

Yohanan Ron

The Music of Josef Tal
Selected Writings



The Israeli Music Archive

Tel Aviv University

The Yolanda and David Katz Faculty of the Arts

Department of Musicology

2000

The Tone as an Idea and a Subject in the Later Works of Josef Tal

On 16 February 1988, a performance of Josef Tal's "Essay" No. 1 for Piano (1986), took place at a meeting of Israeli composers sponsored by the Music Section of Israel Radio¹. On that occasion, Tal (b.1910), who is one of Israel's greatest composers, made the following statement regarding his composition:

This work starts with the playing of a single tone followed by a chord on the same pedal, thus creating an expanded tone. The first tone played is the nucleus which contains the entire macrocosmic content. The tone is the idea, the experience and the subject. Development of such a subject is achieved by producing a series of structures one after the other emerging from the same tone. That is, everything that happens in the work results from that initial expanded tone. There may be diverse results, just as a classical subject may be developed in various ways. Preservation of the one idea, namely the tone, is the work's inner discipline and the glue that unifies it.

The purpose of the present article is to demonstrate how in most of his later works, written from the 1970's onwards, Tal follows the above idea, and to describe the path that led him in this direction.

Josef Tal was a pioneer of electronic music in Israel. As far back as the early 1930s, when he was still a student at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik, he engaged in experiments, which today would be called primitive, in the creation of tones by electronic means.² In the 1950s, with the help of a grant from UNESCO, he travelled to Europe and the USA (for the first time since his arrival in Israel in 1934), to study and familiarize himself with this new field. In the late 1950s and early 1960s he participated in the setting up of Israel's first electronic music studio (in Jerusalem).³ Without doubt, Tal's

involvement in the creation of tones by electronic means has influenced his writing for conventional instruments, and especially his treatment of the isolated tone. In the talk he gave at the performance of the “Essay”, Tal went on to point out:

“Electronic means have made it possible for the composer to create a tone, so that he no longer has to write a subject with relationships between tones. The tone itself is the subject”.

However, the influence of Tal’s interest in electronic music on the composer’s choice of tone as an idea and a subject in his works is only part of the picture.

Tal’s basic approach to musical language has not changed since he started out on his artistic path. Characteristic procedures are to be found in all his works. At the same time, in the course of his creative years technical and conceptual modifications can be discerned that form a logically continuous line of development (along which there is also electronic music). The use Tal makes of the individual tone in his later works, i.e. presenting it as a subject and an idea, is also a consequence of travelling this path, which began with the composition of his first works.

Tal acquired his musical education in Berlin between the two World Wars when Berlin was the cultural Mecca of Europe, and the artists active there were among the leaders and innovators in nearly all fields of art. The teachers at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik included Paul Hindemith, Herman Scherchen and Heinz Tiessen, the latter two followers of Schoenberg (who was also active in Berlin at the time as a professor at the "*Preussische Akademie der Künste*"), by whom Tal was greatly influenced. As a young musician maturing in this environment, Josef Tal was attracted by the language of atonality.

Tal’s initial steps in composition may, however, be termed “Classical”, with regard to various compositional parameters. In fact, most of his works up to the mid 1950s⁴ were written in the traditional cycle of three movements, for example his piano sonata of 1950:

1st movement, moderate pace -(Grave, ♩ = 44; Tempo II, ♩ = 104; Tranquillo, ♩ = 54)

2nd movement, slow

3rd movement, fast - (Rondo - Vivace)

Written in a similar form are his: Piano Concerto No.1 (1944), Piano Concerto No. 2 (1953), Symphony No. 1 (1951), Sonata for Violin and Piano (1951), Concerto for Viola and Orchestra (1953) and other compositions.

Structures of the movements and development of the musical material in these works likewise adhere to tradition. The formal organization in the above-mentioned Piano Sonata⁵ is as follows:

1st movement - has two contrasting subjects and the standard division into exposition, development and recapitulation.

2nd movement - variations on an ostinato bass, the variations developing in the traditional manner from slow to fast and in fixed framework.

3rd movement - Rondo.

The ideas at the basis of Josef Tal's works at the time, which concern us here, and the structure of the subjects in these works also adhere to tradition. That is to say, the microstructural idea is usually an interval or a short motive. The thematic material is in most cases a broad subject in traditional style. The following, for example, is the main subject of the Sonata for Violin and piano of 1951 (Ex. 1):

Example 1



The idea, or the main component, of this subject is the interval of a fourth. The subject itself is written in equal rhythmic values (varied by tied notes). It continues for six measures, develops like the “Gregorian arch”, and ends in a kind of cadenza or closing formula.

Towards the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s, Tal adopts new techniques and concepts. During this period he writes twelve-tone works while in others he incorporates electronic music. Such works include: *Intrada* for Solo Harp (1959), *Symphony No. 2* (1960), *Concerto for Cello* and

2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, clarinet in E, 2 bassoons, contra bassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, percussion instruments for five players: marimba, xylophone, vibraphone, timpani etc., harp and strings).

As with structures, so with ideas and subjects. If the idea, or the basis for a “subject” from the Cello Concerto was a third, that is, the relationship between two tones (see above), and the thematic material is a short rhythmic motive, now the single tone is the idea and the “subject” or thematic material is the expanded tone, as explained by Tal in the introductory talk to his “Essay”. This may be seen as an expression of the process of concentration and reduction of thematic material within the context of an individual tone. Indeed, many of Tal’s compositions of the 1970s and 1980s open with a presentation of the idea and the “subject”, i.e. presentation of the tones - single and expanded. The following are a number of examples (see Exx. 4-6):⁸

Example 4
Opening of Quartet No. 3 (1976)

The musical score for the opening of Quartet No. 3 (1976) is presented in two systems. The first system includes staves for Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Cello. A tempo marking of quarter note = 100 is shown above the Violin 1 staff. The Violin 1 part begins with a long, sustained note. The Violin 2, Viola, and Cello parts enter with a rhythmic motif of eighth notes. The Viola and Cello parts have a double bar line after the first measure, indicating a repeat or continuation of the motif. The second system continues the music for all four instruments, showing the development of the themes.

Example 5
Opening of Symphony No. 3 (1978)

Musical score for the opening of Symphony No. 3 (1978). The score is written for five instruments: 2 Fl., Ob., Cl. in Bb, and Bsn. The 2 Fl. part begins with a whole note C4 (middle C) marked *f*. The other instruments enter with a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, also marked *f*. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 7/8. The score shows the first two measures of the piece.

Example 6
Opening of the Work for Organ "Bekhol Hacavod" ("All Honor") (1983)

Musical score for the opening of the Work for Organ "Bekhol Hacavod" (1983). The score is written for a single instrument, the organ, in the bass clef. It shows a single melodic line with a series of notes: C4, C#4, B4, and Bb4. The notes are connected by a long, sweeping slur, indicating a continuous, flowing line. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

How are these ideas and subjects - single and expanded tones - expressed in a whole composition? The approach may be illustrated in String Quartet No. 3 (1976), in which reduction and concentration of materials and establishing the idea of tone is very evident. As seen in Example 4, it opens with the first violin playing C, presenting the leading idea to the listener. The other instruments then join in, playing adjacent notes: C-sharp, B, and B flat. Playing these four tones simultaneously produces an expanded tone which serves as the thematic material and constitutes a sort of tonicity - a tonal identity card, or "home key" as George Perle describes it. The "home key" may be a chord or cluster with a special color.⁹

Let us go back to Josef Tal's own statement in introducing his "Essay",

that the development of such a subject is achieved by producing a series of structures emanating from that tone. Indeed, the above four tones forming the expanded tone are played at the beginning of the quartet for a duration of 40 quarters at a tempo set at $\text{♩} = 100$ (there are no bar lines), that is to say, for sixty seconds (a full minute). During that minute the instruments exchange tones amid changes of register in a kaleidoscopic manner. What this means is that one minute of this playing, or this section, is both the thematic material - the “subject - and a first structure in which, in addition to quoting the basic tones (expanded tone), the idea of sound is expressed in a texture that may be termed static. After the first structure come others. The second structure is the converse of the first; it is a section in which all four instruments play virtuoso parts simultaneously. The result of this collective playing is a composite “sound”. By this means, Tal preserves the idea of the tone whose presentation is by means of a dynamic texture (see Ex. 7):

Example 7

The musical score for Example 7 is a four-part setting for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. It is written in a single system with four staves. The music is characterized by a high density of notes, with many beamed sixteenth and thirty-second notes. Trills, indicated by a '3' above the notes, are a prominent feature in all parts. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor), and the time signature is not explicitly shown but implied to be common time (C) based on the tempo marking. The overall texture is highly complex and virtuosic, with each instrument playing a distinct, intricate line that contributes to a rich, layered sound.

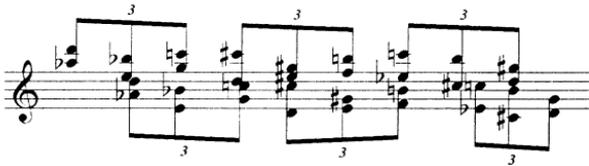
Moreover, through structural linearity Tal retains the dominance of the subject’s tone (C , C[#], B, B^b) and/or the intervals they generate (seconds and their inversions). The first violin starts out as follows (Ex. 8):

Example 8



In this way the tonal “identity card” is also preserved. Another structure is that built of groups of triplets played in rhythmic opposition, as in Example 9:

Example 9



In this structure the chords are constructed from “correct” intervals - seconds and inverted Seconds - and thereby the characteristic sonority, the “home key” sonority, is preserved.

A look at the score of the quartet indeed confirms Josef Tal’s words. It is built of sections - structures which repeat themselves in different variants. Each of these has a different texture¹⁰ and all are connected to or spring from the thematic material, that is: the single tone and the expanded tone. This connection is expressed in several ways:

- a. by quoting the tones which make up the expanded tone.
- b. by sustaining the tonal “identity card”, also in transposition, in changing sonorous, etc.
- c. by keeping close to the idea of tone, as the second structure for example.
- d. by various combinations of the above.

The function of the expanded tone as a “subject” finds expression not only because the structures are derived from it, but also as a function of the appearance of the first structure, in which the “subject” is presented, at strategic architectural points of the quartet. If we assign various structures letters, starting with A, their order of appearance in the quartet would be as follows:

A B C A D B E A D C B A .

That is, the expanded tone, as part of structure A, is played at the beginning and the end of the quartet, thereby enclosing the cycle of musical events.¹¹ Similarly, this tone appears at the dividing points between the three groups - a typical architectural division in Tal's compositions. At the end, the main groups return in retrograde.

In this way, Tal uses the tone both as thematic material from which he develops the musical events in the quartet, and also as a foundation stone of the work's structure.

The manner of composition of Quartet No. 3, therefore, confirms the ideas expressed by Josef Tal in introducing his "Essay". The underlying idea in the quartet is clearly the single tone. This tone together with its surrounding satellites - the composite/expanded tone - provides the work's thematic material and a tonal identity card, as it were, a kind of "subject". The composer clearly handles his subject in the way he has explained, developing from it a series of structures on which the whole composition is built.

Tal's String Quartet No. 3 is thus a good example of the composer's concept of using a tone as a subject and an idea, found in numerous works written in the 1970s and 1980s

Notes

1. The meeting marked Israel's Fortieth Anniversary and was held at the Jerusalem Music Center.
2. Tal Josef, *Der Sohn des Rabbimers - Ein Weg von Berlin nach Jerusalem*; Berlin: Quadriga Verlag, 1985, 127.
3. Tal Josef, *Ibid.* 267
4. These works were composed after his immigration to Palestine; the German authorities forbade him to take with him works he had written in Germany.
5. According to Josef Tal, in his address at a concert celebrating his 75th birthday, Tel Aviv, 1985, the piano sonata represents a traditional three-movement structure.
6. Professor Josef Dorfman's definition.
7. Within the present article I will not go into a discussion on the relationship between a twelve-tone line and a thematic subject.
8. It should be noted that all the following works begin with C. This matter is discussed in a separate article.
9. George Perle, *Serial Compositions and Atonality*, Berkeley 1963, 19.

10. Division of a musical work into sections which differ from each other in tempo, texture and color typifies the modern music of the second half of the 20th century, see: Brindle, R. Smith, *Serial Composition*, Oxford University Press 1972, 108.
11. Tal builds his works to form a symbol of the life-cycle. This aspect too requires a separate article.