

## MASADA — WHAT IS ITS MEANING ?

by ISRAEL ELIRAZ

Three years after the fall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and after the building of the Arch of Triumph in Rome by Titus, Masada — last of the Jewish strongholds — still will not surrender. For twelve months now, the Roman commander Flavius Silva and the ten thousand soldiers of the Tenth Legion have been besieging the mountain, under the most arduous desert conditions. They know that, as long as the mountain is not in their hands, the victory of the Roman empire over the State of Judah is incomplete. The Romans cannot concede that even one lonely hilltop, far away from the rest of the Land, should be the base of an independent Jewish community. It might turn into a symbol 'round which extremists and rebels would rally. Therefore, it must be destroyed, this symbol, this shameful uprising of people who will not let themselves be merged into the life of the great Power.

On the fifteenth of Nissan — the feast of Passover — in the year 73 of the Common Era, nine hundred and sixty defenders of Masada immolate themselves as a "Passover sacrifice, awful yet glorious. Fathers kill their children and wives, and then themselves. Five children and two women survive to tell the tale to the historian Yosef ben Mattathiyahu.

Masada is the challenging call of a tiny people against an overwhelming empire. It is the rejection by handful of men, of a new way of life that they do not want to share. Here, for the first time, in the history of mankind, in the most tragic form, is the clarion call raised: Life as such, under any condition, is not sacrosanct !

No community of men wished to live more eagerly than the people of Masada. They escape from the dreadful disaster which befell Jerusalem and for three years live a full Jewish life. They only ask for a little corner in the desert where they can exist according to their faith and in freedom. They hope to be masters always of this crag girt by ravines. They await a miraculous redemption — the End of Days — as promised in the Hidden Scrolls. Only their strong will to live gave them strength during the devilish siege. Only the man, who yearns so passionately to live, with so strong a religious and national yearning, knows that life without those freedoms is not worth living. So the Jews of Masada resolve to choose death and, in unequivocal and terrifying decision, to give up a world which denies them life in the wilderness.

Silva, the Roman commander, who storms the mountain which its defenders have set alight, stands appalled. He is capable of valuing life and is utterly confounded in the face of a mass suicide which is without any meaning in his eyes. As a Roman, he does not understand men for whom freedom matters more than life.

At the end of the opera, when Silva meets the spirit of the Jewish leader El'azar, the Jew says:

“You may, with engines of war and myriads of soldiers, conquer a mountain,  
Yet you cannot conquer a people prepared to die for a mountain . . .  
There are people who live forever because of one mountain,  
A mountain not bigger than the head of a pin on your military map...”

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### ABOUT THE MUSIC

The opera was commissioned by the National Council for Culture and Art at the Ministry of Education and Culture, for this year's Israel Festival. Originally, the idea of the subject was conceived by Recha Freier to start the activities of the Israel Composers Fund, founded by her in 1958, but the plan was never followed up. In Eliraz' text (-book), the scenes are laid after the conquest of the fortress and are mostly reflections, without historical sequences; of course, the audience should know Flavius Josephus' account of the siege and fall of Masada in 73 C.E.

The opera lasts about 90 minutes and is performed without a break. The stage remains open all the time, but with the help of directional lighting, the scenes are acted out on different parts and planes of the stage in surrealistic approach. The composer felt that this attitude, and the ramifications of the events, could not be musically expressed by the media of conventional instruments and the symphony orchestra. He therefore employed the possibilities offered by the electronic synthesizer, and all music, even the somewhat folkloristic scene of the three washerwomen, is expressed by that means. The sound-track is not a conglomeration of noises or a provision of background but it rather represents a composition worked out in its own structure and logic; the electronic tape provides distinct sonorities and expressive aspects, musical meaning for the scenes. The human voices have music written out in regular system, but no twelve-note, or any other system, has been applied. No aleatory freedom or approximations of performance are allowed. The tape — recorded at the Centre for Electronic Music at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem — has been prepared in full stereophonic, two-channels sound.

To provide best possible performance, Dr. Ekhard, Maronn Tonemaster at the Hamburg State and the Munich opera houses and lecturer at the Hamburg University, has come to Jerusalem with an assistant and a huge amount of equipment to realise an all-directional sound projection. This should make this the first authentic electronic performance in the country.

