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## Tal's Symphony Played by Mehta

Josef Tal's *Symphony No. 3*, which had been commissioned by the Israel Symphony and played widely on its tours, came to New York for the first time in a performance by the New York Philharmonic in Avery Fisher Hall on November 1. Zubin Mehta conducted. It was the first new import on the Philharmonic programs this season, commented Nicholas Kenyon in *The New Yorker*, who went on to call the 14-minute work "exceptionally pleasant." Tal's work "has arguably been played less often than it should have been," he continued.

Harold C. Schonberg in the *Times* wrote: "Tal is one of the better known Israeli composers. His *Symphony* combines post-serial elements with a touch of Romanticism. It is well scored, with a prominent percussion part, and well made."

# Tal's place in symphonic history

## MUSIC

MIKE ASHMAN

First this week a word or two more about Joseph Tal's Third Symphony, which opened the second Promenade concert given by Zubin Mehta and the Israel Philharmonic.

The work is dedicated to these performers and was first heard at this year's Israel Festival. Its short, one-movement format (playing time was less than 15 minutes) gives it a place in the history of compression through which the symphony has passed in this century — Sibelius' Seventh, Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony and Tippett's Fourth are other examples of this development.

In a note written for the first performance, Tal himself observed: "I do believe in the listener's capacity to free himself from irrelevant comparisons with music well known to him."

At the risk of incurring the composer's wrath, I must disobey this well-intentioned commandment. Like the three composers cited above, Tal has reached a stage where the form of his work has become inseparable from its content.

The first thing which really catches the ear in this symphony is what appears to be a fugue, beginning with grumbling double basses, then introducing the other string sections at regular intervals. But this fugue has no "subject" in the traditional sense of the term: like an introductory fanfare which has served to open a show, it vanishes, leaving other sections of the orchestra to have their say.

The effect (and its notation) is similar to that found in several of Sibelius' orchestral works — an apparently "pointless" climax is succeeded by bustling activity from orchestral groups that rarely unite (or even fight) in the manner of the grand tradition that stretches from J. C. Bach to Shostakovich.

The components of this part of Tal's work I thought weak. They include rather predictable percussion manoeuvres (with a significant



Joseph Tal: heard before

contribution from the marimba), the reduction of the strings at one point to just a quartet, and the use of a wrenching string interval that became a cliché in the works of Mahler, Schoenberg and Berg.

Finally the "fugue" returns, collects the rest of the orchestra for an augmented dissonant climax (some ferociously testing brass work here) and dies away into silence.

It is presumptuous, and perhaps irresponsible, to speak slightly of a new score on an inevitably casual first acquaintance. But for all its fluency and transparency of scoring — wonderfully caught, I felt, in the Israelis' performance — I did not find Tal's symphony the "demonstrable masterpiece" that the concert's programme-note writer promised.

Much of its material, and its effects, have been heard before — in, for example, the scores of Varèse and Schoenberg which made up the lion's share of Pierre Boulez's Prom with another visiting orchestra, the Ensemble Inter Contemporain from Paris.

Boulez (the Ensemble's president) chose for the second of two concerts a programme that reflected his own interest in the progress of the music of this century. Rare folk-song arrangements by Bartok (Village Scenes) and Stravinsky (Four Russian

Peasant Songs) provided neat vocal sweetmeats in the middle of the evening. Before this came a late and an earlier Varèse work, his 1954 *Déserts* and 1925 *Intégrales*.

It's hard to imagine, listening to these two pieces, that Edgard Varèse once negotiated to set a play by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in the pre-1914 period, when Richard Strauss was composing *Der Rosenkavalier*. The mature music of this naturalised American is fantastically, joyously anarchic, with a rich vein of humour.

"Just sound" was what the composer sought, but in its cornucopia of effect, his work reached out to anticipate the sonic patterns of many of today's scores.

In a description I cannot better, a colleague of mine once opined that, in Varèse's music of the 1920s and 1930s, you can hear him hammering and screaming through acoustic instruments for the electronic resources he did not then have.

Boulez, who has made an exciting record of three other Varèse scores, controlled these two works with clarity. With its roarings and blarings, *Intégrales* once greatly upset audiences at early European and American performances. It still seems to bring the very noise of modern urban and industrial life into the concert hall. *Déserts*, still very seldom performed, is the more lyrical piece.

Schoenberg's "Song of the Wood Dove" (given here in its reduced orchestration) and the First Chamber Symphony, especially, show the composer on the verge of rejecting tonality. Elizabeth Connell, once a fine *Götterdämmerung* Waltraute, was well-suited to the Wood Dove's not-dissimilar role.

Some conductors seem to relish the almost Straussian business of the Chamber Symphony, but Boulez, supreme in the music of "watershed" styles, judged to perfection the balance between late-Romantic and more forward-looking elements.

In between came a well-programmed reminder of where Schoenberg went next — the atonal *Three Pieces*, a little over two minutes, of experimental study in the composer's most tart vein.

# Penderecki and Schubert

by MAX LOPPERT

Last night's Prom concert, given by Riccardo Muti and the Philharmonia, was a coupling of symphonies — Penderecki's (1973) and Schubert's Ninth. Symphony so-called, some might be tempted to add of the former. In a lively programme note Arnold Whittall put the case for Penderecki's symphonic discourse as concerning itself entirely with contrasts of orchestral texture. By chance, Josef Tal's Third Symphony, played at the Proms by the Israel Philharmonic last week, proved to be a work whose symphonic concerns could be similarly described. The liveliness of Tal's work, the certainty it left after only a single hearing that "something was happening," to as well as in the music, was a helpful additional pointer, if any were needed, to

the basic inertia of Penderecki's.

As ever—how often have we repeated these remarks of Penderecki's instrumental music?—the sound inventions are fascinating; as ever, their attractions are purely sensational, and therefore short-lived. There is an immediate excitement in the slithering strings, barking brass and twittering wind, the fannings-out into clouds of notes, the sprays and splatters contrasted by the pulsation of percussion. But the notes in their tidily sectioned patterns convey no sense of a language being shaped or hammered into coherent musical thought; and so the excitement is an un-nourished, quickly palling kind. Being offered at once so much and so little is a tantalising and distasteful experience.

Muti conducted a crack per-

formance, far bolder and more colourful than the composer's own recorded version—his command of brilliant assortments of orchestral colour, and his ability to keep independently active groupings under tight control, are gifts far too little employed in the service of contemporary music, in London at least. Something of his brilliance and high voltage in Penderecki got into Schubert after the interval, and that was less happy. The "Great C major" does not bloom, does not sing, does not expand, when driven as hard and unyieldingly as it were here; and though one could admire miracles of lucid and energetic articulation, particularly by the unflagging strings, that was hardly compensation for the unloving and unlyrical view of Schubert proposed thereby.

# ARTS GUARDIAN

Still, they sang well and their hit set pieces like Rasputin and Brown Girl in the Ring were fun, if you fancied the simplest catchy pop. In between, they murdered such diverse standards as Big Spender, Hey Joe and No Woman No Cry. Boney M should only be heard and seen in two minute bursts.

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RAH/RADIO 3

Frank Barker

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## Israel

## Philharmonic

THE QUESTION when is a symphony not a symphony must have insinuated itself into the minds of many listeners to the UK premier of J. Josef Tal's Third Symphony, completed a year ago and dedicated to Zubin Mehta and his Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Cast in a single movement, and dispensing with the former procedure we associate with the symphony it is a study in contrasted sounds which establishes its own patterns and exerts a highly individual fascination to anyone willing

to forget traditional terminology.

There is a strong sense of development and forward movement, though the development is sonic instead of thematic, and progress is achieved by ever-changing texture rather than by shifts in key or rhythm.

The work is virtuosic in the manner of Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra, spotlighting the characteristic voices of single instruments or instrumental groups. Notable among these display pieces are a brief episode for the string quartet and a lengthy section for the marimba, the rich man's xylophone at which most composers look down their noses. Mehta and his players took up its challenge with such ebullient expertise that I was left hoping that we shall have another opportunity of hearing the work before long.

Glowing colours were also displayed by Daniel Barenboim and the orchestra in an affectionately poetic performance of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto. The singing keyboard tone and expressive accompaniment were a joy—so much so that the occasional breakdown in communication between Barenboim and Mehta was all the more regrettable.

# Concerts

Albert Hall

Israel

Philharmonic

Zubin Mehta

By ROBERT HENDERSON

THE Israeli composer Josef Tal was present in the hall last night to acknowledge the applause after the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and its conductor Zubin Mehta, had given the first British performance of the quite short but absorbing Third Symphony he composed for them a year ago.

Though widely recognised Israel's leading composer, he is still known here more by repute than direct experience of his music. It would perhaps be too much to hope for that this fine symphony might stimulate a more active interest in his work.

Luminous, cogent and economical, like all the most rewarding music its single movement does not reveal its secrets immediately. But there are many things about it that are difficult to grasp at first encounter, it yet makes a direct and richly satisfying impact.

For within its diversity, its finely structured variations of pace, texture and instrumentation, there runs a much deeper current that not only gives to the music an underlying sense of unity, but enables it to appear fresh and original without relying on any superficial novelty.

The other works in the second of the orchestra's two Promenade Concerts were the Fourth Piano Concerto of Beethoven and Dvorak's 8th Symphony. The soloist in the concerto was Daniel Barenboim, the lyrical finesse of his playing and its scrupulously moderated tone invested with a probingly taut, virile energy.

The searching nature of his performance merited a much more sympathetic accompaniment, however, and only in the third movement of the Dvorak symphony did the conductor's ruthlessly driven and coarsely grained interpretation allow a brief glimpse of the music's genial or characteristically endearing qualities.



7.30 pm Proms 79 Tonight's new symphony loves ignorant ears, says Hans Keller



'Let a different world of music sink in, undisturbed by preconditioned evaluations,' says the 69-year-old Israeli Josef Tal in his recent programme note for the Jerusalem première of his Third Symphony. What sort of world? That's what Israel's leading composer doesn't say, although in my opinion, it can more easily be described to the instinctive listener than to the intellectual insider. The expert, that is, won't get anywhere by listening analytically, trying to pick out motifs, themes, subjects, workings-out, and the rest. The listener to sheer sound and sonorities, on the other hand, will get everywhere.

Sheer sound, not mere sound effects: through their sharply defined character, Tal's sonorities mean something. In fact, they mean so much that they take the place of themes: the very texture of the music, or rather its contrasted textures, become its subject-matter, from which its structure grows. They therefore range widely, from orchestral sound to soloistic sound, from symphonic music to chamber music, and again from symphony to concerto: within this continuous movement, which does not play much longer than a quarter of an hour, the listener unbothered by any knowledge about concerto form will easily discover a marimba concerto of the utmost virtuosity — and if he doesn't know what a marimba sounds like, he will after tonight, for ever.

So it's not only two symphonies for the price of one tonight (Dvorak's Eighth as well as Tal's), but two concertos too. What's more, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 4 forehears Tal's thematic textures, in that the openings of its outer movements as well as its entire slow movement are dominated by the sound of piano and/or strings: thus sound turns into unifying, indeed symphonic, sense.

# A supra-national Israeli

Hans Keller

*The first British performance of Josef Tal's Third Symphony will open next Wednesday's Prom (5 September) by the Israel Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta — which is sold out, but will be relayed live on Radio 3.*

Collective narcissism is the single danger threatening to arrest Israel's development — be it national or religious self-preoccupation, or a bit of both, even though there are religious zealots on the lunatic fringe who regard Zionism and their own faith as mutually exclusive — and who, like the PLO, refuse to recognize the Jewish state. But unlike the surrounding Arab world, Israel's civilization does contain, very articulately so, every conceivable national, anti-national, international, and supra-national viewpoint, including yours and mine, so that it is not at all difficult to find Israeli supporters for my opening main clause.

Nevertheless, at a 'World Jewish Music Congress' in Jerusalem a year ago, my so-miscalled paper (as always, I spoke freely) created a public uproar, the like of which I had never experienced in a life that has not lacked animated reactions to controversial speeches: for a few minutes, I was not allowed to continue — because I had described Israel's national music, whether of the religious or the secular variety, as infantile and, in the case of a religious piece specially composed for the occasion (a reception at the President's), as a load of rubbish.

But, elatingly, I met with support too: even within the national context of the Congress, you could not speak of a unanimous reaction. On the contrary, heartening approval emerged from some of the most unexpected quarters — not publicly, to be sure, but privately after my speech, and very spontaneously so, before the noise had died down. Thus, a *chazen* (cantor) assured me that my observations about the Jewish and, hence, Israeli minor-mode compulsion (which I had shown to operate in the Diaspora on the level of genius, too — in the works of Mendelssohn, Mahler and Schoenberg) had made him think: yes, now that I had mentioned it, he became aware of this restriction in his own mind, and would do something about it. In the future, he would remind himself not to neglect the major mode in his improvisations, thank you.

Another, less vocal supporter gladdened my heart even while I spoke: in the front row, I saw the composer Josef Tal smiling away, not so much at my speech as at the enduring repercussions he could foresee — a

prospect that did not seem to displease him. And indeed, a month or two ago, in the course of my lecture course at the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem, I was still challenged on last year's speech; an earnest student found my reflections on musical nationalism wellnigh incomprehensible, and an equally earnest university lecturer, in an article in the leading Hebrew daily entitled 'Hans Keller and his Victims' (my course had been on 'Music Criticism: Its Role and its Victims'); still took my objections to last year's piece of religious kitsch gravely amiss.

It is in such a context that Josef Tal's (b.1910) own development has to be seen. Indeed, in his creatively formative years, musical nationalism's shallowness tended to sink in more deeply than it does now, when cultural (as distinct from governmental) circles, or some of their sectors, are becoming aware that to regard something undesirable as 'un-Jewish' means as much as 'un-British' meant to them or their parents in mandatory times.

As a born creator, Tal has thus enjoyed the inestimable advantage of isolation (for which, to pose an extreme case, Beethoven had to pay with his hearing); notwithstanding his straightforward, elemental love for the Jewish national home, he was too inventive a musician to be caught up in nationalist movements or submit to such Judaic or Jewish pressures as produce augmented seconds between the minor third and the sharpened fourth or the minor sixth and the leading-note — and the like.

Another type of isolation, not easily attainable for a European or American composer in our insecure age, proved at least equally conducive to the highly individual development of this sharply defined creative personality, which places invention, fantasy, above all else — everything else having been accomplished, or else ignored. While the European composer, and especially the avant-gardist, has tended to worry about trends, unconfessed fashions, in-methods, and the latest out-of-date-ness — at least since Boulez desperately announced that 'Schoenberg is Dead' — Tal has been evolving his natural post-tonal style in total detachment from Europe's and indeed America's much-publicised secret societies, those composing clubs which helped their members to remain alive or, you may think, dead.

The result has been a supra-factional as well as supra-national output which immediately attracts musical listeners who have not themselves been deafened by their theoretical and/or national allegiances. Tal's operas are better known in Germany or the

United States than in Israel, which may not unambiguously recognize him as its leading composer, whereas the rest of the musical world does: *nemo propheta in patria* – especially in prophet-land, where new prophets are a threat to the old. In one distinct respect, nevertheless, Tal's music has, of late, developed what may well prove a prophetic quality, and his only conceivable brother-in-disarmament here is György Ligeti – the disarmament of the enemies of new sounds, that is.

To be sure, the original prophet of what I'm about to talk about is Beethoven – but then, what did those lonely deaf ears not forehear? After Tal's Third Symphony on Wednesday, we'll hear Beethoven's *G major symphony* where you may remember, the texture of piano and/or strings not only dominates the bases, the opening thoughts of all three movements, but is the downright subject of the central movement, shaped as this *andante* is by the juxtaposition of strings and piano, antithetical at first, but resolving into unanimity in the end. It is *the structural significance of texture*, the sense of sound on top of the sound of sense, which Beethoven here explores – in preparation, as it were, of Tal's Third Symphony.

In Tal's Third String Quartet written a couple of years ago, there are clear signs of texture becoming thematic, an essential element of symphonic thought. But in the single-movement structure of the Third Symphony, which he completed about a year ago (and which contains six string-quartet bars, too!), it's no longer a mere question of clear signs: thematic texture has become the *fons et origo* of symphonic construction. The textural variety and contrasts, therefore, are extreme: the scoring is not orchestration, but instrumentation as an intrinsic part of the creative act – more part than parcel.

After the opening, basic thought, the strings' build-up – from the double-basses to the violins – sets the textural scene; it compels us to listen more texturally than we habitually do in thematic music. Now, this innovatory texture is defiantly composed against the background of a fugato; it's a fugal exposition with a difference – some difference: there's no fugue, no canonic imitation. But the pattern of the successive entries, always at five crotchets' distance, instinctively establishes in our minds the fugal background against which these new sonorities are thrown into relief, until the *combined* entry of second and first violins (the two being of the same colour) adds a final contradiction of spontaneous fugal expectation.

From the outset, our attention is thus deflected from the definition of separate parts, and the ear is opened to the new matter, instead of mishearing it for elevated sound effects, for what it used to regard as the manner – a metamorphosis of the very elements of composition which Ligeti does not, perhaps, pursue with the same thematic and structural consistency: he will replace

structure by texture rather than structuralize texture. It is indeed at this critical stage in the history of composition, when musical meaning is only too ready to yield to the stimulating attraction of novel constellations of sounds, that their use as audible meaning – and extended, symphonic meaning to boot – may, hopefully, be heard as a prophetic utterance – if, that is, it's still permissible to foresee sense in the world.

However, the possible historical significance of Tal's symphony is one thing, its assured substance and clarity another. It isn't easy to turn texture into theme and structure – otherwise the job would have been done before with comparable success. The one who has come closest, Ligeti (with developing effect on his game-playing followers), had had his ears sharpened by his *electronic thought* – as has, interestingly enough, Tal himself: his thematic textures would allow one to diagnose electronic preoccupations if one didn't know about them – right to the end which, significantly, the composer has described as a 'fade-out'.

This is about the only concrete remark in his programme note for the first perfor-

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mance (at the recent Israel Festival), wherein he ponders that we haven't got the terms yet to describe this 'different world of music.' 'Oh yes, we have', I countered in private conversation; 'terms that are no good now were never any good, anyway. We can even analyse the work' – and I gave examples of what I meant, some of which have found their way into the present piece. He enthusiastically agreed, 'but if I had written something like that for the programme, it would have been utterly incomprehensible to virtually everybody in the audience.' 'Well, I wrote just this kind of programme note for our Prom!' 'Your tradition in England of writing and reading about music is unique in the world. It isn't only in Israel that you won't, can't, get an analytic piece in a programme; it's the same in the United States, or in Germany. I should think that your own tradition started with Tovey ...' 'Whom I consider too descriptive', I interrupted. 'I understand', he said – but he may indeed have quite a point that hadn't struck you or me: his knowing supra-nationality shows conceptually, too.

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