Habakuk Traber

THOUGHTS ON JOSEF TAL'S SYMPHONY No.5

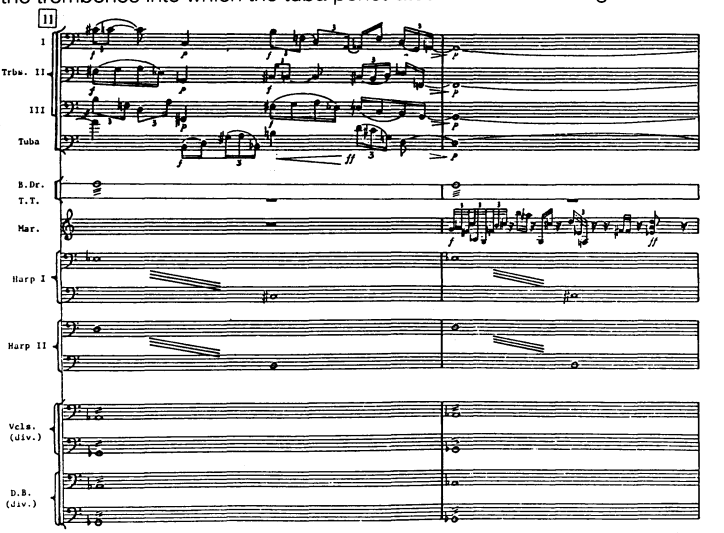
I HISTORY

"The two-or-more-dimensional space in which musical ideas are presented is a unit", Arnold Schönberg wrote in 1934. "Though elements of these ideas appear separate and independent to the eye and to the ear, they reveal their true meaning only through their co-operation, even as no single word alone can express a thought without relation to other words. All that happens at any point of this musical space has more than a local effect. It functions not only in its own plane, but also in all other directions and planes, and it is not without influence even at remote points."* Schönberg did not speak of the place where music is performed but of the space which a musical work itself produces in the imagination of the composer and the listener. It is from there that he evolved his 12-tone theory which had the ability through its order and reference system to replace the old tonality order which had lost its validity. Schönberg's theory might be carried on far beyond seriality into a region of historically aware modernity which makes no (longer) use of it.

SYMPHONY No.5 by Josef Tal is not a symphony in the classic sense. It is compressed into a single movement and it does not, unlike Schönberg's Kammersymphonie or Liszt's Symphonic Poems, conceal several movements within it. To content oneself with the dry translation of the Greek word symphony would be but a poor description of the Israeli composer's work since it does retain some basic ideas of the classic symphony: the principle of development through opposites which employs sharp contrasts as much as delicate transitions, transformation of one thought into another while clearly delineating the difference between the two; maintaining the principle of repetition, however varied. Repetition necessitates recollection but this obstructs the passage of time. Recollection and recognition make it possible to conceive of music evolving in space, a realization of music architecture. "Nothing stands alone, nothing occurs only once. A musical idea that is not worthy of repetition and recall does not deserve to be put forth in a score" (Josef Tal). Musical thought must be expressed clearly and convincingly because it stands for more than just a passing idea and it holds within it the promise of all that it might yet become and all that it might yet cause to happen.

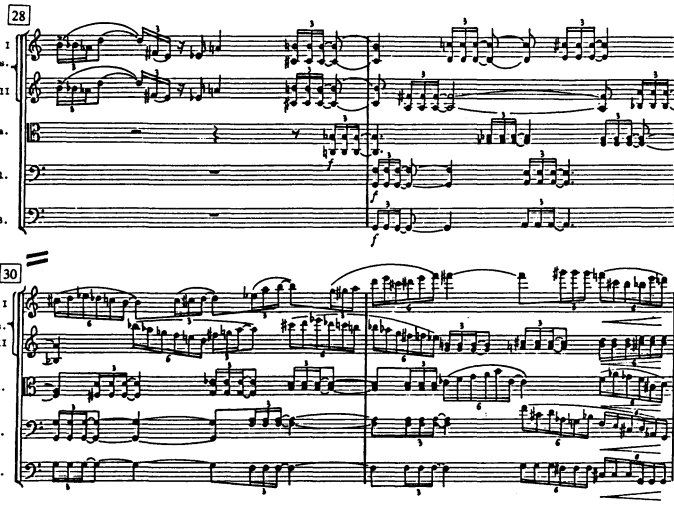
II SYMPHONY No.5

Were it not for the directions of the conductor the only way in which the beginning of the Symphony might be audible would be if absolute silence was maintained. The work is divided into 6 parts and outwardly one has the impression that every two of them relate to one another as a pair of opposites. Common tempo (♪ =60) binds parts 1,3 and 5; a different tempo connects parts 2, 4 and 6 (♩ =55). The tempi differ but the basic beat of the parts is so similar that they merge with each other leaving no trace of their differences. The two opening parts expose the material of the work. Low, quivering sound (tremoli of violoncellos, basses, harps and a bass drum) turns into a serene passage played by the trombones into which the tuba penetrates. Fast marimba figures



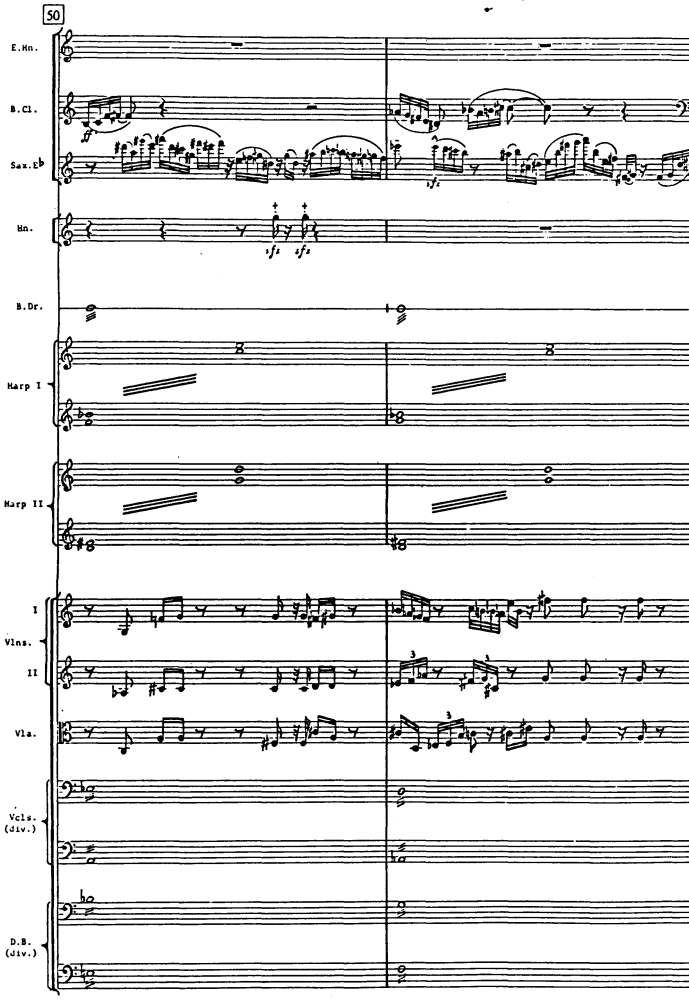
confront it. A trombone trio gets hold of the figures and then, in rhythmic coordination with the timpani, they pass in crescendo directly into the second part. The instruments which were silent until now (high strings, flutes) open the second part which establishes the dialogue. An energetic descending and ascending gesture finds response in softer sounding horns and trombones. The layers intertwine: brass instruments imitate the movement of the violins and the violins give a double response to that – their melody is shaped as a dialogue in itself by involving different elements through dynamics and movement ("polyphony in monophony")

* Schönberg, A. Style and Idea (edited by Leonard Stein), Los Angeles 1975, p.220



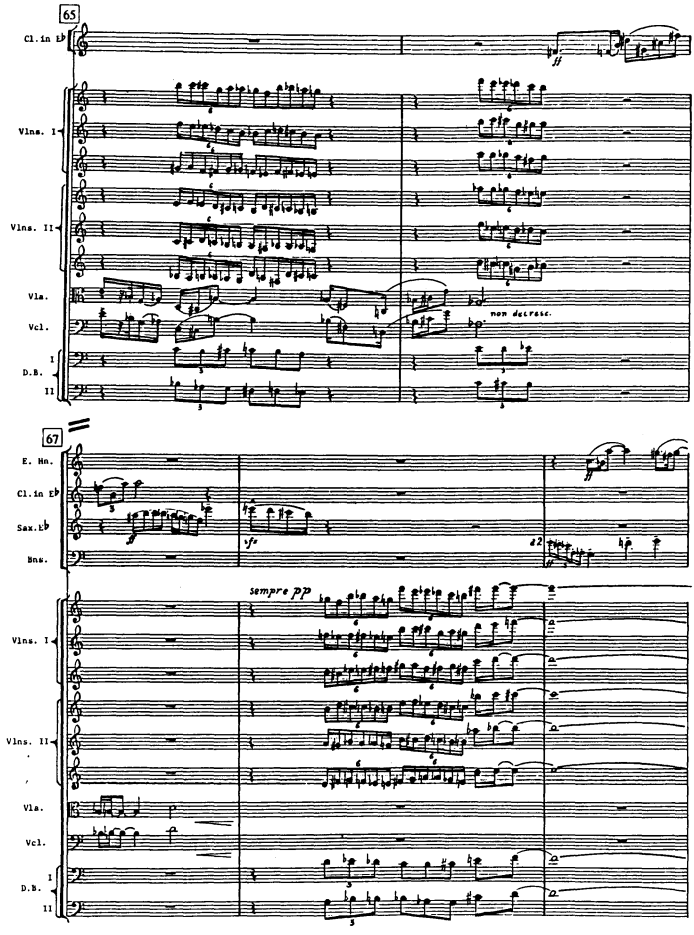
and they allow one musical quality to change into a different one: numerous fast independent movements thicken into a flowing wave of sound (extreme polyphony ends in a homophony which stands endangered). Brass instruments present a contrast to the sound of the strings either by sharp rhythms or by quiet movement.

The third part is an augmentation of the components which make up the first part. Harps, bass drum and low strings establish the sound whose spectrum is broader in comparison to that of the opening part. Woodwinds take over the part of brass instruments and participate for the first time in the orchestral action. Similarly, the part of the marimba is taken over by the strings. Rapid figures and gestures dominate; their involvement has greatly increased in comparison to their status in the first part. First the accentuations become noticeable – the three tam-tam strokes spread through the first part are picked up by other instruments and change from a hint to an active presence. This principle of growth of

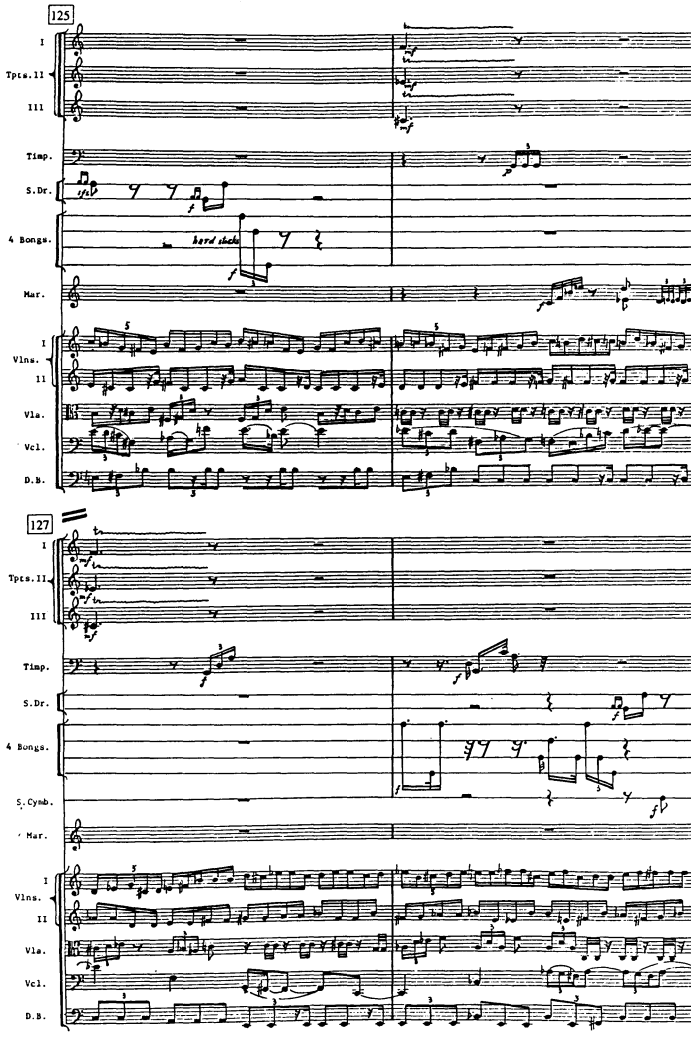


musical ideas is in contrast to the fractured manner of classical style in which themes and motifs had to prove themselves through fragmentation.

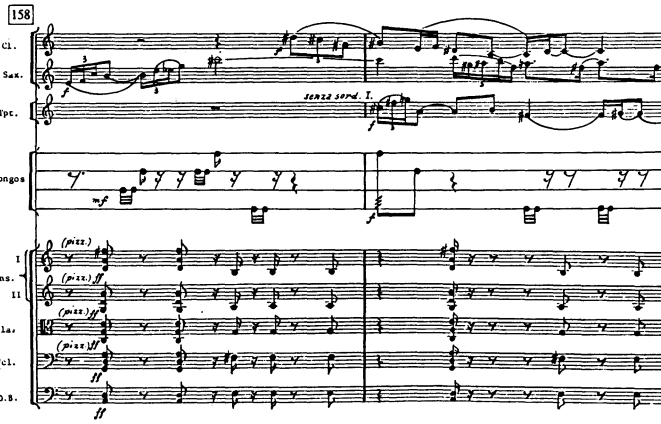
The fourth and central part takes up almost a third of the entire work and is based on the second part. It opens in the strings as a dialogue between expressive melodic gesture and the restless sound. This exchange gradually draws in the wind instruments. Elements from the first



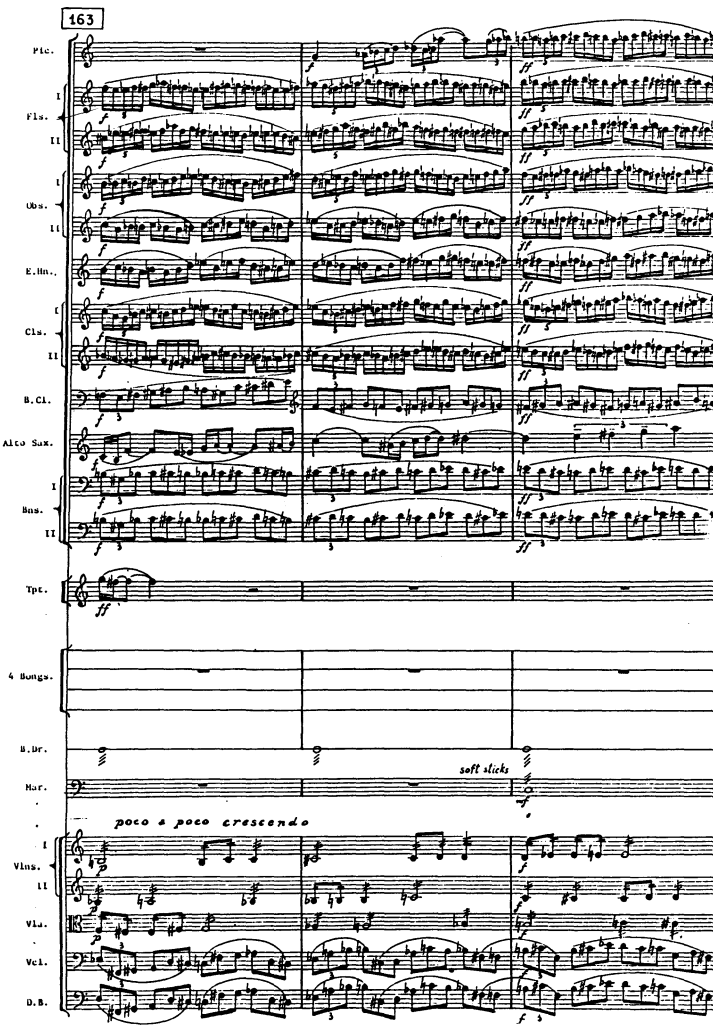
part also join in and, time and again, produce new formations together with elements drawn from the second part; displaying affinity and closeness, contrasts and contradictions. The sound changes: retaining the same tones, it recreates itself from different rhythms. Some fast figures detach themselves and create a contrapuntal texture. Trumpet trills



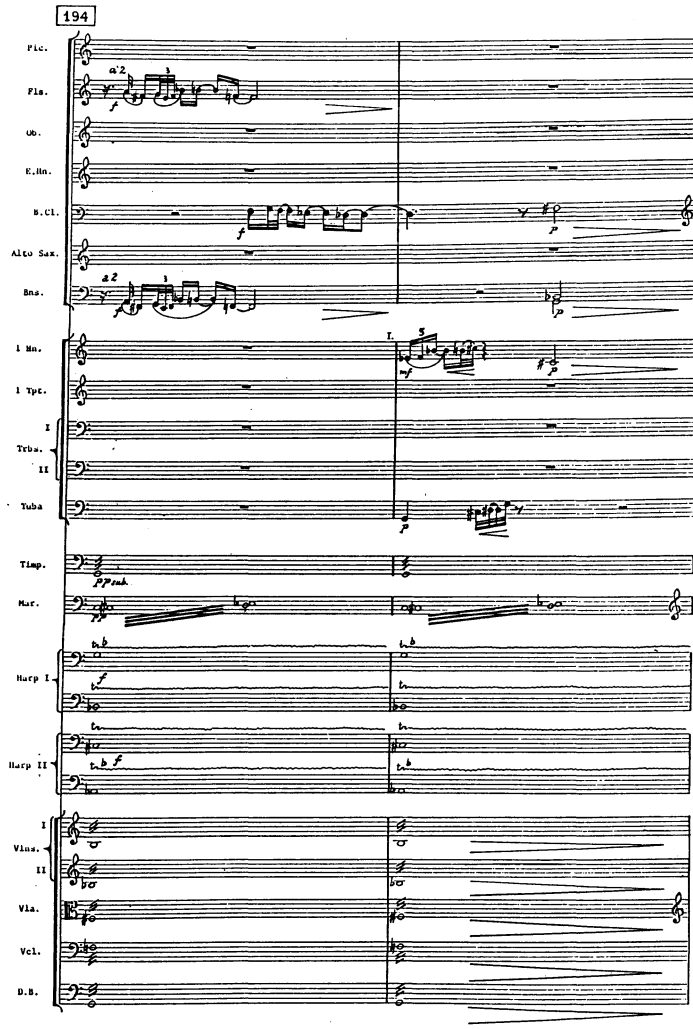
become prolonged accents. Percussion instruments perform as soloists retaining only the outline of the cited motifs; density gives it greater cohesion, binds the rhythm together and in resounding crescendo leads towards an entirely new musical scene. Here we have powerful contrasts between solos of violin, viola and violoncello and later that of bass clarinet, alt saxophone and trumpet with variable orchestral structures:



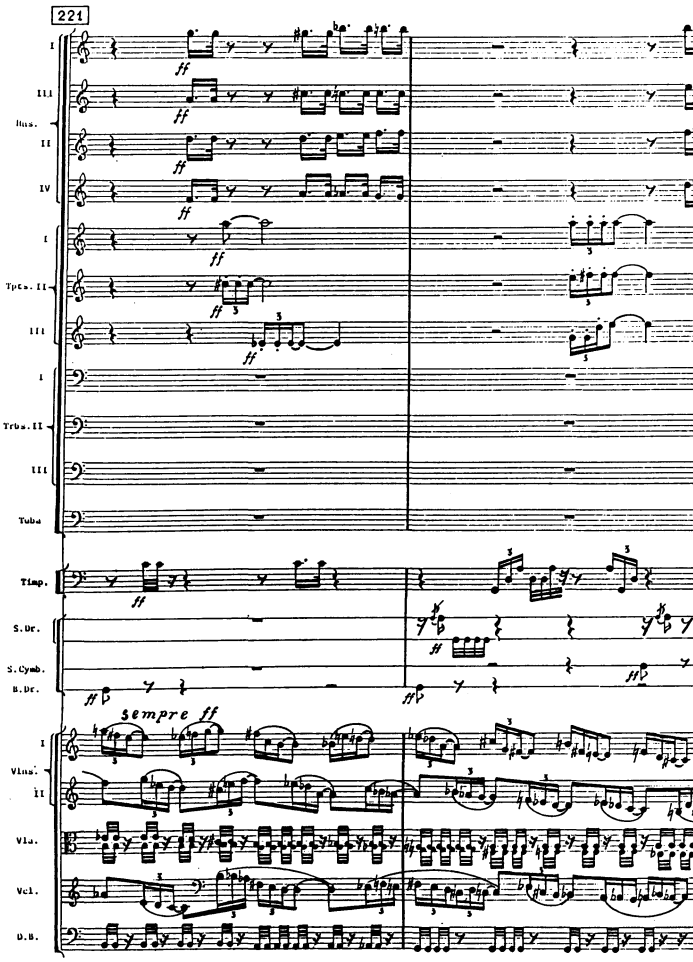
polyphony, single parts and sharp rhythms which merge into a coherent sound. Chamber music comes into the Symphony. Finally two layers merge: the fortissimo of the winds and the emergence of the strings from



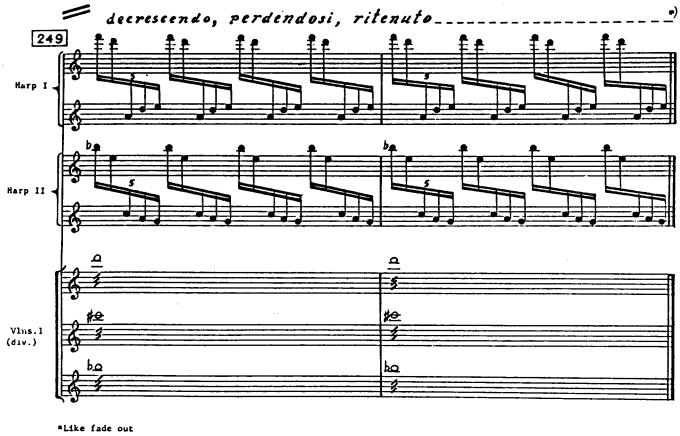
piano. They develop into a powerful sound to which the fifth part of the work is joined. The opening of this part lies in the finale of the third. Around the components of the first part – the tranquilly progressing homophonic structure, the fast figures of the marimba and the brass – material from the other parts is added: the stressed figures from the third part, the restless sound from the second (in the harps and at times in marimba as well). The melodic figures from the thematic layer of both parts wander through the entire orchestra like Klangfarbenmelodien. Elements of the first two parts overlap, move over and change from one into the other. The oscillation between the motivic layer and the timbre is the composition. This part ends as the third part began.



The sixth part opens with an expanded reprise of the second part. From significant melodic motifs a polyphony grows, becoming a finely chiselled, restless sound; different formulation methods follow one another but also appear simultaneously. Accents depict the rhythmic contours.



The flow of events intensifies right up to the middle of this part, then pauses for two measures of the harps and bells and then draws strength from fast changing fields for the culminating show of power. The fortissimo of a tutti trill expands and contracts – the music disappears into the silence from which it initially emerged. At the end, the high tones find themselves in the same position in which the low tones have been at the beginning of the work. In spite of the repetitions of cyclic formulations, what we get in the end is an open structure and wide horizons of the Symphony.



III

Josef Tal was born in Pinne near the town of Poznan. He grew up and was educated in Berlin – "The Son of a Rabbi", as proclaims the title of his autobiography. He left Berlin in 1934 when Germany was already under Nazi rule. Tal is a true avant-gardist and, as such, he is deeply attached to tradition. He bases himself on the music of Beethoven and is imbued with a deep sense of responsibility towards that which is necessary and that which is possible in music.

However, he stands against all traditionalism (not only in the arts). It was Tal who established the first studio for electronic music in Israel and that at a time when cultural progress in the country was taking its first steps. The experimentation with producing synthetic sounds affected the music he wrote for conventional instruments. His preoccupation with electronics sharpened his perception of the sound spectra. It made him realize the possibilities for ordering them, for their manipulation and variation. He made good use of interpolation, augmenting, broadening and transforming musical models according to certain patterns. He made these techniques an integral part of his creative work. His work at the studio made it possible to view the relations between various layers of a composition in a completely new light.

In Tal's SYMPHONY No.5 there occur, at different levels, the exchanges of contrasts and transitions, of metamorphoses and differentiations. These exchanges affect compositional techniques and movement characterization; between homophony and polyphony, between rapid movement and its multiplication in density to sound; between wider and narrower intervals, between faster and slower gesticulations. They also affect timbre and instrumentation and finally bear upon the time factor: the repetitions reaffirm the basic articulation of the form of the Symphony and its statics. However, the reiteration is to an extent independent of the form and thus creates a network of interrelations which does not follow the basic scheme of the Symphony's form. One dimensional aspect does not do justice to Tal's work. The events in his music create and fill a multi-dimensional space. The relations between the events are part of the symphonic process and gain clarity through various constellations of sound and movement, density and transparence, melody and gesture, proximity and remoteness; of realization and recollection. If a fully developed theory of musical space was available, it might have helped to understand the ideas the composer propounded in his foreword to the score. However, even such a theory could not possibly calrify the relation of reason and feeling, of mind and emotion, for this would require active cooperation of the listener.

Habakuk Traber is an organist and musicologist who for many years now has been engaged in research and arranging performances of music written by Jewish composers who had fled Nazi Germany in the 30s and 40s.

Reprint (illustrated by examples) from an article by Habakuk Traber, published in the programme for the first performance of Josef Tal's SYMPHONY No.5 by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Daniel Barenboim, February 29 and March 1, 1992.

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