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HISTORICAL TEXT AND PRETEXT IN THE WORKS OF AN ISRAELI COMPOSER

Prof. Adler announced at the opening of the session that he received a telegram from Mr. Rolf Liebermann to excuse him for his absence, due to medical reasons. Mr. Liebermann sent his best greetings and wishes for the success of the Congress.

Prof. Josef Tal: The present theme was proposed to me with the encouragement that I speak about my own work, and thus explore my own involvement with the problem. It is indeed a problem, and I have indeed been involved with it in a number of my own works, though by no means in all of them. The relevant works belong to various genres. On further thought, however, I decided to limit myself to the operas. An opera is by its very nature always the creation of a "history", long or short in duration, real or fanciful, or more often a mixture of both – and therefore exemplifies the text-and-pretext problem more clearly, directly and drastically than any of the other genres.

The pretext of an opera must proceed from certain assumptions, which subsequently come to be realized in the text of the libretto.

The choice of pretext stems mainly from the regions of the subconscious. Here environmental influences mingle with individual tendencies. Both may lead to original formulations in the construction of the libretto. They may also, however, evolve into the bias of a routinized prototype. Imperfectly assimilated influences from the environment generate fashionable actualizations in the form of parodies, poster-like protest motives, sensationalistic novelties with shock effects, etc. etc. Certainly all this can also be re-integrated into sublimated values, according to the individual capability of the author, his grossness or delicacy of taste, and the measure of his knowledge of the "materia". The choice of the pretext is therefore like the inception of a research task, which, already at its very beginning, unequivocally expresses the ethics of the placement of its goals and responsibilities. In this way, certain preferred configurations will no doubt come to establish themselves in the works of a composer, and in time become typical of his oeuvre.

Having been given the occasion of speaking to you about my operatic works, I find myself forced to observe myself, and to draw some retrospective conclusions about my choice of pretexts. I hope that I have not thereby arrogated to myself any illegitimate professional authority.

For this observation, five operatic works are at my disposal. Two of them are one-act operas based on biblical subjects. The first is the story of King Saul at En Dor, and the second treats of the illicit love between Amnon and Tamar, the children of David. The first of the large-scale operas, *Ashmedai*, is based on a talmudic legend (and I must point with egocentric gratitude to the fact that Prof. Rolf Liebermann is the guilty party as to the initiative of this composition). The second is *Massada*, written for last year's Israel Festival. It is based upon the history of the Roman-Jewish war in the year 70 of the Common Era. The third large-scale opera is not yet completed. Its subject is the contemporary world-wide youth problem.

Upon examining the pretext retrospectively I can very well find a common denominator. The only exception is *Amnon and Tamar*, which has a typically operatic ending, namely the murder of Amnon

which avenges the sister. The other operas, however, have no ending. As the final curtain falls, the idea propounded in the work remains open-ended. Herewith we recognize the task given to the libretto: it has to pose a problem, to develop it according to its full implication, but by no means to formulate a solution. It is the public which must find the solution, not only because it has been stimulated but because it has been forced to do so through the co-ordinated activation of all artistic means. For it is only the self-found solution, or at least the personal preoccupation with the question thus posed to the spectator, which is capable of achieving the proper closure of the circle of communication.

In *Saul at En Dor*, Saul is made aware by his visit to the Witch that he has committed the fundamental mistake of not listening to the Prophet Samuel, and of forgiving his enemy Amalek. Amalek has mobilized his forces against him anew, and Saul goes out into the night, toward his defeat on Mount Gilboa. The opera makes no further mention of the war episode. It ends with Saul's way into the dark of the night, towards the approaching Unknown. In *Ashmedai* it is Satan who tricks the good people into war and conquest. He leaves them in a state of complete spiritual and material ruin. Turned into a proud rooster, he leaves, satisfied, the horribly empty stage. The game can commence again.

Massada is founded neither on the martyrdom of the Jewish defenders of the fortress, nor is it a war-apotheosis. Everything develops towards the tragic recognition by the Roman commander that he has won a victory over dead warriors, from among which only a few children and women have managed to save themselves. These bear the germinating power of continuity, while Rome will be absorbed by history. Silva, the mighty commander, sees the children playing in the distance and leaves the scene, bowed-down and broken.

The new opera, whose title has not yet been determined, shows the youth protest society. A group goes forth to seek a new leadership. They find a primitive man, not yet touched by civilization. They educate him, out of their own cynicism and nihilism, and bring him back to the city as a saviour. The result is not difficult to guess, and in the end the survivors of the group go out again into the wide-open space of the search.

I think that I have been able to show up the red thread, with the help of these examples. The pretext-connection is self-evident.

Now as to the text. Mr. Eliraz, the librettist, will be the one to tell you about the literary sources. I intend to speak about the musical composition and its relation to the text.

For me, all the components of the opera are also an integral part of the score: the text, the stage action, the visual message of the scenery, the vocal and acting art of the singer, the formative work of the stage director, and – last but not least – the conductor who puts all these in motion. They must become realized, capable of being physically grasped, as it were, in the elements of the score, since they must all be experienced by the composer with the utmost clarity and intensity. This does not, however, imply an imitative-descriptive music. The verbal content only acts as the impetus for emotive musical configurations; these are independent of the conceptual logic of the word and justify themselves in a different dimension, the probabilistic and not the causal one. This also applies to all the other components. Hence there is no place here for long-drawn-out arias, because every word is a stimulus-factor and everything which occurs sets off forces in various directions.

The meaning of the words must remain intelligible to the listener, and beyond these also the meaning of the sentences. This creates a discursive style of vocal expression. The word can also be made to function phonetically, as an instrumental sound-element, though of course at the cost of its lexical meaning. All this forces the librettist to construct a very tightly shaped prose, and to be conscious of a responsibility for the proportional share of the verbal element – since he must also take into calculation the time-share of the musical element.

The action in each scene also has its expressive momentum, its immanent tempo, its carefully measured temporal extension; thus it becomes obvious that the architecture of the opera is created by the relationships among the scenes. A particularly difficult task for the librettist is the achievement of a balance of significance between the text and the sequence of action. Both become equal to each other only when the stage action is so clear that it could be understood by the spectators even if there were no text. If the music and the interpretative art are added to this, then each element will reinforce the other.

I would like to quote a passage from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. The singer says there: "I pretend to be neither a great actor nor a great singer. But that I know: when music guides the motions of the body, gives them life, and with this also sets out their measure; when declamation and expression are already transferred to me by the composer – then I am quite a different person than if I

had to create all these by myself in the spoken drama, and had to invent the measure and declamation beforehand on my own – not to mention that every other actor on the stage may the meanwhile distract me“.

Thus, everything that is spiritual-philosophical belongs to the pretext. That is the protoplasm of the libretto. The text itself serves the action. Here lies the fundamental difference between opera and spoken drama. The librettist demonstrates virtuosity when he must insert a monologue, without causing it to put a brake on the action. A monologue leads, necessarily, to contemplations. These must therefore be so highly charged emotively that they become equivalent to an action.

To illustrate this point, allow me to play for you a scene from my opera *Massada*. The old woman, from the group of survivors, disputes with God. The Historian, on a side stage, transfers past and present into the super-temporal. The instrumental part of the entire opera is composed for electronic music, without any orchestral participation. I wanted to avoid as much as possible both the already standardized sound-symbolics of the avant-garde, and the traditional orchestral symbolics. I hope that I have succeeded in evoking the theatrical element through the music in the monologue as well, and in having it compel the singer to a sparing but intensive bodily expression. The singer is Mrs. Adi Etzion-Zak. You have been given the English translation of this scene, by kind permission of the publisher, the Israel Music Institute.

[Audition-Example 1]

The Russian stage-director Alexander Tairow once said: “Of all the arts, the art of music is the one nearest to that of the theatre“. This thought is of course also comprised in the concept of the “*Gesamtkunstwerk*“. It was a well-known preoccupation already long before Wagner – but here I digress. The contemporary variant of the term “*Gesamtkunstwerk*“ is “*Multimedia*“. However it may be called, the common denominator is always the serialization of the available means of expression. The pretext for a multimedia-intention must be particularly specific in form and concept; for only an intellectual projection will create the necessary linking and mutual re-inforcement of the combined media. If this is not the case, quantity is called upon to become quality – which is a demagogic but not an artistic procedure.

I believe that this problem has touched me in another scene in *Massada*. The relationship between text and pretext appears here in a different way. The scene shows – indirectly, by a visual allusion or evocation – the warriors in the fortress in a dialogue with God. Since the libretto begins after the fall of the fortress, this scene is a temporal flashback, and was therefore conceived as surrealistic in all its components. In semi-darkness one sees the bodies, swaying in prayer, out of which there streams a chant which intensifies itself to ecstasy. As a composer I took recourse here to ethnic sources. The chant is a collage of elements from Hassidic, Yemenite and Samaritan traditions. The texts are prayer texts. I do not have the choir on the stage sing, but only move. The music comes out of an electronic re-working of the source motives. Verbal meanings are only discernible fragmentarily here and there in the sounds. All the media are interrelated, and each of them transposed in its own way into the irrational. Here the significance of the pretext outweighs that of the text, but both are built inseparably into the whole.

[Audition-Example 2]

Israel Eliraz*: Although the problem of the relationship between words and music is as old as the first work of art which used words and music, it arises anew every time a librettist and a composer sit down to work together on a new opera. The history of the composition of operas abounds with the most amusing and most tragic anecdotes about these two kinds of artist – the master of words and the master of sounds. They try very hard to work together towards a mutual goal, but at the same time they are working with different materials ruled by different disciplines and laws. Every few years there are important symposia of composers (seldom librettists) who try to explore the problem. Some time

* Israel Eliraz, b. 1936, writer and playwright. His plays have been produced in Israel, West Germany, the USA, France, England, Belgium etc. He has written three libretti for Josef Tal: *Ashmedai*, *Massada 967*, and *The Experience*, and also translated Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* into Hebrew.

ago I read about one such symposium in which some famous modern composers participated: Dallapiccola, Pizzetti, Malipiero, Egk, Blacher and others. They argued about some fundamental problems of operatic creation today, and their remarks and aphorisms were illuminating and banal at the same time. On one issue they all agreed: the perspective for the new opera – and we are all so eager to renew this “*genre démodé*” of drama – depends on a profound research not only of new possibilities in music writing, but also of the ever-problematical relationship between new music and the dramatic verbal texture.

Let me add some remarks on the problem of text and pretext in opera, based on my own experience in writing dramas and three libretti for Josef Tal.

The Jewish legends about Ashmedai and King Solomon have always enchanted me. I was especially impressed by the story of how Ashmedai threw Solomon from his throne into the desert, impersonated him, took his place and upset the country. The highlight of the story was, for me, the uncritical acceptance of a king by his subjects although his deeds absolutely contradicted everything the people believed in. I was amazed by the metamorphosis which a nation can undergo when it does not constantly observe the nature of its leaders.

In the original Hebrew legend there is a happy end: the Jewish sages finally manage to unmask the devil and to remove him. Using this legendary material as a base or skeleton for the fabula of my first libretto, I tried to build an entirely new world on the stage: a king, a queen, their son, an inn-keeper with whom the king is in love, their daughter, a city, citizens, the army etc. The Hebrew legend served for nothing more than a pretext for the construction of a totally new drama which occurs somewhere on the European continent about 500 years ago. Thus I gave the story the character of a folktale, achieving, in a way, a point of perspective, for me as the writer and for the public as the audience. By projecting my story in time and place, I tried to elevate the plot to a higher level of symbolic character, though not to that of an allegorical drama. Everyone in the audience could assume that we are dealing with current political events. Everyone had to work out his attitude towards the dramatic events which take place on stage. There could not be any misunderstanding that our main interest was in the European catastrophe, where leaders using the mask of democracy and nationalism could achieve disastrous results. The legendary figure of the King of the Devils, which has some similarities with the mythical figure of Mephistopheles in European culture, served to accentuate the political and theatrical issues and at the same time to avoid falling into the trap of a *Lehrstück* or sheer propaganda-play.

I approached my second libretto – *Massada 967* – in a totally different way. Although the fall of the mountain fortress of Massada is a historical event, there is only one literary source which tells about it: Josephus Flavius’ *History of the Jewish War*.

Three years after the fall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (70 C. E.) and after the building of the Arch of Triumph in Rome by Titus, Massada – last of the Jewish strongholds – still will not surrender. For twelve months the Roman commander Flavius Silva and 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 Jewish State is incomplete. The Romans cannot concede that even one lonely and distant hilltop should be the base of an independent Jewish community. It might turn into a symbol. It must be destroyed.

No community of men were more eager to live than the people of Massada. They had escaped from the dreadful disaster which befell Jerusalem and for three years lived a full Jewish life. They only ask for a little corner in the desert where they can live according to their faith and in freedom. 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 siege. So the Jews of Massada resolve to choose death, to give up a world which denies them life in the wilderness. Silva, the Roman commander, who storms the mountain and the fortress which its defenders have set alight, stands appalled. He is utterly confounded in the face of a mass suicide.

The main problem was: how to approach this historical and tragic event, which is very well known in Israel and has become something of a national myth? How to deal with a story of which the associations are still so vivid and meaningful? Is it possible to add fictional figures or invented dialogues without risking your neck? One thing was certain, that we cannot retell the story. This is useless. We tried therefore to avoid dealing directly with the terrible sacrifice. We began our story after the destruction of the fortress. Here on its ruins, a Roman historian who cannot understand the Jews tries, by the order of Silva, to put together the sequence of the last days and nights, as in a puzzle, by forcing the survivors – five children and two women – to tell their stories.

The structure of this opera is, purposely, not a dramatical process but rather a flow of sequences of scenes. Some of the short scenes occur before our eyes as a present event, and others as a kind of flashback of the past. It is not, as in the case of *Ashmedai*, a tightly built dramatic story. The points-of-view of the participants in the drama are mingled. In one scene we witness the events through the eyes of the survivors, in another scene we see them through the eyes of the dead, or of the Roman historian.

Thus we have tried to demystify the story of Massada and at the same time not to subject it to a *Verfremdung*. We arrived at a mixture of dramatical and poetical scenes, which I might call a kind of dramatic requiem rather than a conventional opera. Reality and non-reality, present and past, living characters and dead people are mixed together. The surrealism of some of the scenes has been incorporated into a quasi-realistic structure. We intended to bring together history on the one hand, and dream or lunacy on the other.

The words are a very important factor in the texture of this opera. The music was therefore written to the original Hebrew text and not to its German translation, as was the case with the two other operas. The words became a rhythmical element which cannot be translated.

The third opera, *The Experience* (temporary name), is of another nature and of a different dramatic texture. Here we are not dealing with a legendary parable or a historical-national event.

It is the story of a group of young people, from different social backgrounds, who are sick of their society. They meet a man on the mountain. They try to build him up, to give him a biography, as well as to share with him the principles of human civilization. Without being aware of it they are constructing an "Unhuman Puppet", a monster. Coming down to the city, to the world, backed by his young colleagues, he achieves full power. After a short time he will take over the Establishment, will use it for his own purposes, and will smash his creators to pieces.

Here, more than in the two previous libretti, I discarded the linear dramatic plot. The construction is much more fragmentary and abstract. It is a sequence of visual images, testifying to "*la condition humaine*". The short and very swift scenes, which bring to our mind a film scenario rather than a play, oblige the audience to build the characters and to fill in the gaps, which means that it must participate fully in the performance. The use of visual images and symbols is much more extended in this opera than in the others. The dialogue is "*pauvre*" and very sparse, on purpose. The action crystallizes around the stage images: the stage becomes a mountain, or a place of crucifixion, or a huge chessboard, or an asylum, etc. Through these images, or I should rather call them *metaphors*, we get the theatrical narrative without dealing with their philosophical or psychological implications.

The struggle of the librettist in the creation of an opera is with the text and the pretext. It is an everlasting search for a structure of words that serve as vehicles or guidelines to the composer, the choreographer, the set designer, and all the others.

Pizzetti described libretto and music "as one plus one which do not make two, but one"; and I may add that a good libretto enables all the arts involved to become one. I believe, indeed, that the opera begins with the word, which provides a maximum of stimuli for the artists who take part in the total creative work.

Let me bring only one saying from among the many hundreds on this subject, by the poet and librettist W. H. Auden:

"The verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public but are really a private letter to the composer. They have their moment of story, the moment in which they suggest to him a certain melody; once that is over they are as expendable as infantry is to a Chinese general, they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them" (Partisan Review 19, no. 1, 1952, p. 10).

I do not think that the words have to efface themselves. They are important components, as are the other elements in the opera. The main task of the librettist is to find the exact proportions for every act, so as to rebuild on the stage a harmonical "World of Art" where text and pretext are not in dichotomy, a stage where you can still find meaning for a world which becomes more and more meaningless.