

SELF-PORTRAIT OF THE COMPOSER JOSEF TAL

A self-portrait has its inherent dangers. One can't help thinking of the implications of the Picture of Dorian Gray.

A portrait turns a subject into an object. The artist on his part reacts to that which he has objectivized. In this sense every composition is actually a self-portrait of its creator, since the completed composition has disengaged itself from him, standing before him and compelling him to react to this portrait, for instance, when he himself interprets it instrumentally or verbally.

The mastery of the different stages of self-contemplation requires a good measure of self-discipline so as to exclude, as far as possible, external and all-too-human influences.

Fully aware of the difficulty of this task of drawing a self-portrait, I shall now attempt to talk about my work as a composer, both in close proximity to myself and from a far distance.

First let me sketch in the background.

The twentieth-century composer has to struggle with the problems of communication to a degree that was hitherto unknown in the history of music. Three factors contributed to bringing this development to its culmination in our times.

1. An enormous increase in the audience through the organizational management of concerts and the introduction of technological mass media, such as the radio, television and records.
2. Connected with this, the impaired capacity of grasping other than typical sound structures.
3. Rapid and radical transformations in the structure of the musical language of the twentieth century.

These changes in the musical language brought about a loss of all yardsticks, not only by the average listener but also by many composers. In the whirlpool of the metamorphoses, speculation often corrupted logical thinking, invention was concentrated upon surprise effects as surrogate^s for emotional reaction, the intensity of the one-time sensation became the ^{new} criterion that took the place of sound workmanship.

With these confused conceptions there arose a new generation that was indoctrinated by ideological polemics whose alleged substance often was merely ephemeral.

I am saying all this not as a reflecting historian but as a composer who, from his earliest years of study, grew up in the midst of these stormy developments. Therefore, it is a matter of course that frequent changes in the structure of my works, in textures and treatment of the material, are easily recognizable since, after all, I was not deaf to my musical surroundings.

Still, I would take the task of painting my self-portrait too easy if I were to believe that I could draw the true features solely from the chronological sequence of the variations in musical techniques. Irrespective of the different variants, of the manifold discoveries to be made in the sphere of music, one and the same person must be discernible in everything, in so far as he has been successful in preserving his human identity as a whole. I should like to tell you about this struggle against an inner disintegration. The struggle is not confined to myself. There are many who will be able to identify with me.

It so happened that one of these days I read an article about the Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe, born in 1929. At the age of 13 he made his first attempt at modern music, wrote a small study that had harmonies and rhythms, but no tunes and no key, and took it to his music teacher with the explanation: "This is what we've got to do now. The world's run out of tunes". To which she replied: "Peter, does God ever run out of faces?"

This short episode throws light on one of the principal causes for the crisis in twentieth century music. The features of a composition used to be recognized almost exclusively from its melodic statement. Even when it bore new and sometimes even strange features, one could soon become familiar with it and accept it into the circle of one's musical friends. Then followed the process of radical change. Different organizations in the realm of sound, known henceforth as atonal or twelve-tone or stochastic or accidental music, or fundamentally nihilist attitudes toward any kind of organization - all this changed the interrelation between sounds and led to a revolution in the functions of all known distinguishing marks.

This, of course, does not mean that there no longer exist any melodies in the so-called "modern" music. Yet they find a different expression and they no longer bear any resemblance to the traditional melodies; now they are reflecting a musical space that has expanded enormously. This is a strong challenge to both composer and listener, but certainly does not signify that "the world of melodies has fallen apart" - on the contrary, it indicates the revelation of a new world of tunes.

This melody is a **one-part** musical statement. It can also be raised to higher power through ~~the multichromatism of~~ polyphonic ^{techniques} phrasing. If it contains latent harmonic connections, these can be realized through additional harmonizing - typical for the classic style and one of the most popular conceptions of a melody to this day. For a composition such as an opera, in which all the participating singers are carriers of soloist airs, this melody represents the main contingent of musical invention. We can observe these metamorphoses of the conceptions of music most easily in contemporary operatic literature.

In the context of my self-portraiture I would like to play to you a scene from my opera "Massada", written for singers and electronic music. It has a Hebrew text.

On the stage we see an old crone, mournfully bent over a young woman who had been raped by Roman soldiers. The crone wrangles with God, like Job. Naturally she does not sing in the style of a traditional aria. Her vocal expression renders the dramatic reality of her surroundings absolute. Melodic and rhythmic intervals create different grades of tension, which are not determined by any specific tonal organization, which cannot be subsumed into categories of dissonance and consonance, but whose energy content varies with the specific situation of the moment without any typical reaction. Thus the whole melodic line follows the law of this composition, dictated by the uniqueness of the dramatic situation.

Permit me to add a few words about the electronic part of this scene. To avoid the listener's typical associations of colors of sound - such as the pastoral sound of the clarinets, the militant one of the trumpets, the emotions aroused by the tremoli of violins, etc. - I decided against an orchestra as the instrumental partner of this historical, yet/surrealistically represented ^{on the stage} ~~scene~~ ^{subject}, but preferred to compose electronic music exclusively. Now this does not at all mean that only decorative background music is being provided by painting imitative music. On the contrary, the vocal part and the electronic music constitute a homogeneous duet, the one increasing the musical potency of the other's musical statement. In this sense the composition is definitely the continuation of a musical tradition, without further treading much-trodden paths. Now let's listen to this example, sung by Ada Etzioni, mezzo-soprano.

E.1.

You may be surprised to hear the next example from my self-portrait. Here are two parts from a concerto for piano and orchestra, which I wrote a little less than 30 years ago. You might possibly say: "this composer does not know what he wants. He seems to change his views every few years".

But this is not so. I already said at the beginning that materials are subject to change, and with it the mode of their application. No matter what may happen in the course of a life, how much the mode of making a statement may change, the striving toward the preconceived aim of creative thinking must be recognizable already in statu nascendi. Thus, if I am now presenting something like a portrait of the composer as a young man, the exterior appears quite different from the previous example. But the first glance may be deceptive. You will be pleasantly surprised to hear right at the beginning a singable and easily grasped tune with which everybody could hum along. This tune is even quoting an ancient ^{lament} dirge of Persian Jewry. I was interested in the individual components of the melodic line. In the course of this composition I individualized them, developed them separately and brought them together again for discussion. The tensions and contrasts

which you perceived in my first example are also present here, they only extend over longer sections. The interrelation of the parts constitutes the structure of the work. No formal schéma enables predictable events, although one could be working here, with traditional methods of measuring just as well. This is because I do not deny my roots. On the contrary - the greater the distance of the upward growing treetop from the surface of the earth, the greater the dependence of the trunk on the roots reaching deeper and deeper. Thus, if this music were to contain nothing but the imitation of old, worn-out procedures learned by rote, history will throw off the old skin of its own accord. If, however, what has been achieved later is alive already at an early stage, then the external change of style constitutes no contradiction within a man's body of work. Then all depends on the audience at which the work is addressed: whether only what is superficially recognizable is being grasped or whether also the deeper contexts can be understood. Thus a painter can make a young face look very mature and an old face quite childish in a portrait. What he wants to express by the shadows and wrinkles of a melodic face is decisive.

Now you can hear the second and third part of my piano concerto. The soloist is Shushanna Rudiakow, Mendi Rodan is conducting the Jerusalem Symphonic Orchestra.

E.2

I should now like to talk about one of my latest compositions, the string quartet, Op. No. 3. And again I shall have to draw a different portrait of myself. The main emphasis is on a tendency towards a new concept: it is the texture of the work, which becomes ^{its} thematic statement. Up to now, texture had ^{always} been a merely secondary element.

The texture of the sounds, known by the technical term of ^{voice} "melodic ~~line~~", followed the conditions set by primary elements, such as tune and harmony, serving the maximal utilization of their potential. The "melodic line" now has become emancipated from other elements, and this term therefore no longer defines precisely the same thing. It is better, therefore, to speak of texture, which comprises all the

elements. Texture thus becomes a definite form, it becomes the foundation stone from which the overall structure of the work is developed. Such texture undergoes internal transformations, inner changes in the interrelation of the constituent parts - such texture can be compared with a drop of water as seen through a microscope. All or selected elements take part in the inner life. Their manifold interrelations, their for and against, which are now taking the place of consonance and dissonance, their different and controlled stages of emotional release - all this may contribute to a sharply defined character of the texture and assumes thus, the same significance as that of marble or granite for the sculptor - with the difference that in music the texture is already a creative act of the composer. When we previously spoke of melodic motifs which at the same time served as distinguishing marks for the perceptive listener, now texture as such can assume the role of motif, it can postulate itself as a contrast to the melodic line - as I demonstrated in my first example from the opera "Massada". A new perspective of musical-architectural designs is being opened to the listener. Such a design, in which the invented textures serve the work, differs for each work and does not, therefore, lend itself to comparison with crystallized architectural models known to the listener from traditional music, ^{models} such as the sonata, the fugue, etc. Nevertheless, even in this new form there are discernible some basic elements whose behaviour is conditioned by spontaneous reactions - in principle like those of the first to the second theme in the sonata. Yet here we do not have the reaction to one another of traditionally formulated themes, but building stones as defined above. Now I would like to present to you some of these building stones of my third string quartet, at first separately, so as to let you participate in the building of the overall structure. The work begins with splinters which become condensed into a complex of sounds.

E. 3a)

Strongly contrasting with this beginning, an emotional release is reacting in an extremely agitated quadriphonic texture, leading to

consequences of the previously postulated sound complex and again being resolved in partial movements.

E. 3b)

Now the first violin is playing a melodic line, developing from short, terse statements into a drawn-out phrase. The rhetoric intervals in this melody are filled with short responses from the other instruments.

E. 3c)

If you will now permit me to play to you the foregoing in continuity, you will already discern the evolutionary process of this composition. The positions of the different textures, each by itself and all to one another, the sharply contrasting melodic line of the first violin - all these are features which a priori characterize the self-portrait of the composer.

You will agree that criteria of "beauty" and "ugliness" are irrelevant here. The ugliest face can turn beautiful in communication, provided that from within a statement is appealing. To assist you in forming an opinion on this, I am repeating the opening.

E. 3d)

I don't want to bore you with a detailed analysis of this composition. But I feel strongly about one point, and this may even be decisive. I am fully aware that I shall now antagonize the avant_garde, when, in a quasi reactionary fashion, I am talking of the morals of a process of composing.

Far be it from me to paint the portrait of a moralist, but I regard the self-evaluation of a compositional idea as a moral act. The idea must be capable of proving itself - otherwise it is not fit to live. The composer must explore his ideas and bring to light what is beneath the threshold of consciousness. This is a moral obligation. If he evades this obligation, he abandons his children before he has raised them to independence.

You will recall the opening of the string quartet. I was talking of splinters condensing into a complex, and then followed the vehement reaction of a wild texture. This splinter episode repeats itself elsewhere in the composition, but instead of the wild texture there evolves from the condensed sound complex a flower of sound which up to then had been a closed bud and which now brings the whole beginning to maturation. It is the result of search and cognition. I call such action in the creative process a moral action in the original, unadulterated sense of the word. Here is yet another small example:

E. 3e)

Now I come to the end of my self-portrait.

A few last strokes of the brush as a comment to the third string quartet.

The hour which you, dear listeners, have been spending with my talk and my music has shown you a sketchy outline of the adventure of a lifetime. There is no linear creative process. By its very nature it moves adventurously in many directions. There is the big danger that this may mislead one to superficiality. But just the same it is the great privilege of the creative man that all the roads are open before him. It is up to him, whether he loses his way in that universe or whether he explores it.

As a conclusion you will now hear the third string quartet, played by the Israeli String Quartet.