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The Music of Josef Tal

Selected Writings

The Israeli Music Archive
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Josef Tal: "The Death of Moses" Requiem for Solo, Choir, Orchestra and Magnetic Tape - the Text and the Music

The requiem "The Death of Moses", for which Josef Tal was awarded the Israel Prize, is one of the composer's major works. It was completed in February 1967 and later dedicated retroactively to his son, Reuven, who died in Israel's "Six-Day War" (June 1967).

Josef Tal, who was born in 1910 in Poznan (now Poland), and whose family came to settle in Berlin when he was six months old, was raised in the atmosphere of German culture and language.

As a student in the Berliner Hochschüle für Musik he often worked as a piano accompanist for singers and dancers. From this grew his leaning, as a budding composer, to write music for texts together with other art forms (see list of works).

The young composer arrived in what was at the time Palestine in 1934, knowing no Hebrew at all. His appointment as a teacher at the Jerusalem Academy of Music obliged him first to take a course in Hebrew, and his knowledge of the language was greatly enriched by his close friendship with the composer Yehuda Sharret.[1] However, when he was asked by a Jerusalem publisher to write a music theory teaching primer, he wrote it in German. To meet its purpose, the book was published in Hebrew translation.

The composer's linguistic limitations in Hebrew, however, did not prevent him from starting, early in his artistic life as an Israeli composer, to write music for Hebrew texts. Among the works written during his early years in the country are:

"Exodus", a choreographic poem for baritone and orchestra (1946),
"The Mother Rejoiced", Cantata for soloists, choir and orchestra (1947),
Three unaccompanied Israeli songs (1953),
A Succoth Cantata for soloists, choir and orchestra (1955),
"Saul at Ehn-Dor", a concert-opera for soloists, choir and orchestra (1955), and others.

Most of the texts Tal used came from Jewish sources, as in the "The Death of Moses", the text of which, collected and arranged by the poet Yehuda Ya'ari, tells the story of Moses who, after journeying through the desert for forty years, is denied permission to cross over the River Jordan to the Promised Land.

Though Tal calls this work a "Requiem", and it is indeed a kind of lamentation and eulogy to Moses, its structure rather resembles that of an oratorio or even the Renaissance-Baroque form known as "Historia".[2] "The Death of Moses" is almost a chamber work and each of the roles in it - Moses, God, Narrator - is represented by a particular singer, or group of singers.

In an essay entitled "Historical Text and Pre-text in the Works of the Israeli Composer,"[3] Tal referring, among other things, to the way the text in a musical composition takes shape, says:

> "Usually the pre-text, or the idea, emerges from a certain assumption which springs from the subconscious and is influenced by the environment and the artist's own personality. The text is the realization of that idea or pre-text".

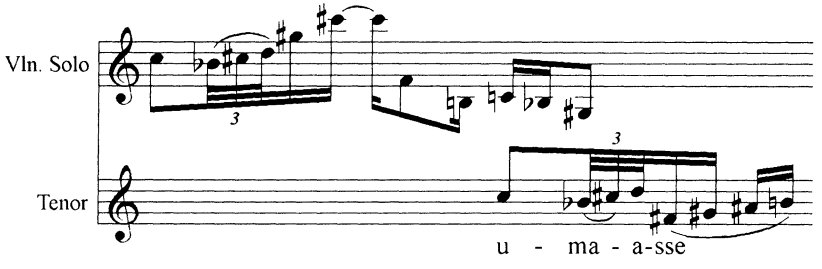
In the present case the character of Moses and the idea of protest against the Almighty - "I will not move from here until you revoke that judgment" (forbidding Moses to cross the Jordan) - constitute the pre-text. Based on this pre-text Yehuda Ya'ari arranged the libretto into seven movements which he organized into a theatrical - dramatic structure whose climax occurs in the fifth movement (two thirds of the way through), that is, in accordance with accepted dramaturgical practice.

The musical structure of "The Death of Moses" moves forward, along with the dramatic development of the plot, gradually gathering energy until it reaches its climax , which is expressed in orchestral fullness, rich, dense texture and dynamics ("*Forte*").

As a composer of instrumental-vocal works, Tal sees all the components of such a piece as integral parts of the whole. In "*Text and Pre-text*" he goes on to say that the music written for a work of this kind is not imitative or

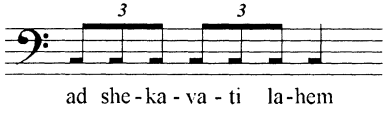
descriptive. The verbal meaning triggers the creation of musical structures independent of the conceptual logic of the word. Thus, the music too justifies itself independently. The meanings of the words and the sentences in the work must be understood, and this commits the composer to a style that best conveys the meaning of the text. At the same time, the words' resonance and phonetic quality also have to be taken into account.[4]

In light of the above, I shall examine the relationship between text and music in this work. First, it should be borne in mind that Tal writes for the human voice which, as seen in "The Death of Moses", stems from his basic approach which gives equal attention to each voice source. This leads him to write vocal roles which could be termed "instrumental", including complex rhythms and wide intervals, sometimes introducing imitation techniques with "mechanical" instruments. The following is an example of this, taken from the first movement:

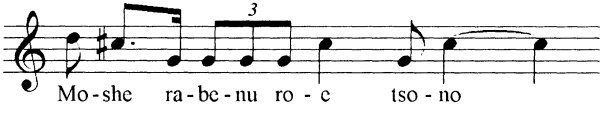


This having been said, in "The Death of Moses", Tal gives the human voice a range of expressions extending from something approaching *bel canto* to *Singschprache*. For example:

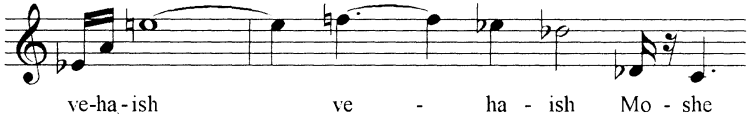
(Singschrache, 5th Muv.)



(Recitativ, 1st Muv.)



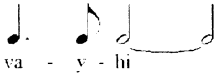
(Aria, 3rd Muv.)



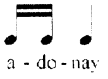
And now, to go back to Tal's own words in "*Text and Pretext*" ("It has to be clear. The sound and phonetic factor of the words should also be taken into account"), his writing, as reflected also in the following quotations from "The Death of Moses", may be examined from several points of view.

A. How the composer relates to meter:

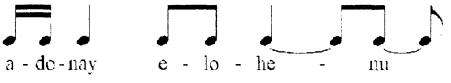
In principle it may be said that Tal succeeds in fitting the notes to the meter and length of the syllables which make up the word, and its Hebraic intonation - with the stress generally on the last syllable. For example, the word "***vayehi***" (*"and it shall come to pass"*) has three syllables - stressed unstressed stressed (– v –). Tal writes the fitting rhythmic figure for this word (1st movement, 36th measure, for solo tenor):



Another example: the word "*Adonay" (Lord)* has three syllables, two unstressed and one stressed (v v –). In the28th measure of the first movement, the soloist sings the following rhythmic figure:



and the paired words "*Adonay Elohenu" (The Lord our God)*, as follows:

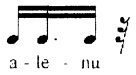


But the constraints of the musical texture and the differences between the soloist's voice flexibility as compared with the less flexible ensemble call upon the composer to write accordingly. The following are a number of examples. For the word "*vayehi"* Tal writes for the ensemble singing in rhythmic unison (1st movement, 24th measure) the figure:

that is, overlooking the weight of the syllables. In a polyphonic ensemble (rhythmic and melodic polyphony) each voice sings an independent line and a different rhythmic figure:

Naturally there are exceptions, or "liberties". Above the tri-syllabic word "***alenu***" (*"upon us"*) (v–v) (1st movement, 29th measure), Tal wrote the rhythmic figure: giving equal strength to each of the three notes.

In practice the soloist (in the performance of the work by an orchestra and soloists from Hamburg conducted by Moshe Atsmon) sang it thus:

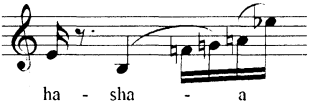


That is to say, in the course of singing, the soloist "adjusted" the rhythmic figure's meter.

B. How he relates to the meanings of words and the need to emphasize them.

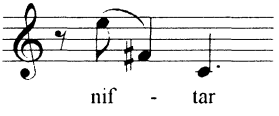
The following are a number of examples: In the sentence, "***Amar ha'Kadosh Baruch-Hu***" ("*Said the Holy One Blessed-be-He*") , in the 2nd movement, Tal felt that the coupled words "***Baruch-Hu***" ("*Blessed-be-He*") should be emphasized. Thus, while the sentence as a whole is written in recitative, syllabic style (following Tal's basic tenet that the words should be clearly understood), the coupled words "***Baruch-Hu***" are given a long melisma which includes the widest possible range shifts:

In another passage - "***Higiya ha-sha'a she'ata niftar min ha-olam***" (*The hour has come for you to depart from the world*) (beginning of the 6th movement), Josef Tal sees the need to add meaning, through the music, which goes beyond the written words. The word "***ha-sha'a***" (*The hour*) is sung in a rising melismatic motive:



That is: *The hour is come for you to rise to heaven.*

The word "***niftar***" (*depart*) is sung in a wide descending sweep:

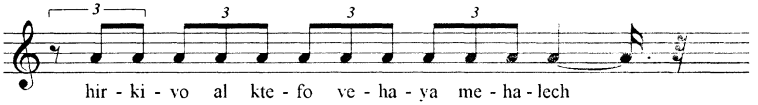


symbolically conveying the descent of man to dust.

C. How he relates to the meaning of a whole sentence.

This may be expressed by a musical symbol which sometimes borders on descriptive music. This writing is very unusual for Tal ("Music should not be imitative or descriptive", *Text and Pre-text*) , yet we sometimes find in this work musical passages which describe symbolically the meaning of

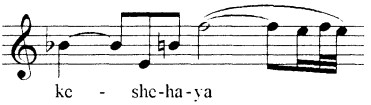
the text. For example: the sentence "***hirkivo al ktefo ve haya mehalech***" (*"he set him upon his shoulder and he would walk"*) (3rd movement) takes on the following musical expression:



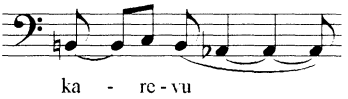
– which could be symbolic of the action of walking.

D. How he relates to a word's musical potential.

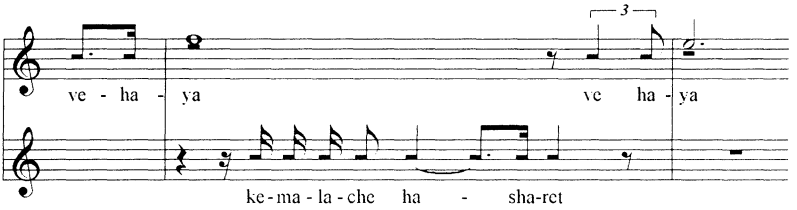
This tonal energy of syllables. An open syllable - in this context a syllable ending with open lips, e.g. "Ha" - has more energy than a closed one - in this context one that ends with the lips drawn together. Josef Tal applies this in his writing. For the word "***keshehaya***" (*"When he was"*) (2nd movement), which ends in an open syllable, he writes a motive ending in an upward-leaping melisma:



While, in the 4th movement, the word "***karvu***" - ending in the "closed" syllable (u) (***"hen karvu yamehcha lamut***" - *"for your days of dying have come nigh*") is sung in a descending musical movement with very small intervals:



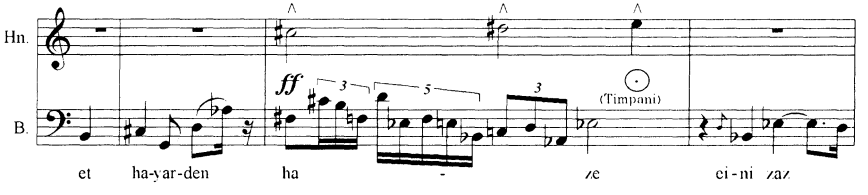
To build a musical sentence to answer his needs, the composer also repeats words which have potential musical energy. For example, at the end of the sentence *"**vehaya kemalacheh hasharet**" ("and he was as the ministering angels")* (4th movement), he repeats the word "***vehaya***" at the end of the sentence. That is, at the work's completion this sentence is worded: ***vehaya kemalacheh hasharet vehaya*** - ending with the energetic open syllable "***ya***". The whole passage sounds as follows:



To provide a syllable conducive to developing musical energy, Tal, (with the librettist's permission, as explained by the composer in an interview on July 3rd, 1987), even goes as far as replacing a word selected by the poet with another word from the same verse (in Psalms). Thus, in the 1st movement, the original passage ***uma'aseh yadenu konenehu*** (*"and establish thou the work of our hands"*), is in Tal's composition replaced by ***uma'aseh yadenu konena*** - i.e. ending in an open syllable (**na**) rather than a "closed" one (**hu**), but without altering the meaning.

E. How he relates to the meaning of the text by an allusory or explanatory motive

By using a musical motive which implies a text that is about to follow, or the reverse - a motive relating to a preceding text - Tal "clarifies" the text itself. A graphic example of this occurs in the 5th movement of the requiem where Moses addresses God: "***Ata omer li lo ta'avor et hayarden hazeh. Eyneni zaz mikan ad shetevatel otah gzera!***" (*"You tell me I cannot cross this River Jordan. I shall not move from here until you revoke that judgment."*) Whereas the first appearance of the sentence is a plea (*Why do you tell me I cannot cross the Jordan?)* the second is an expression of defiance against the Almighty. By using the horn alongside the first vocal passage the composer suggests the protest and even the effrontery to be expressed in the sentence that follows:



In conclusion, the examples quoted in this essay show that in writing for the human voice Tal adopts a free usage of musical expressions, ranging from the lyrical to the spoken/declaimed: passages that are melismatic and syllabic, for singing and recitative, wide-moving and heroic, and on the other hand restricted even to the point of a line proceeding along one note. At the same time, however, (as he emphasizes in his essay: "*The meanings of the words and sentences must be understood by the listener*") he makes sure the text comes over clearly. By using a variety of music expressions, he approaches the text in several ways, taking into account the weight of the syllables, a syllable's phonetic energy, the direct and allusive meanings

of the words and sentences and the Hebrew intonation - with its accented ultimate syllable. Despite constraints due to the work's complexity, sometimes giving rise to certain "liberties", one sees here the formidable achievement of a Hebrew composer whose mother tongue is not Hebrew. Josef Tal, moreover, abides by his own advice in the above-quoted essay "*Text and Pretext*". The composer is true to his word.

Notes

1 See the essay: "The Where and When in Josef Tal's compositions."

2 "Historia" in the *New Grove* Dictionary, edited by S. Sadie, London: Macmillan, pub. 1980, Vol 8 (592)

3 *Iyunim Bemusika*, issue 6-7, published by the Association of Israeli Composers 1974, (23-26)

4 Ibid.