

# 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, Geshar. 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 lecturer 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 planets, in fact for the music of the 21st century. Well, this seedling took well in the soil of Israel and brought a rich crop, among others concertos 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 harp (1971, revised in 1980, which was a set piece for the International Harp Contest held in Israel in 1982. A propos of harp: Max Saal was Tal's harp 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, props and lights, but in the orchestra pit, except for the conductor, nothing but loudspeakers 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 ASHMEDAI (1968). Rolf Liebermann commissioned it and with an all-star-cast and premiered it in Hamburg in 1971 with Gary Bertini 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. All this is delightfully recounted in Tal's autobiography "The Rabbi's Son" (published: Berlin 1985) written during his sojourn in Berlin within the framework of his activities at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

Another remarkable and weighty point in Tal's creativity are his symphonies. There are, so far, six of them, written between 1952 and 1992. Zubin Mehta conducted SYMPHONY No.4 (1985) in 1986. The work was commissioned to mark the 50th anniversary of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Daniel Barenboim presented Tal's SYMPHONY No.5 (1991) in Berlin in 1992. The often played SYMPHONY No.2 (1960) was last heard on April 10, 1994, played by the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra conducted by David Shallon within the framework of the programme of the European Broadcasting Union which meant that it was broadcast simultaneously by 14 radio stations. Naturally the larger works which I could only briefly list here, have a veritable 'army' of chamber music pieces. Among the standard chamber instrumental combinations, you may find quite a few surprises: harp and trombone; recorder, marimba and harpsichord; string trio and saxophone (1994, written for the Schleswig Holstein Festival). Also many solo piano works, including ESSAY I-III (1986/88/89), works of such extraordinary power that the electronic brain of Jeffrey Burns has adopted them for his repertoire. And, last but not least, Tal's work for the organ, SALVE VENIA (1983) which he has written for me and which I 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 Wolff Prize of 100,000 U.S. dollars that Tal shared with Vladimir Horowitz and Olivier Messiaen in 1983. My mention of it is not in order to enhance Tal's part in it – it is, in fact, offered as a criticism. The Wolff Prize, in fact, "collects" great and famous artists in order to adorn itself. It is a sort of modern scalp hunting in cultural disguise. Not so – praise be to God – is the case of the Stamitz Prize awarded by the Künstlergilde. A year ago I had the joy of receiving it myself. This year my joy is even greater for this year it has been awarded to Josef Tal. Fifty years after World War II the Stamitz Prize goes to an Israeli, and an Israeli born in Germany. In 1910, Pinne near Posen belonged to the Reich of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Let us admit it freely: this award is no coincidence – it was put forward by Dr. Matthias Buth of the Ministry of the Interior in the German Federal Republic and the jury supported it wholeheartedly. This rather modest prize has a far more important meaning – it signals the concept of and impetus for our future. Now, as in 1993 when Petr Eben was awarded the prize, the Künstlergilde becomes the geometric locus of cultural policy. The innovation embodied by the Guild, which was expected and hoped for by many, becomes thus true, it starts exerting its influence.

And finally, the winner will be 85 this year. Just like the worthy Heinrich Schütz, Tal toils on, day in day out: in June of this year his seventh opera, JOSEF (1993-95) will be premiered in Tel Aviv and he goes on with his work on notation for electronic music, and – as if this was not enough – he has been commissioned to write a new opera for Rostock.

Somewhere in his autobiography, Tal says: "...all one needs is a lot of patience and a long life...". 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 works; for that is his portion: 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.

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