

Josef Tal (born 1910), a graduate of the State Academy of Berlin, since 1934 a teacher of piano and composition in Jerusalem, firmly established his place among the leading composers of his generation in Israel with his Choreographic Poem EXODUS, composed in 1945/46. This work was later followed by the Symphonic Cantata "The Mother Rejoices" (1948/49), important chamber music, Concertos for piano and for viola and orchestra, and the Symphony No. 1 (1952), all of them widely performed in Israel and other countries.

The problem of opera had occupied the composer's mind for many years (preparing his large-scale opera "The Tower of Babel", on a libretto by Yizhak Shenhar), when he wrote his "Saul at EnDor" for Michael Taube and the Ramat Gan Chamber Orchestra in 1955. This work is described as an "opera concertante", not intended for stage performance, and is based literally on the narration of the Bible (Sam. I., Chapter XXVIII, 3—25). The story is told by a Narrator while the dialogue is sung by the actual characters.

Josef Tal is not concerned — as have been composers before him — with the magic and supernatural aspects of the biblical episode. He was attracted by the human tragedy behind the dramatic tale. The Prophetess of EnDor is not a witch, such as she is described in most modern literary and musical versions of the biblical scene, but a priestess, full of dignity and human insight. When Saul comes to her hiding place, he is still the mighty king, conscious of his authority and commanding power. But after hearing Samuel the Prophet pronounce the dire fate that is in store for him, Saul breaks down and becomes miserable and helpless. The Prophetess of EnDor then shows her warm, almost motherly, understanding. She prepares a meal for him and does not permit him to proceed on his way towards the inevitable before he has rested and gathered new strength.

Her charity is in stark contrast to the severity shown by Samuel imparting to Saul the voice of the Lord whose commands the king has not followed.

The work develops in five dramatic sections. It opens with the preparatory narrative; this is followed by the description of Saul's way to find the woman at EnDor and the invocation of Samuel; the dramatic climax then comes with Samuel's prophecy of impending disaster; after this come the woman's soothing words and her preparation of a meal for the broken king; the short epilogue shows Saul and his servants on their way home into the dark of the night, towards their destiny.

THE STORY

The text is taken from the Bible, Samuel I (Chapter 28, Verses 3—25). The story is recited by a narrator. The dialogue is presented in song-style. The music strives at expressing the purely human elements in the Biblical tale.

As long as Saul, the King, is aware and conscious of his might and power, his speech conveys authority and command. The moment he feels instinctively the impending disaster, he becomes — in the misery of his despair — a helpless, imploring child.

The woman, who is gifted with spiritualistic power, wisely chooses grave words in keeping with the great responsibility lodged with her. The woman of En-Dor is not a witch of the European fairy tale, but a priestess, full of dignity, comparable to the Sybils of the Delphic Oracle. Her Prophecy is not that of a magician but is the outcome of a profound knowledge of the fatalism of the situation. After Saul has been told by Samuel of his dire fate, she turns into a helpful and loving mother. She prepares a meal for him to give him strength to bear the inevitable. Samuel's voice alone is of unwavering oneness. His words are severe, and severity is the form into which he forces them. In this mission there is no longer any place for human frailities.

Textually, the composition consists of five areas of tension: The narrative and preparatory introduction; Saul's way to the woman in En-Dor and the invocation of Samuel; Samuel's utterance of God's Judgement — the dramatic climax of the composition; the preparation of the meal for Saul and the woman's soothing words. Saul and his servants leave En-Dor, and go into the dark of night towards their unknown destiny.

THE TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

The subtitle "Opera Concertante" stresses the intention of the composer to create a non-scenic performance.

The score is arranged with particular regard for microphone technique. The tonal balance between narrator and orchestra is calculated almost exclusively for the microphone. The mixtures of sound required in bars No. 151—160 are obtainable only in a radio performance. The sparing orchestration for an effort of high dramatic tension in bars No. 175—177 can never achieve its aim when performed on the concert-stage.

However, all such sound-effects are avoided, which, by way of electronic amplification or distortion, such as multi-vibration, create a mystic illusion.

Josef Tal (born 1910)

Saul at Endor—Opera Concertante

Written in 1955, the work is based literally on the Bible text (Sam. I, chap. XXVIII, 3-25). The story is told by a narrator, the dialogue is sung by the characters. According to the composer, his music strives to express the purely human elements in the biblical tale. For him, the woman at Endor is not a witch of the European fairy tale, but a priestess, full of dignity, comparable to the priestesses of the Delphic oracle. Her prophecy is not that of a magician but is

the outcome of a profound knowledge of the fatalism of the situation. Textually, the composition consists of five areas of tension: the narrative and preparatory introduction; Saul's way to the woman at Endor and the exorcism of Samuel; Samuel's utterance of God's judgement—the dramatic climax of the composition; the preparation of the meal for Saul and the woman's soothing words; finally Saul and his servants leave Endor and go into the dark of night towards their destiny.

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