if he is any good, will be musically motivated anyway.

So, inevitably, will the musician's libretto where composer and librettist are not one. The trouble is that it will only be incidentally and accidentally that his musical motivation will bear fruit: you cannot expect a composer of Frankel's or Tal's calibre to worry about his librettist's musical motivations, however good and congenial a musician this collaborator may be. He in his turn cannot fail to feel a little frustrated if his musical motivations are not perceived—if, instead, a musical structure arises which he had not dreamt of. His proper course of psychological action, which I invariably tried to pursue, will be to evince complete understanding of what the composer has done—who, after all, did not know about the librettist's structural intentions. On a few, very few, occasions in both operas, it did actually happen that the composer's structural plan did coincide with the one I had intended: inevitably, my joy overflowed.

If there are any fellow musicians amongst my readers who are, at the same time, sufficiently competent verbally to be eligible librettists, I strongly recommend the experience, which offers multi-dimensional satisfactions, chief among them the very unexpectedness of the composer's invention: after all, artistic satisfaction is obtained through the meaningful contradiction of one's expectations. In other words, the disadvantages of the musician's role as a librettist do eventually turn into artistic advantages—so long as the composer is substantial enough, and sufficiently congenial, for the librettist to be spontaneously drawn to his music; there is, needless to add, a special attraction about having one's verbal work musicalized in an unexpected way.

The very dissimilarity of the two composers' creative personalities strengthens my recommendation: collaboration with any composer will prove rewarding—if, that is, he has something to say which cannot be expressed verbally. Naturally, I would strongly advise against any collaboration with a composer who would merely underline your verbal build-up, unable to contribute new thought to the joint undertaking: mere incidental background music, essentially tautological, does not gain in interest just because it is your words it is incidental to.

After the experience of these two collaborations, one could, in fact, risk adopting an extreme position, in that ideally, every librettist ought to be a musician—the composer's first, all-important listener. In such collaborations, the occasions will inevitably be legion when the librettist, by showing his detailed understanding of the composer's musico-dramatic structuring, will be able to save the composer a lot of time which would otherwise have been filled with superfluous doubts, self-criticisms, attempts at alternative solutions.

If, on the other hand, the musician-librettist has some valid criticism to offer, its effect and ultimate result will again be, at the very least, time-saving. Does not the 'normal' situation, wherein the composer understands what the librettist is doing, but the librettist cannot understand, cannot even read, what the composer is doing, boil down to a downright nonsensical state of affairs? The fact that both my composers finished their respective scores in record time; the only opera I know which was written faster being *Aida*, seems to support my rhetorical question, the more so since *Marching Song* was Frankel's only opera: Da Ponte's uncanny understanding apart, many hours must regularly be wasted on composers' explanations of facts which librettists would absorb within minutes if their approach to the score *in statu nascendi* were a musician's.

But I am dreaming: my state of ideal creative affairs ignores the low incidence of simultaneous, intense musicality and equally developed verbality. Nevertheless, if we remember the composers I mentioned in my opening sentence and add all the outstanding composers who were active as music critics, as well as those whose literary talent was, like Mendelssohn's, almost as profound as a creative writer's, we begin to suspect that the present writer cannot be all that much of an exception, that the incidence of such simultaneity must be higher than is generally assumed in view of the elemental differences between the laws of conceptual and those of musical thought. In shorter words, there must be one or two musicians among my readers whom the present essay could stimulate into writing a libretto for the composer of their choice—or, still better, one or two composers who, prompted by my report, could easily think of a musician-friend whom they might invite thus to collaborate. It would, of course, be an enormous satisfaction if the two operas here discussed turned out to have started a new branch of operatic creation.
