

# PIONEER COMPOSER

Emigré composers, recently celebrated in London, also forged musical life in the nascent state of Israel. The pioneers included Paul Ben Haim, whose works are receiving increasing exposure, as well as composers like Mordecai Seter, Odeon Partos and Boskoviz. One of the most progressive is Josef Tal, one of the only surviving members, who lives alert and active in Jerusalem. In contrast to Ben Haim's 'Mediterranean' style, Tal took a more radical path, a stylistic synthesis of middle eastern elements with central European modernism and avant garde. Born in Grunthal in Pinne (now Poland) Tal studied in Berlin with Hindemith, coming to Palestine in 1934. He first taught at the Jerusalem Academy of Music, where he was Director from 1948-52, and then joined the Hebrew University as Head of the Electro Acoustics Department. Many of his operas are on biblical subjects. The most recent, *Joseph*, premiered to acclaim in Israel in 1993. Tal was awarded prestigious commissions from German opera houses and festivals from the 1960s and was made a member of the German Academy of Arts in 1971.

Aged 91, Tal lives with his wife in an apartment, high up in the Kyriat Yovel district of Jerusalem, overlooking rolling Judean hills. Their home is adorned with plants and they have a beautiful roof garden: "my wife's work" Tal explains. Mrs Tal is a sculptress. We sat across a table laden with tea and Israeli biscuits – and the discussion spread from the table to cover the globe. Listening to Tal's clear and warm voice, Jerusalem, on this occasion, truly became a spiritual centre of the universe.



**You are known as an avant-garde composer. Do you see yourself in that way?**

The term 'avant garde' is a military term from Napoleonic times, 'those who go in front', to spy out the land, who face danger and don't know if they will return. Maybe now there is no avant garde! Schoenberg, Hindemith and others didn't really think of themselves as 'avant garde'. Certainly one needs to keep up with the technologies and the new. When I was a student in Berlin, Schoenberg was there, Schreker, Hindemith. I knew then that I needed to find out what was going on 'out there', in the present. Since then I have changed my style about every 15 years.

**Did you ever meet Schoenberg?**

Only once. Schreker conducted *Gurrelieder* once with the Academy orchestra. We were all encouraged to learn instruments, and as there was a place in the harp class, I took up the harp. So then I played harp in the *Gurrelieder*, and Schoenberg came to all the rehearsals – he was tough!

**Did you follow Schoenberg's 12 tone method?**

Schoenberg (and you need to see his early compositions in serial style) said it was not a method but a *discipline*, which is different. It is not a method which com-

poses for you, but more an approach. But there are those who use it as a method, and that is a misunderstanding. What was revolutionary was using the 12 notes as egalitarian, all equal. Then it is up to the composer to decide what is important in a piece. Schoenberg was avant garde in that respect, even though he didn't think so.

But what is new is not always the best. I recall a concert in Berlin of new works, where the critic complained that some were old-fashioned, and as for the rest – it was too unfamiliar!

It is like a car: every year there is a new model – but not every new model is better than the last. One needs to choose what is good in what is new. Music is like research. We all produce ideas every day for everyday use. But in music you produce ideas, not for every day use, but to develop. You have to look into the idea,

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to find out its content, to make it grow and develop. This is composition. 'Compose' – the word means 'put together'. But put what together? A composer needs to find something to say, then look at the elements and develop them.

**You were at that time set on a successful musical career in Germany, but like many of your colleagues, were forced to emigrate. When did you come to Israel – or 'Palestine'?**

I decided to leave already in 1932 after the Reichstag was set on fire. I realised then what was happening. I left in 1934. My teachers would say, 'why go, surely this man (Hitler), won't stay in power more than a short time; how can he?'. But I left. I could not come to Palestine as a composer, since that was not considered a secure profession, so I came as a photographer. It was a good training I never regretted. I mostly did passport photos.

JOSEPH TAL WAS ONE OF THE COMPOSERS WHO FORGED MUSICAL LIFE IN THE NASCENT STATE OF ISRAEL - AND HE IS STILL AMONGST THE MOST RADICAL. MALCOLM MILLER TALKS TO HIM ABOUT HIS WORK AND HIS IDEAS

Once in Israel you pioneered electronic music, a field in which you are particularly famed. What are your views on current developments of that medium?

I expressed my ideas in a recent booklet, *Electronic Music in the Third Millennium*, published by the IMI [Israel Music Institute] for my 90th birthday. Electronics is very close to me.

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It is the way of the future. Every acoustic instrument has its limitations, but in electronic music – you can make a whole piece from a single tone. I would really like to be here in 20 years time, to see how it develops. But I feel that there is a crisis in the electronic music field at the moment. There have not been any major advances in the last 20 years or so. Although there is new equipment, more and more gadgets, one still needs to know how to compose.

Is your music consciously Jewish?

My paternal grandfather was a cantor. He came from near Galicia and was famous, not because he had such a great voice but apparently he was a very good improviser. He would improvise on the 'negnot' (cantillation notes) for the community so was very popular. So perhaps there is a connection there to my composition...

I have composed works with Jewish subjects – but none of my six symphonies have Jewish subjects. I have used Yemenite and Jewish themes, but only for the public – because they want it – not because it is the way I compose. I am a composer, not a 'Jewish' composer. To ask whether my music is Jewish is like asking whether Beethoven's music is

Christian. Above all Beethoven was avant-garde – he shocked the public from his very first symphony, in C major but starting with the dominant of F. And take Mozart: he was fired by the Archbishop for writing music unsuitable for the church. I went to a concert in Berlin with Mozart's *Missa*, played in a Cathedral, to see how it would sound in its original liturgical context. It really didn't have anything to do with the service, what the priest said, the responses, and one could really agree with the Archbishop's criticism, that it did not 'serve the Church'. But Mozart had bigger ideas, he was more interested in the music. His father wanted him to serve the Court, and to a certain extent he did, but he was always writing beyond it, being original, even shocking.

What is Jewish music? I was recently asked in interview in Berlin, about Mahler's Jewish elements and influences. But this is so superficial, after all it is not what is outside that counts, but inside. When Mahler uses Austrian or Viennese or German folk tunes it sounds quite different from Bruckner or his contemporaries. I was at the Jewish Music Conference in London (1998) on a panel discussion about Jewish music, and was the 'bad child' the 'enfant terrible', and didn't say what they wanted! Jewish music is always related to liturgical music, never art music. Even if there are quotations of folk music, surely this doesn't make the music Jewish! It is like asking what makes English, French or German music. It is a deeper question. How can we define identity? Not through 'outside' things, but internal elements, background.

If Jewish music is difficult to define, what in your view is Israeli music?

It will take 50 or a 100 years for the critics to really gain a perspective on what is going on here, what Israeli music is. There are a lot of exciting developments, a lot of good composers, lots of possibilities, different ways and approaches.

Do you still compose?

I am satisfied – I don't want more and more. One has to get used to Nature. I compose but find it hard to see and to write the notes – so it's slow. One needs to be very accurate about the notes. But I am happy. I listen to my music and there are lots of performances now, especially the early works. I can hear the truth of myself in the early works, the young composer. I can recall the problems I had with this or that work, how I struggled to overcome them, and then moved on. The types of problems, the concerns, are the same, these works reflect the same person. So even changing one's style, similar problems arise, there is a sense of identity, continuity.

By a happy coincidence, on the day following our meeting I was invited to a concert at the Bar-Ilan University Campus, the first in a series presented by the electro-acoustic music department, directed by Eitan Ahizur and attended by an audience bristling with professors and music students. The concert began with recent works by Gideon Levinson, Eitan Ahizur, an organ work by Andre Hajdu, one of Israel's major composers, and as a climax, Josef Tal's Concerto for Harp and Electronics, in an excellent performance by harpist Adina Haroz. It was one of Tal's most popular works, composed in 1971, its highly idiomatic textures reflecting Tal's own experience as a harpist (he performed with the Israel Philharmonic early in his career). The reception was, predictably, enthusiastic, further affirmation that Tal's music continues to communicate originality and beauty, a voice for the present and the future. ■

Recommended: *THE MUSIC OF JOSEF TAL* Dr Yohanan Ran, Israeli Music Archive, Tel-Aviv University

Malcolm Miller is a musicologist, pianist, writer and lecturer