
World Harp Congress REVIEW

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Composer Interview



Josef Tal

By Adina Haroz



Josef Tal was born in 1910 in Pinne near Poznan, Germany. He studied at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik with Heinz Tiessen, Paul Hindemith, Kurt Sachs and others. He immigrated to Israel in 1934.

Josef Tal began teaching piano and composition at the Jerusalem Academy of Music in 1937 and served as director of the Academy from 1948 to 1952. In 1950 he was appointed Lecturer in Music at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, was head of the Department of Musicology from 1965 to 1970, and in 1971 received his professorship. Since 1961 he has also been the director of the Israel Center for Electronic Music.

Josef Tal has appeared with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and with European orchestras as pianist and conductor. He has given many concerts and made frequent lecture tours throughout Europe, the United States and the Far East. Josef Tal has been awarded the Engel Prize of the Tel Aviv Municipality three separate times for his musical and pedagogical activities. In 1965 he was appointed chairman of the Music Committee of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, and in 1969 he was elected honorary member of the Music Department of the West Berlin Academy of Arts. In 1971 Tal received the State of Israel Prize and in 1974 was made president of the Israel section of the International Music Council, a post he held until 1982. In 1975 he was awarded the Arts Prize of the City of Berlin. He became an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1983 he was the recipient of the prestigious Wolf Prize in Israel.

Since it would be difficult to encompass the complete life and works of Josef Tal in one article, I have chosen to focus on his special relationship with the harp. His compositional style is very unique, and even though critics have tried to find influences of composers such as Bartok and Schoenberg, there is originality and intense personal statement in everything he writes. I have always been captivated by the clarity of the structure, even though one cannot use traditional terms for it.

I interviewed Mr. Tal in the beautiful surroundings of his home and was reminded again that he is a man surrounded by dichotomy. The serenity and beauty which his wife has created for them often seem in direct opposition to the turbulent statements of his compositions. But there are aspects of his music that mirror this serenity, and appear in the form of "secret whispers."

At other times, one finds harshness and screaming in his statements. In his own words, he calls this mixture of shouts and whispers "a new kind of counterpoint." This specific ability of his is, in my opinion, Josef Tal's essence. He demonstrates a fresher, younger attitude than many composers half his age. Just as Mr. Tal spoke about his teacher Max Saal, each one of my meetings with Tal has been a spiritually enriching experience. - Adina Haroz

Haroz: You studied composition at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. At that point you were proficient in piano. How did you come to study the harp?

Tal: As you know, I was there mainly to study composition. But I was required to study one other instrument besides piano. One day there was a vacancy for a harp pupil in the class of the famous harp teacher Max Saal. Although I had never found the harp particularly interesting because of its lack of repertoire, I still felt it would be a challenging instrument.

Haroz: How did you find it studying with someone as famous as Max Saal?

Tal: He changed my attitude toward the harp! We developed a strong bond of respect and cultivated a lasting friendship. In fact, Max Saal became a spiritual guide for me. The feeling was mutual because even though I was young, Max Saal entrusted his own children to my teaching.

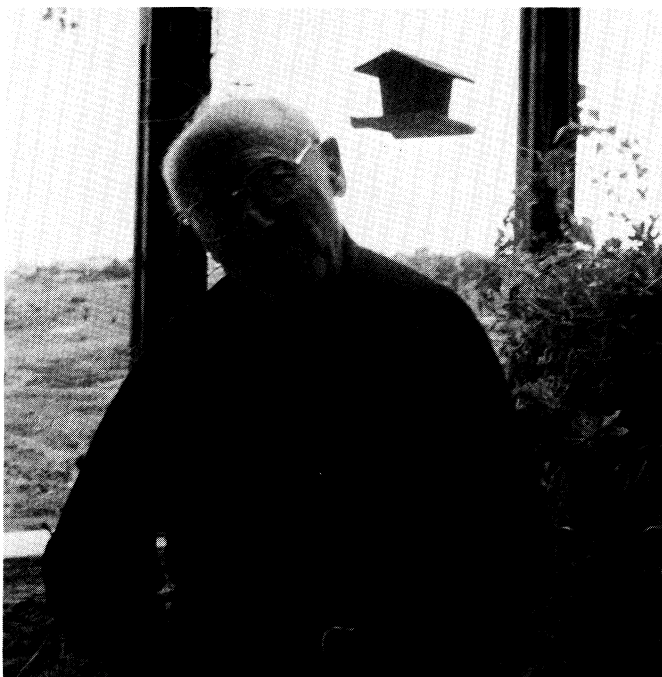
Haroz: You seem to have taken to the harp very naturally. Could you tell us something about your early days as a harpist?

Tal: Yes, I did make rapid progress. There is one amusing story I can tell you about my student days.

Not long after I began my studies, Max Saal received a telephone call during one of our weekly classes. He was asked by a film company to send his best student to participate in a recording of background music for a film. Saal chose a young woman, and soon a large car with uniformed driver came to take her to the recording session. Max Saal resumed teaching us. You must remember that in those days his classes often lasted several hours or even several half-days. Well, in about one and one-half hours, the telephone rang again. It seemed that the wrong student had been sent, and precious recording time had been lost. Max Saal agreed to send his next best student. Another car and driver soon appeared to escort the student to the studio. Another hour and one-half passed. The telephone rang; it was the conductor with more complaints. Max Saal turned to me and said, "Josef, you go!" I thought he was joking so I didn't move. Then he looked at me, repeated his request, and asked, "What are you waiting for?"

Haroz: And what reception did you receive at the studio?

Tal: When I arrived, the orchestra members gave me a mocking applause and said, "Here's another genius from the Academy!" When I looked at the music, I immediately understood why the other harpists had had problems. The arranger didn't understand anything about writing for the harp. The harp part could be played easily on the piano but was nearly impossible to play on



the harp. I also realized that the conductor did not know this. Well, the conductor told me to look at the part while he worked with the other musicians. I listened to the sounds around me, looked at my part, and decided to arrange it as I thought best. The actual harmonic material was quite basic because the arranger had not been able to cope with the harp's pedals. I decided to use glissandi with arpeggios and simple chords, which I knew I could play. Because I was already an experienced musician, the pedals and modulations were not a problem, and I was able to blend in with the orchestra to everyone's satisfaction. Later I told Max Saal what had happened, and he burst out in laughter. "Now I know why I sent you! I knew you would be right for the job," he exclaimed.

Haroz: After only two and a half years of study, you passed a special examination in the field of harp teaching.

Tal: Yes, I was a bit apprehensive as I was the first student to take the examination. Also, Max Saal was not allowed to be among the examiners because he was my teacher. But he did coach me as to what to do. He told me to answer the question my examiner would ask me in such detail that there would be no time left to ask another question. My examiner asked me a technical question concerning finger positions. I answered at length about playing in general and hand and foot coordination. I only had enough time left after my answer to play a short melody and some modulations. What I didn't realize was that my examiner, who was a distinguished harpist, had also been very nervous as this was her first time as an examiner. The assistant director gave me a short melody and asked me to play modulations. When the experienced harpist saw how easily I was able to do this, she stared in amazement.

Haroz: You were also principal harpist of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. How did that happen?

Tal: When the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra was founded in 1936, the Hungarian harpist Klari Szarvas was appointed to the principal harp position. Because of a previous commitment, she was not able to join the orchestra until one year after her appointment. I was given a rigorous audition and asked to take the interim position, which I did. During that time I also taught harp to composer Robert Starrer, who played in the radio orchestra in Jerusalem.

Haroz: Could you tell us something about the compositions you have written for harp?

Tal: I first composed a harp part for my symphonic poem, *Exodus*. Later I wrote *Lament for Harp and Cello* in memory of Klari Szarvas' husband. For harp competitions in Israel, I wrote *Intrada*, *Structures* and *Concerto for Harp and*

Electronics. In 1989 I wrote *Duo for Trombone and Harp* which was dedicated to Adina Haroz and her son Nitzan, and performed at the Fourth World Harp Congress in Paris-Sèvres. Most recently I have finished a harp solo, *Dispute*, for the 1992 International Harp Contest in Israel.

Haroz: Would you tell us something about your immigration to Israel?

Tal: The British ruled Palestine at that time and immigration was difficult. Each Jewish immigrant had to present a document concerning his profession, or prove that he had \$1000 (a high sum on those days) in the bank. A musician was not considered to have a profession which could support him. Knowing this, I decided to study photography at a four-year professional school. I actually managed to complete the entire program and pass the examination in one year. This enabled me to work as a photographer and to immigrate to Israel in 1934.

Haroz: Has the fact that you could actually play the harp increased your desire to write for it?

Tal: Not necessarily. I am not a composer for one instrument. In each piece I write for a certain instrument, I try to reach the soul of that instrument and to deepen my knowledge and technical ability in writing for it.

Haroz: As a harpist who has played your pieces, I can testify that you know the harp well. It was hard for me to forgive you, however, for the way you make use of the low register! Because of my small size, it is almost impossible for me to play with both hands on the wire strings.

Tal: Yes, it is hard to forgive the composer for extreme demands. This feeling is the same among all instrumentalists. All those things to which one is not accustomed can cause a certain anger or frustration. Eventually, the musician finds a way to do it and becomes used to it. I don't write anything impossible to execute. There is a difference between impossible and unusual.

Haroz: What were your feelings when I asked you to write a work for harp and trombone? Did it seem a bizarre combination to you?

Tal: No, I don't see anything strange in the combination - it's only unconventional. It's possible to write absolute nonsense for violin and piano and this is considered conventional! One always has the choice to go along the main road or to take a side path that no one has taken before. It demands courage to take the side path because one does not know where it will lead or what one might

To Nicanor Zabaleta

קונצרטו לנבל ומוסיקה אלקטרונית (1971)
CONCERTO FOR HARP AND ELECTRONICS (1971)
 (NEW VERSION - 1980) (גרסה חדשה - 1980)

יוסף טל
 JOSEF TAL

The score for Harp and Electronics (1971) is presented in three systems. The first system includes a 'Tape' section with two 1 1/2" tape markers and a 'tape tacet' instruction. The harp part begins with a tempo marking of '♩ = ca 72'. The score features various dynamics such as *mf*, *sfz*, and *ff*, along with performance instructions like 'L.v.' and 'very sharp'. The second system continues the harp part with similar dynamics and markings. The third system concludes the piece with a tempo change to '♩ = ca 72' and a 'very sharp' instruction. The duration is noted as 'Dur: 11'33"'. The score is written for Harp and includes electronic elements indicated by the 'Tape' section.

INTRADA אילנטראדה
 FOR HARP (1959) לנבל

יוסף טל
 JOSEF TAL

The score for Intrada (1959) is presented in three systems. The first system includes a tempo marking of '♩ = 88' and a key signature change to C major. The score features various dynamics such as *pp*, *mf*, *f*, and *ff*, along with performance instructions like 'étouffé', 'p (flage.)', 'marc.', and 'sec.'. The second system continues the harp part with similar dynamics and markings. The third system concludes the piece with a tempo change to '♩ = 108' and a 'simile' instruction. The score is written for Harp and includes electronic elements indicated by the 'Tape' section.

encounter along the way. In order not to get lost on the path, one must make a great spiritual effort to find and to know one's source as well as one's destination.

Haroz: When we played *Duo for Harp and Trombone*, I immediately felt a special kind of relationship between the two parts - a connection that was different from the usual "solo-accompaniment" texture. Could you explain what was different?

Tal: Yes. There certainly are many solo statements in the piece, but they always relate to each other and create a counterpoint in the space of time. This is not a counterpoint based on an aesthetic of intervals such as consonance and dissonance, but rather a counterpoint of different ideas. It demands a listener who is able and willing to listen and to comprehend.

Haroz: Do you have any messages for harpists or for harp manufacturers?

Tal: Yes. I was very impressed with the development of the computerized harp, and I am sorry that the work on it has been stopped. For the organ, there is already a computer which controls or pre-sets the combination of organ pipe sounds (registration) to be used in the compo-

sition. I support the development of computer technology for the harp which would liberate the pedals for different sound possibilities.

If my late teacher, Max Saal, had seen what I compose today for the harp, he would say, "Josef - have you gone crazy? Go see a doctor at once!" He was very open and interested in the developments of his time, but he wouldn't be able to imagine how the style of musical language has changed. This process must go on, and I believe that the computerized harp will contribute to it.

Haroz: Mr. Tal, in the name of the readers of the *World Harp Congress Review* and myself, I would like to thank you for this enlightening interview and to wish you many more years of health and creative activity.

Adina Haroz was born in Jerusalem. She received her Artists Diploma degree in harp from the Rubin Academy of Music as a pupil of Klari Szarvas. She has appeared as a soloist and with chamber ensembles in Israel and abroad and has recorded for radio and television. Her solo recording of Israeli music has received high critical acclaim. Ms. Haroz is a member of the Doron New Music Ensemble and actively performs and commissions new music for the harp. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the World Harp Congress.