HOMAGE TO JOSEF TAL
On the occasion of his winning the Johann Wenzel Stamitz Prize
(Mannheim, Germany, March 28, 1995)

The life of the composer Josef Tal is full of sharp clear lines and unexpected twists. Utterly uncommercial, hard and virtuoso as his music is, so strong-willed, self-determined and uncompromising was his way in life.

It began in the 30s. Highly talented, extremely well educated and a quick beginner on the road to a brilliant career, he was stopped in his track by political events. The 3rd Reich pushes off his chosen way and makes him lead the life of a ‘late developer’. Overnight, the successful young pianist, harpist and teacher shut the piano and the music notebook in Berlin and quickly switches to the ‘useful’ profession of a photographer only in order to enable him to emigrate to Palestine and thus save his life. That was in 1934. He joins a kibbutz, the rather leftist Beth Alfa; later moves to another kibbutz, Gesher. He wanders all over the country as a solo performer and music missionary but the magnetism of Jerusalem becomes dominant in his life and he moves to the city. Here after adventures as a fireman, soldier-musician and educator he reaches, at long last, the road which leads him to his true destiny: professional pianist, teacher at the Academy of Music and lecturer at the Hebrew University. It is said that his pupils are Israel’s 13th tribe! Now at last he becomes a composer – at first ‘infamous’; then widely known and acknowledged, with international renown following fast, in particular due to his pioneering work in the field of electronic music.

But before that happens, 10 years have gone by. Those ten years in which, normally, young men’s careers are developed and established. Ten years which cannot be regained and cannot be claimed. I shall try to find a positive reason for what amounts to theft: perhaps the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob wanted to prevent Josef Tal from becoming a ‘fashionable’ composer? True, this is hardly a consolation and it is a tremendous sacrifice, but it does fit Tal who always chose to make his way through the narrow gate not through the wide one which fellow-travellers take.

There are two men I would like to mention who belong to Tal’s Berlin years: his teacher Heinz Tiessen and the engineer Friedrich Trautwein. Tiessen, an East Prussian (born 1887 in Königsberg, died 1971 in Berlin) belonged to the small but radical group at the Berlin Academy associated with Schoenberg. Through him young Tal comes early into the sphere of dodecaphony. This experience enables him to take his own stand as opposed to the composers who are committed to the so-called ‘Mediterranean Style’, a dreamy, folksy Mediterranean medley. Tal did not have it easy in his efforts to stand against the official trend, but he did not give in and, finally, succeeded. Another little note on Tiessen: in 1965 he was
awarded the Johann Wenzel Stamitz Prize in Esslingen. Exactly 30 years after his teacher has been thus singled out, Josef Tal is awarded this prestigious prize. One could say, in vernacular, “Now ain’t that a coincidence...”

Now for Trautwein, the engineer (born 1888 in Würzburg, died 1956 in Düsseldorf). He was awarded at the State Music Academy in Berlin and worked with Oskar Sala on developing electro-acoustic instruments. Trautwein’s sound generators awakened in Tal the taste for music of other planes, a fact for which the 21st century is well served. Tal’s research, well in the soil of Israel and brought a rich crop, among other concerts which use electronic sounds of a magnetic tape in lieu of an orchestra: CONCERTO for piano No.5 (1964) and No.6 (1970); CONCERTO for harpsichord (1964); and CONCERTO for horn (1971, revised in 1980), which was a set piece for the International Festival of Chamber Music in Israel. Why did they choose horn? Max Saal was Tal’s horn teacher in Berlin and today we have here among us members of the Saal family! Tal’s opera MASSADA 967 (1972) commissioned for the 25th Anniversary of Israel’s Independence created a veritable furor. On stage there were singers, procs and lights, but in the orchestra pit, except for the conductor, not a Beck*transmit. The tape which transmitted electronic music from magnetic tapes. Following this, Tal became famous, despised, respected, admired. Connoisseurs claim that he has been all these already since his great opera work ASH/MADE/IA (1968). Rolf Liebermann commissioned it and with an all-star-cast and premiered it in Hamburg in 1971 with Gary Berlin conducting. A performance in New York by the New York City Opera followed and Tal has ‘arrived’ in the US. A series of seminars, symposiums and guest-lectureships; his UNESCO fellowship and early visit to Japan, Canada, England, Holland and Poland (1960!) I can only mention here in passing. Al this is delightfully recounted in Tal’s autobiography “Theinnovation” which he has written for me and which I have premiered at the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem.

Josef Tal was awarded many prizes. I will not list them here but there is one thing that I should like to take up: the Wolf Prize of 100,000 U.S. dollars that was shared with Vladimir Horowitz and Oliver Messiaen in 1983. My mention of it is not in order to enhance Tal’s reputation but in order to add to myself. It is a sort of modern scalp hunting in cultural guise. Not so – praise be to God – is the case of the Stamitz Prize awarded by the Künstlergilde. A year ago, the brain of Jeffrey Bums has adopted them for his published works, and I would like to conclude with my homage thus: “...I would like to conclude my homage thus: ‘...I would like to conclude my homage thus: ‘Therefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own talent, his own power, for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?’ (Ecclesiastes 3:22)”. I congratulate the distinguished recipient Josef Tal and I congratulate the jury on its wise and right decision. Oskar Gottlieb Blarr is an organist, composer and music director of the Neander Kirche, Düsseldorf, Germany.