

REPERTOIRE EXPLORER

JOSEF TAL

Reflections



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Josef Tal

Reflections

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Josef Tal

(b.Pinne/Poland, September 18, 1910)

“Reflections”

(1950)

Preface

Any consideration of Josef Tal's music in general, and *Reflections* in particular, needs to be placed in the context of the emergence of Israeli concert music in the period 1935-1950. Tal, who was born Joseph Grünthal, 18 September 1910 in Pinne (now Poland), was a founding member of that group of composers known as the «first generation.» They were all European born and trained, and later (during the 1930s) migrated to the *Yishuv* (the pre-1948 term for what was to become the State of Israel).

The first generation of *Yishuv* composers engaged in a great and lively debate regarding the nature and purpose of Israeli music. Suffice it to say that amongst the several schools of emerging thought, the most overriding issue would have been the establishment of a musical identity with clear connections to its Jewish roots. Some insisted that only indigenous middle-eastern musical influences qualified as useable sources in the creation of a specific national style. Others believed that transposed European, but specifically Jewish musical materials and traditions would be central. Still others would keep a more generic range of options - the transference of European musical traditions, inflected, perhaps, with «local» influences, but founded on Jewish (read: biblical, as opposed to strictly liturgical or folkloristic) subject matter when not otherwise more general in nature. It is to this latter group that Josef Tal properly belongs.

One group established what composer Max Brod (1884-1968) termed the *Mediterranean School*. Taken in its broadest sense, these composers sought to create a national idiom derived, syntactically from Debussy, but perhaps also from Ernest Bloch (as in *Schelomo*, or *Trois Poèmes Juifs*, or the *Israel Symphony*) retaining a fundamentally post-romantic but pan-tonal, modal harmonic language incorporating musical elements common to both the Jewish and Arab cultures of the region. Perhaps the most well known of this group includes Paul ben Haim (born Paul Frankenburger) (1897-1984), a graduate of the *Munich Academy of Music*, Marc Lavry (1903-1967), originally from Leipzig, and Odeon Partos (1907-1977), originally from Budapest. Together with other colleagues, these composers looked for inspiration in the East in the hope of coming closer to an understanding, as well as the spirit of ancient Jewish music.

As the *Mediterraneans* sought to reinvent the indigenous past, others, Tal amongst them, had little interest in the specific musical speech of tradition. These others sought to bring the technology of the post-*Sacre du Printemps* / *Pierrot Lunaire* generation to new soil, and to develop from it a modernist school of composition with strong historical roots in Jewish thought and history even as it tended to divest itself of explicit folkloristic materials influences.

Tal himself studied at the *Staatliche Akademische Hochschule für Musik* in Berlin. His teachers included Tiessen, Trapp, Hindemith, Sachs, Kreutzer and Saal. He emigrated to Israel in 1934 where he taught composition and piano at the *Jerusalem Academy of Music*. He was Director of the Academy between 1948 and 1952. In 1965, he joined the faculty of *Hebrew University* eventually becoming head of the musicology department. Among Tal's signal achievements, already in his fifties, was his founding of the *Israel Center for Electronic Music* in 1961. Tal

produced some of the earlier examples of electrico-acoustical music, and in this is joined by such as Edgard Varèse, Mario Davidovsky, and Luciano Berio.

For a period Tal's music explored aspects of serial composition although not in a doctrinaire fashion. In this there is a broader clue to Tal's approach to composition since, by his own admission, his music eschews traditional formal processes. Tal's use of serial procedures can be seen as more pre-compositional than specific, a fundamental acceptance of the processes of autogenesis which are at the core of the essentially relativistic nature of musical speech, especially in the post-tonal world.

In 1989, at age 79, Tal underwent an unsuccessful eye operation which, for what can only have been an agonizing period of time, made it impossible for him to compose. After a number of years rehabilitation, Tal was able to resume composition, and has been active into his nineties very much like his nonogenarian American colleague, Elliott Carter.

Tal has, during the course of his long career, been the recipient of many honors. These have included a UNESCO grant for the study of electronic music, the *State of Israel Prize*, the *Art Prize* of the City of Berlin (1975), the *Wolff Prize* (Israel) (1983), the *Verdienstkreuz I Klasse* (Germany) (1984), the *Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (France) (1985), the *Johann Wenzel Stamitz Prize* (Germany) (1995). His works are presently represented by the *Israeli Music Institute*. The present work, *Reflections*, was published originally by *Universal Edition* in 1980.

Tal's works cover a broad range of types and subjects. As mentioned earlier, being a strong and dedicated supporter of the State of Israel in general, and having a strong connection to his Jewish roots, many of Tal's compositions (including both the Choral and Orchestral works, as well as the ballets and operas), are based on biblical or historical subjects. These include the operas *Ashmedai* (1968), *Massada* (1972), *Josef* (1993), *Saul at Ein Dor* (1955), as well as the choral/orchestral *Succos Cantata* (1955), *The Death of Moses* (1967), and *With All Thy Soul* (1978). Aside from these, though, are 3 String Quartets, 6 Symphonies, 6 Piano Concertos, Concerti for Viola, Cello, Flute, Oboe, a Double Concerto for Violin, Cello and Chorus. Additionally, there is much piano music, other chamber and vocal music and, of course, the electronic works.

* * *

Reflections (1950) is, then, a relatively early work. Written for string orchestra, it precedes the symphonies, is neither tonal nor serial, and inhabits a world not unlike Bartok of the third and fourth string quartets, tempered somewhat by a decidedly Stravinskian acidity, along with a Hindemithian contrapuntal propensity. This, however, should not be taken literally. Cast in three movements, and having a performance time of approximately fifteen minutes, its procedures relate it more to the general neo-classic aesthetic of the late 1930s and 1940s. The use of solo strings played off against the ripieni of the string body points to the Baroque concerto grosso. As if to trump its neo-classical models, the final movement is a «fugue» in which Tal obliquely pays his respects to Hindemith without reverting explicitly to Hindemith's vocabulary.

The title, *Reflections*, can be understood both technically and aesthetically. The pianist Jeffrey Burns, in comments published on www.aquanet.co.il, and who has performed and recorded a good deal of Tal's keyboard music notes that «Tal has always been eager to incite his fellow

humans to individual reflection by creating unaccustomed situations.» While the reference, in this case, was to Tal's *6th Piano Concerto* which has the distinction of having an electronic accompaniment rather than an orchestral one, the principle of musical materials not going where you necessarily expect them to go and the concomitant requirement to «reflect» on this situation seems to be a basic concept in Tal's music. As will be seen in the string orchestra piece even though discussed in relation to the much later concerto, Burns notes that «it is typical of Tal's style that larger passages are repeated. The repeats always have some variation in comparison to the original and eventually take some different musical course from the former appearance of the material. This practice is a deliberate consequence of Tal's conviction that music is a representation of a dialectical process, in which experiences are voiced on the musical stage and developed and set in juxtaposition with one another. The dialectical element is omnipresent in Tal's musical thought.»

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Each of the three movements of *Reflections* is brief (73 measures, 96 measures, 47 measures), concise and consistent with Jeffrey Burns' characterization. Formally, the middle movement retains clear vestiges of closed ternary form. The third movement fugue is both the most traditional in its layout even as its imitative counterpoint (past the exposition) is focused more on the development by extension and elaboration of numerous thematic asides pushed against the fugue subject itself.

* * *

Although overall strongly, even strainingly lyrical at times, the predominant flavor of the piece is aggressive. Tal often proceeds by means of obsessive reiteration of small musical chunks which appear as isolated events only to coagulate into longer episodes with repeated statements. A good illustration of this process can be seen in the opening, somewhat misleadingly labeled *Tranquillo* of the first movement where an intruding, syncopatedly halting but upwardly moving, contrapuntally oblique figure at measure 12 is doubled in length at measure 17. By measure 28, this figure has become the sole musical idea now extended to five measures complete with a climactic ritardando leading inexorably to the main *Allegro*.

In the midst of this are a number of other ideas which undergo similar transformations. Principal amongst these would be the second measure opening two note thrust of the first violins. This figure expands in characteristic thematic pieces: a dotted rhythm preceded by an upbeat, a four note figure resembling the inverted B-A-C-H motive, brief dactylic syncopations, an overall arching shape that has consequent downward movement for every upward gesture or phrase. This group of ideas, through various extensions, flows into an extended solo violin accompanato. After this collides with the intrusion mentioned above, an unaccompanied cadenza ensues. From this point until the *Allegro*, the two thematic-motivic «concept» engage in complimentary and/or conflicting dialogue as the musical direction accumulates the stress that ultimately propels it into the *Allegro*.

The opening harmonic ambiguity of the A flat - C (major third) (Violas, Cellos) versus the strongly accented A flat - D tritone (Cellos, Basses) establishes (from the explicit consonance of the third and ambiguous dissonance of the tritone) an extremely unstable harmonic climate. Traditional perceptions of consonance and dissonance are often reversed. Ordinarily, we tend to hear intervals of the third and fifth as consonant - certainly within tonality here they are

fundamentally so. But Tal's harmonic language here is not tonal, functionally or otherwise. Indeed, the resultant harmonies are as often as not the byproduct of the lateral movement of independent contrapuntal lines that are almost random, accidental. The often oblique movement of inner voices produces unstable harmonic results. Tal moves freely back and forth between consonant and dissonant intervals or chord structures. In a generally non-tonal (or thirdless) context, the sudden appearance of sustained open fifths, or major or minor triads with added or augmented sixths are extremely jarring (read: dissonant) in that they are a) out of the general context, b) almost never prepared through any kind of tonal voice leading, and c) are not resolved according to conventional tonal expectations.

With the singular exception of three measures in which they do not appear, the entire forty one measure *Allegro non troppo* is driven by the moto-perpetuo of relentless Baroque sixteenth notes. Essentially consisting of obsessive oblique linear movement in which all the voices move in similar directions, or in static ostinatos, small thematic fragments will suddenly emerge out of the roiling movement in relivio. The most insistent of these, a stamping, syncopated figure, first occurs in the violins at measure 43 after having been suggested by the violas and cellos somewhat more lyrically in measures 34 and 35. A more aggressive reduction of this motive is spat out by cellos and basses in measures 35 and 36. This figure will appear in imitation in one form or another from this point forward. Although there is some dynamic shifting there is not much in the way of dramatic or dynamic shaping to the movement. There is only the primacy of the omnipresent driving texture in which different elements spring out with ever increasing urgency.

The balance of the movement references the earlier tranquillo's thematic materials (even the solo violin, albeit over statically insistent accompaniments). It consists of elaborate extensions of those materials culminating prematurely at measure 61. Here, the sixteenth note motion is dropped for three measures, but the sudden, timely augmentation is not allowed to gain control of the motion before the sixteenth note movement is restored. As if fighting against motoric domination, the violins sing out a rhythmically augmented version of materials heard originally at measure 15 of the tranquillo. The *cantilena* insists on longer and longer values until it lands on a sustained C-E major third over the relentless motion of the rest of the ensemble. Ultimately, the sixteenth note motion simply stops dead in its tracks after several perfunctory cadential attempts which leave the unexpected consonance hanging unresolved and unaccompanied.

* * *

The second movement, *Largo*, has a tripartite structure bearing a curious resemblance to what would have been a recent work of Tal's teacher, Paul Hindemith. In 1946, on commission from Antal Dorati and *The Dallas Symphony Orchestra* (Texas), Hindemith wrote the fifth of his nine symphonies (1), *Sinfonia Serena*. The third movement of this work, *Colloquy* (for String Orchestra in Two Parts), is a puzzle piece consisting of two parts - the first, played by half of the strings, is singing and lyrical, the second, played by the others, is playful and entirely pizzicato. Hindemith's structure has the opening lyrical section, followed by a double cadenza for on-stage and off-stage violins, followed by the second section, pizzicato, at double the initial tempo and exactly the same length. This is followed by a quadruple cadenza for a pair on-stage and off stage solo violins and violas. The movement concludes with the lyrical music the pizzicato music played simultaneously.

Now although it should be stated that there is virtually nothing *Reflections* resembling Hindemith, Tal's formal layout is a not so distant cousin to Hindemith's *Colloquy*. Both are slow movement string orchestra pieces, with allegro middle sections played pizzicato, featuring a pair of interconnecting cadenzas.

The opening of the second movement, played by a trio of solo strings (Violin, Viola, Violoncello) transforms the work into a concerto grosso. The opening four measure cantilena, played in unison by the solo strings, presents the embryonic forms of virtually all the motivic elements for the movement. The entrance of the ripieni strings on an added sixth C-sharp minor chord presents yet again an example of a paradoxically dissonant, though thoroughly commonplace consonance. The insistence of this C-sharp minor chord is, of course, defeated by all of its neighboring dissonant tones. Although nothing in the movement directly suggests tonal procedures, Tal embeds a cleverly concealed tonal resolution in the form of the above-mentioned arriving C-sharp minor which, by the very end of the movement, becomes the dominant of an F-sharp major cadence.

The entire first section of the movement forms a closed arch in which each of the elements of the opening string trio unison is developed in turn. As in the first movement, dialectically, a given fragment (through imitation and extension) becomes the momentary focus until other elements emerge to supercede what preceded it. A soaring tutti violin line dominates a growing swell of argumentatively combative triplets which, in turn, land on frustrated trills and tremolando. Re-energized triplets, offset by staccato tremolando accents eventually disintegrate into a sustained, nearly Lydian, but thirdlessly uncomfortable C major fading to pianissimo.

The solo violin intones its cadenza, based entirely on the four note fragment A-B-D-C sharp, itself an «isolation» of previously stated materials. Although containing an implicit melodic E dominant to A resolution, the chromatic extensions and adumbrations all but blur any tonal implications.

The central *Moderato* has the solo violin accompanied by pizzicato ripieni in music that has the character of an expressionistic folk dance. Based on an obsessive rhythmic ostinato (3-3-2) with a recurring downbeat hurdy-gurdy fifth in the bowed violas, the solo violin continues its triplets against the plucked duple rhythm of the other strings. The solo violin takes on the character of «country fiddling» using double stopped open strings as if to suggest the sympathetic strings of a rural instrument. Gradually, the string ripieni begin to fill in their rhythmic figures, also gradually taking on plucked open string nuances which, however briefly, become relatively consonant, almost modally diatonic.

A second cadenza interrupts this peculiar dance, a somewhat truncated version of the original cadenza. The dance is resumed, but only briefly as sustained low double basses and mumbling Celli, Violas and Violins hint at a change. By the 63rd measure, the opening section is brought back in its original tempo. Here, instead of combining fast and slow music as Hindemith had done, Tal combines the opening cantilena with a condensation and elaboration of the materials originally played as an extension by the full string body. The repetition, which extends to twenty measures, becomes a fairly literal restatement of the opening section. The original trilled arrival is extended somewhat as Violas and Cellos make their own rapidly sweeping comment on the violin's original soaring melody. After three additional measures of the opening section are brought back, the original initial C-sharp minor arrival point returns, complete with accompanying dissonant neighboring tones - but this moves, now quite unexpectedly, to F-sharp major (with added

sixth) sustaining C-sharp (i.e. second inversion) as the lowest tone (now without contrabasses). The implied tonal formula of the violin's cadenza has been stretched into a tonal answer.

* * *

The various forms of imitative counterpoint (rounds, canons, fugues, inventions) constitute the fundamental embodiment of the dialectical in music. The concluding fugue of *Reflections*, more than anything else stamps the neo-classical seal on the work. But, as before, the piece begins with an inherent contradiction. Although marked *Grave*, the tempo indicated is eighth=132, normally a temporal aspect of *Allegro*. The 12/8 meter almost never divides into anything smaller than a sixteenth while also featuring relatively long held values that tend to negate the faster metronome mark.

The two measure fugue subject is given out by cellos beginning on B (following the F-sharp to C-sharp of the previous movement), but moving immediately to C (and important clue for the implied C cadence at the very end of the piece). The subject itself contains six different motivic ideas (a dotted quarter, an internal dotted rhythm, a dotted rhythm preceded by silence, a brace of three eighths, a quarter and an eighth, and a brace of six sixteenths) each which will in turn be given its development either in episodes between subject statements, or in countersubject. The first response, a real answer (in fugal parlance, a fugal answer is either «real» - that is, unaltered, or «tonal» - that is, adjusted for «harmonic» purposes) is given by the Violas a fifth higher. Three measures of developmental episode leads to the third statement, on B again given by the 2nd violins. This is answered by the 1st Violins giving the same real answer, on F-sharp, as before. These statements are at the octave above the initial iterations of the subject. Three more measures of episodic development are followed by the solo violin beginning the fugue subject, this time on A, but below the Violins' statements, in the midst of an undulating accompaniment. The accompaniment becomes static, almost C-majorish as the violin's extensions of the fugue subject appear to recall similar moments in the earlier slow movement.

At the end, making a dramatic crescendo we arrive on a G-D pedal in the basses, with internal voice movement that shifts in and around G, but with the sixth subject statement initially in high octaves in the first violins, also on G. The seventh statement, another real answer, is given similarly by the second violins, now a fourth lower, i.e. on D (the dominant tone to G), complete with the D-A pedal fifth in the basses. Harmonically much less diffuse than at any time in the entire work, the pervading flavor is a constantly shifting mix of modalities such that the exact tonal character remains unstable.

A six measure episode leads to a complete splintering of the fugue subject into the six elements mentioned above. The cellos and basses together announce the eighth statement, at the bottom of the orchestra, on A. The entire ensemble takes up the next four measure episode in exact rhythmic unison with all voices moving in almost the exact same directions based on either the sixteenth note group or the eighth note group. This lands rather suddenly in pure, unadulterated C-minor over which divided first violins continue with extensions of the subject with only slight tonal digressions (i.e. a D-flat, an F-sharp).

From measure 36 to the end (i.e. measure 47), Tal engages in implicit fugal stretto. Traditionally, towards the end of a fugue, the subject will be given in numerous overlapping statements, rather than in complete sequential statement and answer. The purpose is to invoke telescoped movement leading to the conclusion of the fugue. The last five statements of the

subject are given without intervening episodes. The ninth, by the first violins on G (with C minor now having given way to simple open fifths on C and G and modal undulations in the internal voices). The tenth, on D by Cellos and Basses - the C and G fifth restricted to the violas. The eleventh is given by the violas and second violins in widely spaced parallel fourths on A and D simultaneously. After one measure of this, the basses answer with the fugue subject in augmentation, which is itself imitated by the first violins on E-flat.

By measure 44, our previous C minor tonality has returned rather emphatically with first violins trying to override it. But a now very long and sustained C-G pedal in cellos and basses, with modally shifting internal movement from the violas, allows the final statement of the fugue subject, on C but with a strongly Phrygian flavor owing to the leading tone nature of the subject (C D-flat ... E-flat ... G ... A-flat). In the end, all contrary motion or rhythm is dropped, and violins and violas descend to the concluding C-G-C cadence. This open fifth, however, is not allowed to resolve the question. Buried above the celli, but below the violins, is a renegade F in the violas which, while allowing a degree of consonance to reign at the end, defeats a clear modal resolution into either major or minor.

Avrohom Leichtling, 2005

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