

## **Josef Tal's Variations**

Tal wrote *Cum mortuis in lingua mortua* in 1945 when he still bore his original name, Josef Gruenthal. It is a set of variations on the like-named piano piece from Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, where it occurs as a variant of the "Promenade" following a piece on the Roman Catacombs. Regarding the title Mussorgsky wrote: "Latin text: with the dead in a dead language. A Latin text would be suitable: the creative spirit of the late Hartmann [the painter of the pictures in the said exhibition: H.T.] leads me to skulls, summons me to them, the skulls have quietly lit up". To the 35-five-year-old Tal, this seemed like a weak metaphor for the victims of the Shoah, among whom were his parents and many of his relatives and acquaintances. He knew that there was no direct form of artistic expression for the atrocities that German Nazis committed with the

extermination of European Jewry, nor for the suffering of the survivors. Images, formulae and testimony from history formed an initial bridge between the languages. In his variations, Tal subjects isolated bars, aspects and turns of phrase from Mussorgsky's piece to closer scrutiny, interpreting them in an exegetical spirit and transforming them into opposing gestic characters. They circumscribe two modes of expression: lamentation (which can harden into indictment) and a volatility that can suddenly turn into frenzy. In their polarity and inner ambivalence, both modes symbolize profound grief. This grief especially pervades those sections that seem rigorously constructed, such as the opening of Variation III, passages of Variation VI and the opening of Variation VII. The grief cries out for forms and formulae so as not to sink into despair. Tal ends his cycle with a "Fuga con variazioni", a fugue obtained from Mussorgsky's "Promenade" theme, stylised and transformed into a funeral dirge. It incorporates and develops reminiscences from the preceding variations, first from Variation VI and finally from Variation I. The work fades away with the memory of them. But the circle comes full close in an unusual way: it is not the theme that reappears at the end, as in Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, but the thoughts and memories initially kindled in Tal by the Mussorgsky piece.