

Josef Tal

THE OPERA IN THE LIFE OF A COMPOSER

AUTOBIOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS

When the path of musical experience in the life of a composer is long and full of profound impressions the past and the future often appear indistinguishable. Such sporadic condensations may begin to be noticeable quite early when, in a flash, a specific perception is awakened. Then it may be quite a long while before this fruit is ripe for picking and meanwhile, new perceptions bring quicker results. That is how Beethoven's notebooks must be understood, his spontaneous discoveries oft had to wait years for realization. And so, when in great old age, a composer is about to complete the score of a new opera it is time for him to reflect in retrospect upon his opera world. This is the only way in which he can reach new condensations, within which the prospects for the future are contained.

My introspection brings up the vivid memory of a singing lesson in high-school when I was about 15. Our singing master explained to us boys the term 'opera', illustrating his words with excerpts of arias and accompanying himself on the piano. The lesson inflamed my imagination and caused vehement reactions. That very day I searched for and found in some book a rather dramatic story about a man named Johannes. I bought a little music notebook at the corner store and immediately began setting Johannes' words to music. I have never seen or heard an opera but, following the guidelines of our music master, I let my imagination create a theatre stage upon which I set to a lively melody. For reasons which I can no longer recall,

the whole enterprise got stuck that very day and seemed forgotten for many years. Other matters temporarily claimed priority. But a little live ember remained and smoldered somewhere deep below the surface. It remained there throughout the years of my studies in pre-Hitler Berlin, where I also tutored opera singers and became deeply involved with opera life in that great European capital. Soon, however, came the political uprooting and the need to put down roots in the new homeland with its ancient historic past.

It was twenty years before the tiny ember, at long last, managed to burst into flame. Michael Taube, founder and conductor of the Ramat Gan Chamber Orchestra, commissioned me to write a chamber opera for them. The result was the concertante opera SAUL AT EIN DOR (1955).

Writing it I felt that as an opera composer, I was much like a child taking its first steps.

When I think back on the early days of my opera writing, I discover to my astonishment what tremendous transformations occur in the work of one man alone. Actually, it was these illogical leaps in development that forced me to view in a positive-critical light all I have learned in the past.

The just-born State of Israel had several higher priorities than to support an opera house. I understood clearly that no professional operatic stage could be made available. Already at the time there were, of course, some private initiatives to mount opera productions, but these inevitably remained in the domain of the dilettanti.

However, the wide open eyes and ears of a public eager for emotional stimulus presented a challenge to the composer. The biblical episode of Saul at Ein Dor seemed to be suitable material. At the heart of the dramatic action is the fateful pronouncement of Samuel. To make the spirit of the prophet materialize on a stage would put to the test the individual powers of imagination of the listeners, instead of intensifying it through music. In such instances, any attempt to make a concrete presentation of a disembodied prophecy would result in kitsch, thus falsifying and demeaning the spiritual content. On the other hand, aided by words, the musical statement on its own awakens the listener's imagination. He becomes a spectator through the powers of his own fantasizing. In this way the composition becomes opera concertante.

I did not come to opera writing through systematic and methodical studies. Into this first attempt went all the experience gathered through years of observation and auto-didactic efforts.

Ten years later, Rolf Liebermann, director of the Hamburg State Opera, commissioned me to write a full opera for his company. The commission became the opera ASHMEDAI (1968). It brought me into the foreground of world opera writing, a dream I have not even dared to dream.

Thus opened the opera-writing chapter in my life. A new factor penetrated my consciousness: opera going public, separate and different from the concert-goers. They may be the same people, but opera audiences are required to be capable of coordinating the visual impact with the aural, the latter being split into music and text. This is a demanding intellectual process involving considerable emotional outlay. The mutual heightening of intellectual and emotional potential is the tension filled road leading to the real objective: the merging of the visible and the audible into a third dimension. When the listener's ability to absorb or the interpretative ability of the performers do not meet the demands made upon them by this merger, there occur exaggerations, distortions and fakings, of all artistic attributes which caused the history of opera to be full of controversies. In my student days operatic parodies occupied the pride of place in intellectual amusement. Still, opera has managed to maintain its magnetic appeal for wide audiences to this day. Arias from the operas quite often vied for popularity with the 'hits' of the moment, while splendidly produced operas collided with the ideals of 'Neue Sachlichkeit'. The exorbitant cost of opera production also caused problems. The discussion was brought to a head when the composer-conductor, Pierre Boulez, declared at a public meeting that all opera houses should be put to the torch! However, even after this unequivocal public denunciation, Boulez remained a prominent and active opera conductor. The 20th century 'Neue Sachlichkeit' put up convenient arguments against the opera most of which were based on such questions as: Why must the characters sing to one another instead of speaking? Why does the hero sing a robust aria having just been stabbed (to death!) and all that to the accompaniment of the orchestra?! Why does the public accept all those ridiculous features of the opera? Well, they are not really ridiculous. They are the quintessence of the composer's ideas and feelings.

The fertile soil on which the opera thrives is the close relationship between language and music, each bringing out the other's vital elements. As raw material, sound is common to both speech and music. A word is itself a sound in which consonants, vowels and diphthongs create a sound complex. A word of many syllables forms also a rhythmic figure. In addition, such sound unit incorporates a definite meaning which will permit everyday verbal communication. In music, on the other hand, though each part of the sound is physically determined by its parameters, no specific meaning can be attributed to it as it can to the spoken word. Most words 'describe' natural phenomena which can be perceived. Even in the case of such exceptional words as: spirit, soul, suffering – the listener has concrete associations, as if translating them into tangible facts. The sounds of music, however, bring information leading to limitless spheres. We make every effort to differentiate between the various sounds by use of pitch. In reality, however, sounds know no measurable dimension such as depth or height. The expression 'high pitch' is borrowed from the natural world. Sound, in all its endless possible combinations, is invisible and eludes every conceivable definition, except in its measurable physical nature. When it is a question of writing music for a text, the listener must be able to relate the 'visual' information of the word and the invisible message of the sound to one

another. He then attains something new, which leads him to multi-dimensional experience. The meaning of the spoken words is sent forth by the music into spheres beyond limits. There is nothing grotesque or laughable in the pairing of speech and music, be it in folk song, art song or opera, for it gives us a third and quite phenomenal result. The pairing of the two sound elements, i.e. the word with its limited meaning and the musical tone of endless horizons was the basis that aided the development in the course of centuries, of an art form which as it gathered experience and acquired power, integrated ever more different means of expression. Thus was opera created, combining the visible with the audible; the audible making greater demands on the perceptive abilities of the audience. As the skill of the composers/writers, the performers and the audiences augmented, more and more elements were added. Finally, in the 20th century, the word 'opera' did not adequately describe the art-form it referred to. The importance of the text in Wagner's operas, the splendour of the production, the symbolism attributed to accessories, the enlarged orchestra in his operas demanded that the final product be called 'total art'. In our fast moving technological world this soon became 'multi-media art'.

Such total inclusion had been known long before Wagner. Johann Mattheson, a contemporary of Bach, a composer of operas in the style of his time wrote: *In my opinion, a good opera theatre is nothing but an academy of many fine arts where architecture, painting, the dance, poetry... and above all music should unite to bring about a work of art.* (from Paul Henry Lang's "Music in Western Civilization") This definition also shows the universe of music which absorbs unto itself all that is visible and reveals ever new expressions. Thus, the composer and the listener might well let the visible be created in their imagination alone without concrete materialization. Bach did that in his church cantatas the text for which was written by the protestant preacher Erdmann Neumeister. Bach's cantatas in operatic style were ill-received. Though there was never a question of actual staging yet the dramatic texts were too close for comfort to the secular worldly stage. Bach who travelled widely and heard many operas, recognized immediately a great potential which lay in mingling the visible with the audible. Romain Rolland in his "A Musical Journey" wrote: *In what concerns Bach, it is typical for him to have chosen Erdmann Neumeister as the librettist for his first cantatas. It was Neumeister who wrote that the cantata is nothing but an opera piece, and was the man who introduced the cantata in operatic style.* At this point the opera concertante and Bach's cantata in operatic style meet.

In an opera, however, there are visual constellations of which the staging alone, without a single spoken word, create music. Such is the beginning of – one might say the overture to – my opera ASHMEDAI which I wrote some 20 years after SAUL AT EIN DOR. The overture to the first act introduces ASHMEDAI who causes utter confusion of mind and reason. While the audience make way to their seats a soft bass sound which emanates from loudspeakers wreathing the ceiling of the great hall and meanders among them. Thus, while the lights are still on, the public is already busy following the movement of the wandering sounds. Every listener becomes an active partner and gently feels his way to his assigned role. Then it becomes pitch-dark; nothing can be seen. The bass sound gradually changes to short, indefinable tones which come frontally at the audience from several points of the stage. Here and there a light flickers briefly, the sound-canopy thickens, the stage gets ever lighter; Ashmedai's games begin: he works his magic on the stage properties and sends men into frenzy. I used only electronic instrumentation for the musical texture I needed and which could not be achieved using ordinary instruments. At the highest dramatic point the stage disappears and immediately the first act begins. This theatrical/dramatic opening of the opera ASHMEDAI is complete reversal of the earlier example, SAUL AT EIN DOR. Here we have a frontal and concrete introduction with not one word spoken. The functional contents of the opera touch one another: theatre-concert-stage-dance; just as Mattheson said "...an academy of many fine arts...".

In the finale of my opera DER TURM (1983), a concert podium is erected on the ruins of The Tower and a single movement string quartet is played. The choir, the soloists, the extras in the production, together with the public in the hall, make up the audience at this concert. This reversal of the usual finale effect is achieved through the use made of all available musical and dramatic means.

'Multi-Media' is therefore a new synonym for 'opera'. Both imply multiplicity and this, in turn, requires a revision of compositional tactics. The genetic-intellectual development of man's perceptive faculties and his ability to deal with multiplicity, is the basis for important developments in the history of music. The struggle between quality and quantity which takes place in the framework of the perpetual multiplicity of musical polyphony continues into our own times. Taking an overall view, an obvious beginning of this combat is in religious-political censorship enacted at the time of Palestrina. It was intended for protection of the total perception of holy scriptures in the musical horizontal dimension against the proliferation of autonomous polyphony. Polyphony led to the discovery of a world of daring new sound-complexes in the vertical musical dimension, namely Harmony. I dare think that in future, a similar cultural-political combat will take place against today's rock music and its standardized, industrialized mass-hypnosis. Its success relies on persistent exploitation of the minimal perceptive powers of the masses. Together with mass communication media, this regression and backwardness will eventually lead, through a split between quantity and quality, to a musical-spiritual vacuum. At this point the opera of the future may become a creative, regenerating influence. Opera challenges both audiences and performers to absorb the visible and the audible simultaneously while reciprocal reference points are perpetually maintained.

Necessarily, the consideration stretches to the field of music for the screen. In a film, the spectators should never be aware of the music. It serves solely to awaken acoustic association with the action on screen. Film music presents no intellectual competition to the opera. This rather interesting phenomenon can be clearly observed in film versions of operas. Almost without exception the picture and the virtuosity of the singers are dominant. The orchestral part is reduced to the rank of film music. Filmed opera requires, in the ratio of sound and picture, an equivalent to the concept of close-up. Eventually, it will lead to the emergence of a new kind of opera for the screen, in which the many inter-related qualities of the multi-media will find suitable expression.

This positive prognosis for future developments is relevant to the divisions which occur in the present with regard to the understanding of music in general. To present such an occurrence in an operatic manner, Israel Eliraz, the librettist of my last opera, invented the character of Josef. Through him is expressed the everlasting struggle between the waking reality and the dream ideal.

All my operas deal with metamorphoses of this confrontation. Thus, the opera JOSEF (1993-95) continues to spin the thread which has its beginning in my other operas and proceeds to weave the canvas of the composer's world.

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