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The Music of Josef Tal Selected Writings



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The "Where and When" in the Compositions of Josef Tal

In his well-known essay in "Orlogin" Alexander U. Boskovitch states that an Israeli composer must express in his works the dialectical "here and now". This chapter sets out to examine the music of Josef Tal in the light of that pronouncement.

Josef Tal's work is often perceived as monolithic music expressed in uncompromising atonal musical language. Indeed, Tal, who received his musical education (in the 'thirties) at the *Berlin Hochschüle für Musik* says in his autobiography,² when describing the school's curriculum and the music written there: "Whoever used the tonal method of writing or even the expanded chromatic method was considered backward". Thus, he goes on: "I began expressing myself using modern atonal means".

Tal acquired his musical education between the two world wars at a time when Berlin was the cultural Mecca of the west, at least where the art of music was concerned. His teachers included Curt Sachs, Paul Hindemith, Max Trapp and others. The teacher who influenced him most was Heinz Tiessen, who taught composition and was a follower of Schoenberg and his new (dodecaphonic) method. Schoenberg at the time was in fact teaching at the *Preussische Akademie der Künst* - a competitor of the Berliner Hochschüle. As part of his academic syllabus Tal participated in the first experiments conducted there in the creation of tones by electronic means, experiments carried out in the early 'thirties in the academy basement, known as "the Trautwein Basement", named after the engineer who built the equipment there (experiments took place despite the constant ridicule of many of the school's teachers and students).

In many of his works composed in Israel Tal indeed uses the modern techniques and language he learned and absorbed as a student. For this reason, in most of the studies done in Israel and most of the articles published in periodicals dealing with Israeli music, Tal's work is portrayed as being contrary to Israeli music-making in general and to the "Mediterranean" style in particular. This is evidenced in the studies by Avner Bahat,³ Zvi Keren,⁴ Leora Bressler⁵ and others. In the article in "Orlogin" referred to above Boskovitch also writes:

"Sometimes a composer does not want, or is unable, to give up his musical-ideological heritage and prefers to continue using the same style as before and preserve its values within the limited circle of his intimates, like the eternal and rather stubborn immigrant".

In this verdict the writer presumably included Tal. Even now there are those who regard Tal's music in this way. In an article entitled: "There is No One Israeliness", published in I.M.I. News as recently as December 1996, the composer and musician Yossi Peles writes:

"In the 'forties and early 'fifties the predominant influence was in fact Mediterranean... though there were also some composers who from the outset rejected any stylistic commitment involving Jewish liturgical or oriental influences... Despite their dealing with Jewish and Hebraic texts composers such as Erich-Walter Sternberg and Josef Tal (however much they differed) considered themselves independent composers committed only to their own musical and personal tastes".

But it is not so straightforward as that. A careful examination of Josef Tal's music and the present historical perspective allow one to recognize that his music is not monolithic. Despite its dominant atonality, Tal's music has undergone changes and modifications over the years. A proper examination reveals somewhat surprisingly that these changes reflect what occurred over time in Israeli music. Tal, moreover, has tried in his own way to express the feeling of time and place of the period.

But before pursuing this subject, the development of Israeli music should briefly be summarized.

The history of Israeli music begins in the mid-1930s with the wave of Jewish immigration ("the Fifth Aliya") from central Europe and especially Germany, when all three sides of the operative triangle, namely, serious composers, professional players and a well-trained audience were at hand. When the "European" composers arrived in the country they were exposed to new sounds (including the sound of the Hebrew language), a new landscape and a nationalistic-Zionistic atmosphere. A large proportion of the composers - the "new Israelis" - were influenced by this exposure. In the literature and publications of the period we find various definitions relating to this influence: "A wish to blend into the Semitic space", "A wish

to express the dialectic here and now", "Writing that combines the eastern melos with western technique", and so on. In addition to the environmental influence, there was also a conscious desire to create an "appropriate" Israeli style. Such influences and desires led to the creation of a genre which in time became known as "the Mediterranean style in Israeli music". Even now there is no consensus as to what this style and its characteristics really are. Some maintain that above all it is the national element which typifies the style, that is to say, it is a music which expresses the transition from oppression to redemption, etc. Others emphasize the oriental element and any composition which includes oriental elements is in their eyes "Mediterranean". Some emphasize the Impressionistic atmosphere. It is quite plausible that all the above principles are to be found in some degree or other in "Mediterranean" music. Technically, composers made extensive use of modal scales, especially the Doric, used Oriental melodies as the basis of their works, imitated oriental instruments and included "empty" harmonies and microtones, etc.

This "Mediterranean" genre reached its peak in the second half of the 1940s and the early 1950s. Alexander Boskovitch's 'Semitic Suite', generally considered a forerunner of this genre, was composed in 1946. Composer Ben-Zion Orgad gave a fitting description of it in a review which appeared in 1984 in a special Independence Day supplement of the daily newspaper "Davar":

"The works of Paul Ben-Chaim - 'Five Pieces for Piano', 'Pastoral with Variations', 'Naim Zmirot Yisrael' - join ranks with Alexander Boskovitch's 'Semitic Suite', Avidom's symphonies and Alexander's 'Israeli Dances', which are models from which may be derived the characteristics of the Mediterranean style. In this model one can discern a balanced, impressionalistically organized mixture of singability, rhythmic formulae and orientally inclined sonorities".

In the second half of the 1950s, Israeli composers, for the first time since their arrival the country, started going abroad to study. They traveled to Darmstadt, Paris and the U. S. A. and had their first taste of the world's avant-garde - a subject for a separate article. For the present, suffice it to say that following this exposure the dominance of the Mediterranean genre in Israeli music drew to an end.

To return to Josef Tal. On reaching Haifa in 1934, Tal stayed there for a while, working as a photographer. He then moved to Kibbutz Gesher in the Jordan Valley and was a member of the kibbutz for two years. While there he engaged in music-making at kibbutzim in the Galilee and the Jordan Valley with local musicians such as Carmi of Ein-Harod, Yehuda Sharret of

Yagur and others. At the end of 1936 he settled in Jerusalem (where he still lives) and found his place among a group of musicians including Stefan Wolpe, Thelma Yellin, Sydney Seal, Emil Hauser and others. In Jerusalem Tal taught at the conservatory and performed in concerts.

When he left Germany Tal had been allowed to take nothing but a few clothes, thus all his early compositions were lost. His initial years in the country were for him a period of acclimatization during which he wrote almost nothing, apart from a few solo pieces and a number of songs. His first serious composition, which also won him the Engel Prize, is his Concerto No.1 for Piano and Orchestra written in 1944. From this point on Tal devoted himself increasingly to composition. At least one composition of his was published every year. Most of the works which Tal wrote at that time (around 1950) are characterized by traditional components and frameworks, written in traditional techniques such as variations, and atonal musical language. Among such compositions may be counted the Sonata for Violin and Piano (1951), Symphony No.1 (1952), Sonata for Oboe and Piano (1952), Concerto for Viola and Orchestra (1953), Concerto No.2 for Piano and Orchestra (1953) and others.

It was in 1950 that Tal produced his piano sonata (the only piano sonata he has written to date), constructed on the same principles as described above: it has three movements, the first of which is in traditional sonata-allegro form; the second, "Basso ostinato", is a series of variations on a recurring theme in the base built in traditional form - from slow to fast with fixed time frames; the third movement, "Rondo", is indeed built on the traditional rondo scheme. An interesting point about this piano sonata, however, is that Tal takes as his basic thematic material Yehuda Sharret's song "Rachel" (after the biblical matriarch), better known as "Hen Damah" (Her Blood) (see Ex. 1):



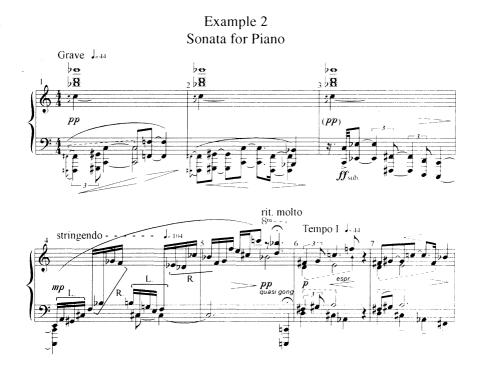
The motive, consisting of the song's first three notes, is the basic nucleus of the outer movements - the first and third. The whole song serves as a basso ostinato in the second movement where it is quoted in its entirety. As may be seen in Example 1 the range of the song "Rachel" is the interval of a fourth. It is written in the key of D and has a varying meter. Since it has neither a leading tone nor a sixth degree it may be regarded as written in the

Doric mode, a popular and accepted scale in Israeli music those days. Moreover, the song was quite popular at the time, describing Rachel the matriarch and shepherdess, who also symbolizes the people's return to their land. The words of the song (by the Hebrew poetess Rachel) are: "Hen damah bedami zorem vekola bie ran Rachel haroa et Zom Lavam..." ("Her blood runs in my veins, her voice sings in me - Rachel who tends the flocks of Laban ..."), words which express a wish to emulate our biblical Mother. Both text and music here reflect without doubt Israeli nationalistic and Mediterranean elements. These are the materials Israeli composer Josef Tal took for his new composition. From this, the devotees of the Mediterranean stream within Israeli music concluded that Tal had crossed the Rubicon and gone over to their kind of music-writing. Tal himself, however, totally rejected this notion, insisting that he had used that particular song as a gesture to his friend Yehuda Sharret and because of its rhythmic and melodic potential. And indeed, Tal uses the source material in his own unique way.

The two outer movements are written in an atonal idiom, while the motive of the first three notes of the song:

forms the basis of their

composition, using all of its components: the upward pitch direction, the rhythmic structure, the intervals and the three-note idea. The beginning of the first movement is an example of this technique (see Ex. 2):



Measure No.1 a similar motive, derived from the original.

Measure No. 6 in the tenor - the original motive transposed using the tones of the first measure.

Measure No. 6 in the alto - the tones of the motive, the tone F, an octave higher than the original.

Measure No. 7 in the tenor - the motive of the song transposed.

Measure No. 7 in the alto - the original tones of the motive (D, E, F), and so on.

The middle movement - "Basso Ostinato" - is a series of variations in which Yehuda Sharret's song "Rachel" is quoted in its entirety and serves as the bass, being repeated six times. Each of the repeats is played in the original key (D) but in varying registers. Harmonically one could treat this movement according to the song's tonicity, that is, as though it were written in the key of D. But above the base Tal has built variations which do not depend on the song's tonicity. In this way two, as it were, independent tone systems are heard side by side - i.e. polytonally. Furthermore, the movement is written for the most part in three voices only, which blurs the tonality even more, as illustrated in Example 3:

Example 3
Basso Ostinato



Tal's First Symphony, completed in 1952, is also based on external, borrowed material. The song used here is a Persian-Jewish lament which the composer found in Idelsohn's "Thesaurus". The way the authentic material is approached and treated in the symphony is similar to his treatment of material in the sonata; the outer movements are abstract and based on motives taken from the song. In the second, middle, movement the song is quoted in different registers, in transposition and by various groups of instruments. Like Yehuda Sharret's "Rachel", this song too has a flexible and variable meter and is in the Doric mode. The first quotation of the song is played on the bass clarinet with D tonicity. The song is as follows:

Example 4

The symphony also appears to have an ideological concept behind it. This is what Tal says about the work:¹¹

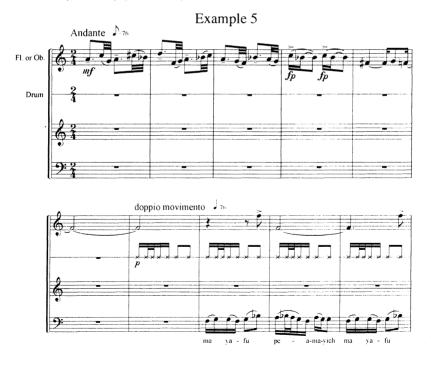
The symphony is in three sections played without a break. I used an old Persian- Jewish lament as transcribed by Idelsohn. This melody provides the symphony with all the motivic material it contains. The first section contains tiny particles of the song; as these are developed and expanded they grow and coalesce into new thematic figures. After a slow introduction in the spirit of the lament the mood becomes rebellious. Only in the second movement is the song presented in its original form. In simple variation—form it reappears again and again played by different instrumental groups, thus providing a kind of respite in the middle of the composition. In thethird section there appear - after a transitional episode - the main character outlines of the first section. Now the lament's passive mood changes into a dance song which becomes increasingly lively. The work ends with a coda, thus completing the cycle". 12

According to this explanation and in the light of the musical events depicted in it (lament - revolt - dance song) the symphony expresses an

extra-musical, ideological nationalistic ethos which was widespread at the time: liberation or transition from subjection to redemption (it should be borne in mind that the nationalistic ideological approach, according to some researchers, was a dominant aspect of Mediterranean music). Moreover, according to Alexander Ringer, a dance-like final movement is one of the characteristic features of Israeli music of the 'forties and 'fifties.¹³ Is this then one more example of "Mediterranean" music?

In 1953 Tal wrote two concerti: Concerto for Viola and Orchestra and Concerto No. 2 for Piano and Chamber Orchestra. The first ends with a tempestuous dance movement. The second also ends with a dance movement and is based, like the first symphony, on a melody which Tal took from Idelsohn's *Thesaurus*.

That same year a booklet was published by the Histadrut (Federation of Labor Unions) Center for Culture and Education in which were included three pieces for mixed choir by J. Tal after songs by the melodist of Yemenite origin Sarah Levi-Tannai: the popular "Moladeti" (My Homeland), "Ma Yafu Pe'amayich" (How beautiful are thy footsteps) and "Elohim Esh'alla" (I shall beseech the Lord). In addition to the fact, interesting in itself, that Josef Tal uses these songs, he adds to the voices in the second song "Ma Yafu Pe'amayich" - from the Song of Songs - an accompaniment for drum and flute (or oboe) (see Ex. 5):



Describing how Mediterranean music should sound, Max Brod writes:

Transparent music, soaked in bright light; Judeo-Yemenite melodies, the landscape, the shepherd's song, the oboe, the clarinet, flute and drum all have a role to play".¹⁴

And here we see before us a work based on Judeo-Yemenite songs, in which a flute, an oboe and a drum take part. Are we not now talking about Mediterranean music?

It seems to be the case, therefore, that in the late 'forties and early 'fifties, when the Mediterranean style was at its peak, Tal was a frequent borrower of Oriental-Jewish source material as the basis for his compositions. Or, in other words, he made use of original Jewish source material in his works at the very time that the Mediterranean style was flourishing in Israel. Can the works of Tal referred to above be seen therefore as Mediterranean? This is what Josef Tal himself has to say:15

"In the Idelsohn Thesaurus I found musically bold melodies and discovered through them what Bartok does." "In my Second Piano Concerto and First Symphony the subject (from Idelsohn) of the second movement is given as a quotation. I analyzed the melodies deeply, paying careful attention to details such as intervals, rhythms and so on. I used this to jolt my imagination and adapt the material to my writing. I didn't ask myself if this was Israeli music".

"In these compositions (the First Symphony and the Second Piano Concerto), and also in the Piano Sonata, the first section takes the bones of the melody and sets them in new connotations. In the second movement the melody is given in full. Third movement pure musical treatment again. I want the listener to know where everything is taken from and I show him what I have found in the song. To this end I give the quotation, but on no account is this a demonstration of nationalistic feeling." "Landscape can influence aesthetic taste but to change this into formulae is absurd. People are influenced in different ways and therefore this cannot be a matter of prescriptions and formulae. This is a very narrow, local, provincial approach". "If someone writes in the Doric mode and it sounds oriental and exotic, is that enough? The society you live in finds expression in your music whether you use the Doric mode or the twelve-tone technique".

If we take Ben-Zion Orgad's definition as the most pertinent, and if the works he mentions (Pastoral with Variations by Paul Ben Chaim, Semitic Suite by Alexander Boskovitch, symphonies by Avidom and other works) as being true models of the Mediterranean style, it would surely follow that Josef Tal's Piano Sonata, First Symphony, Second Piano Concerto and other works based on Oriental-Jewish melodies are definitely not Mediterranean. Notwithstanding, it still seems no mere coincidence that Tal used Oriental source material in his compositions in the Mediterranean style heyday. It may be assumed that the prevailing ambiance - as he himself has pointed out - together with social-public pressure at the time, also affected the uncompromising atonalist Tal. Without doubt Josef Tal tried, as seen in the works quoted here, to express the spirit of the time and place in which he lived and worked.

Notes

- 1. Alexander Uriah Boskovitch, "The Problems of Original Music in Israel", *Orlogin* 9, 1953, 287
- 2. Josef Tal, *Der Sohn des Rabbiners Ein Weg von Berlin nach Jerusalem*. Berlin, Quadriga Verlag, 1985
- 3. Avner Bahat, "Traditional Musical Elements in Israeli Art Music", M.A. thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1973
- 4. Zvi Keren, Contemporary Israeli Music, Bar-Ilan University Press, 1980.
- 5. Leora Bresler, "The Mediterranean Style in Israeli Music", M.A. thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1983
- 6. Yossi Peles, "There is No One Israeliness", I.M.I News 96/1-2, 8-14
- 7. See Genesis, Chap. 29
- 8. Poems by Rachel, Tel Aviv, Bar Publishers, 1986, p.53
- 9. In 1951 "Cultural Center" published a booklet entitled "Introduction to the Theory of Musical Form" written by Josef Tal. In the chapter dealing with musical structures based on borrowed melodies, Tal uses Yehuda Sharret's "Rachel" as an example of a song with rhythmic and melodic potential. This reinforces his argument regarding his reasons for using the song.
- 10. Abraham Z. Idelsohn, *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*, Leipzig 1914-32.
- 11. Printed on the score published by Israel Music Publishers Ltd., 1957.
- 12. Josef Tal builds and treats his compositions as if they express the life-cycle a subject dealt with in a separate article.

- 13. Alexander Ringer, "Musical Composition in Modern Israel". *M.Q.* No.1, Jan. 1965 (282-297)
- 14. Max Brod, Israel Music, Tel Aviv, "Sefer Press", 1951.
- 15. These remarks and statements were made and recorded on different occasions. The recorded material is in the Israel Music Archives, Tel Aviv University Musicology Department.
- 16. Josef Tal's relationship with Israeli music in subsequent years (the 'sixties and after) is the subject of a separate article.