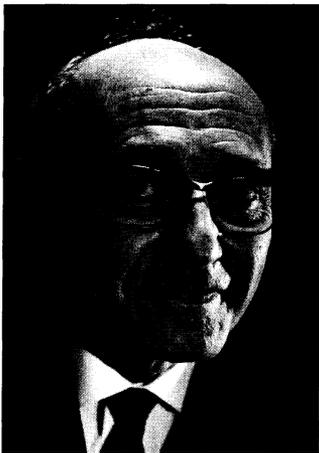# JOSEF TAL: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Josef Tal (born Grünthal, 18.9.1910 – 25.8.2008) died three weeks before his 98th birthday. His creative period in Israel – and his involvement in academic musical institutions in Israel (especially as a member and co-founder of the Jerusalem Music Academy and the Musicology Department at the Hebrew University) lasted about 60 years, paralleling the activity of four generations of Israeli composers. His forced emigration from Germany in 1934 cut him off abruptly from the centre of European avant-garde in Berlin. Yet, throughout his creative years in Israel, Tal maintained his links with the European heritage and persisted in his constant quest for new compositional techniques.

In his early years in Israel, Tal was among the most determined opponents of the ideological pressures that were brought to bear upon composers who immigrated to Israel from Europe in 1930s.[*] Like Erich Walter Sternberg, Tal rejected the demand to base his works on folksong quotations, prayer melodies, or a forced adaptation of Arabic music. In this respect, his aesthetics were diametrically opposed to the national-collective approach advocated and practiced by Alexander Uriyah Boskovich.[†] In several interviews with me, Tal insisted that his music is "Israeli music" simply by virtue of his being a Jewish, Hebrew-speaking composer living in Israel. Looking back at eight decades of musical creativity in Israel, Tal's approach has been vindicated, merging into a global trend towards growing pluralism.

Tal was a prolific composer, writing in a variety of genres: three Hebrew operas (**Amnon and Tamar** [1961]; **Massada 967** [1972; IMI 240]; **Josef** [1993; IMI 6970]); four German operas (**Ashmedai** [1968; IMI 109], **Die Versuchung** [1975; IMI 292]; **Der Turm** [1983; IMI 6453], **Der Garten** [1987; IMI 6582]); dramatic scenes (e.g., **Saul at Ein Dor** [1955; IMI 6617], **Else – Hommage** [1975; IMI 383]); six symphonies; thirteen concerti; chamber music, including three string quartets; instrumental works; and electronic compositions. It is now possible to appreciate his distinctive contribution as one of the "Founding Fathers" of Israeli art music, and as a composer who received international acclaim since the 1960s.

Tal's life story is presented in *Reminiscences, Reflection, Summaries (Retold in Hebrew by Ada Brodsky)*, published in 1987.[‡] Brodsky was a close friend of Tal's; and the book faithfully represents Tal's personality, which I had the privilege of knowing after many years of working together (as colleagues at the Hebrew University's Department of Musicology).

Tal's attitude towards his music and his audience was inspired by the uncompromising approach of Beethoven and Arnold Schönberg, two composers whom Tal particularly admired.[§] He places high demands upon his listeners: his works are intense, dissonant and densely eventful, and cannot be fully comprehended in one hearing. In this brief, preliminary summary, I wish to offer general guidelines to readers who wish to approach the music of this great composer.

Two statements from *Reminiscences, Reflection, Summaries* will serve as my starting points. In a short dialogue entitled "Interlude: And What About Pleasure?", Brodsky contrasts the experience of listening to contemporary music (including Tal's own) with the sheer joy provided by Schubert's music, and asks Tal: "Can I ever fully identify with [your] music without this sense of joy?" Tal responds:

> *I was born and raised in the early 20th century, and Classical and Romantic music became, through these early experiences, my musical native tongue. But decades before that, the stage had already been set for a profound transformation in the relationships between tones. Those relationships that we were taught to appreciate aesthetically as dissonant or consonant no longer correlated with reality. The discerning consciousness penetrated highly tense fields, which were previously rejected as dissonant or strident, and were now revealed as new sources for musical contents. (p. 162)*

However, Tal did not belittle the importance of composer-listener dialogue, and he concludes the "Interlude" by stating: "Art cannot be created without an art-loving public [...] only when the creator and the audience meet each other again, shall we know the nature of future music and the nature of the experiences it can provide to its listeners" (p. 163). In the book's "Postlude", Tal reveals this central aspect in his creative process:

> *I do not live for the present alone: every moment in which I live is also a future. But I must never forget that everything arises from the past. The past brought me to this present point, which also includes the future. There is therefore no point in trying to cut oneself off from the past, out of childish protest, or worse: out of fear of being dragged back and trapped forever. Why fear the past? It resides within us; everything we are, and everything we do, we owe to the past. It brought us so far, and thanks to it we can go forth towards our destiny. (p. 227)*

I believe that this statement provides a key to Tal's richly creative, uncompromising world, and offers a good starting point for the elucidation below. My explanation should prove even more useful in conjunction with the growing number of superb recordings of Tal's music that have become available over the past decade.[¶]

Despite Tal's unequivocal opposition to ideological-national pressures, he did not entirely avoid folk or traditional materials. Two of Tal's major early works feature the technique known as 'syncretism' – incorporating quoted materials into an alien harmonic texture; such works constitute autobiographical statements. In the second movement of the **Piano Sonata** (1950; IMI 6626), Tal quotes a simple, diatonic, small-range melody (confined to the diapason of a perfect fourth) by Yehuda Sharett (1901-1979), setting the poem *Rachel* by the Hebrew poet Rachel (the pen-name of Rachel Bluwstein, 1890-1931). The melody is quoted in the manner of the ancient

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* See: Jehoash Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine 1880-1948: A Social History* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1995).

† See: Herzl Shmueli and Jehoash Hirshberg, *Alexander Uriyah Boskovich: His Life, his Work and his Thought* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 1995, in Hebrew).

‡ Editor's comment: Tal has also published two autobiographies in German – *Der Sohn des Rabbiners: Ein Weg von Berlin nach Jerusalem* (Berlin: Quadriga Verlag, 1985); and *Tonspur: Auf der Suche nach dem Klang des Lebens – Autobiografie* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 2005).

§ For an in-depth analysis of Schönberg's personality, see; Klára Móricz, *Jewish Identities: Nationalism, Racism, and Utopianism in Twentieth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¶ See http://snipurl.com/taldisc for a discography of Tal's music. Recordings of Tal's **Sonata**, **The Wooden Horse** and **Second String Quartet**, discussed below, are available at **IMI**.

cantus firmus technique, underpinning a chromatic-dissonant harmony. This movement constitutes a symbiotic expression of Tal's rich inner world at this point in his life: Sharett, erstwhile member of Kibbutz Yaggur, studied composition with Tal and became his close friend, as well as representing the world of the Kibbutzim which embraced Tal warmly upon his immigration to Israel; Rachel's sensitive poetry had already become a romantic symbol for the world of the early Zionist settlement and of the Israeli-Biblical landscape (in this particular poem, the poet identifies herself with her Biblical namesake). For Tal, the cantus firmus technique symbolised a connection with a distinctive aspect of the European heritage, while the rich chromatic harmony represented Tal's personal world and his deep connection with the Schönbergian avant-garde.

In 1953, Tal composed his **First Symphony** (IMI 6613) – the only one of his six symphonies featuring the traditional three-movement sonata structure (the others are written as single, continuous movements). In the second, slow movement, Tal quotes a traditional Jewish-Babylonian melody from Idelsohn's *Thesaurus of Oriental Hebrew Melodies*. The melody is introduced in the lowest, darkest register of the bass-clarinet, and later penetrates a dense dissonant texture. During the fast Finale, Tal employs the Romantic, Lisztian technique of thematic transformation, turning the lament theme into a *hora* dance.

Example 1

Another manifestly autobiographical work is the dramatic scene **Else**, which commemorates the great poet Else Lasker-Schüller, whom Tal has met several times during her final, horribly tragic years in Jerusalem. In the movement which portrays a traditional German *Hausmusik* evening, Tal creates a collage, bringing together a sonata for viola da gamba by Bach with a Chopin Mazurka.

In all these cases, Tal succeeds in using the quoted materials without compromising his own stylistic and aesthetic principles, which draw their inspiration from the aesthetics of Arnold Schönberg. Music's most distinctive characteristic is its temporal progress in several parameters, some basic (melody, harmony, rhythm and timbre) and some more complex (formal organisation, articulation vs. continuity). Each of these parameters can change independently of the others. This quality was particularly important for Schönberg and his successors, including Tal. Thus, Schönberg's *Piano Concerto* is dodecaphonic in its melodic and harmonic content, yet in formal terms it adheres to the Mozartian tradition (as Schönberg himself emphasised); similarly, the *Suite* op. 25 is based on the patterns of the Baroque dance suite and the Romantic character piece.

Example 2

Tal's **Second String Quartet** (1964; IMI 52) follows a similar pattern. Its opening clearly demonstrates the manner of writing which Tal described to me on several occasions: "I take a single note, intone it and allow it to live". Here, the cello opens with F^1, reiterated four times, each time in a different timbre; the note then moves to the other instruments, in other octaves, and is finally enriched harmonically.

The rest of the work is based on a dodecaphonic tone row, but this is largely a matter for the composer rather than the listener, who follows a series of brief harmonic events in different textures, with no metric organisation. Occasionally, one of those events is repeated in a different guise yet a similar texture (e.g., the homophonic texture of p. 4 which returns on p. 16). The temporal organisation is reminiscent of a Beethovenian string quartet, especially such densely dramatic works as op. 18/1 and op. 95.

Similar thinking dominates the **Third Symphony** (1978; IMI 6172), also written as a single movement. The prevailing component in this concentrated, dramatic work is its texture – the contrasts between clearly-defined timbre groups in the orchestra; the string section, in particular, introduces "tonal clouds" which obscure definite pitches and chordal harmonies. The movement proceeds as a series of brief, intense events, whose points of demarcation are powerfully articulated, as in the classic-romantic symphonies of Beethoven and Brahms. A recurring linchpin in this movement is the short opening motif, with its clearly discernible melodic profile.

Another important strand in Tal's creative output is electro-acoustic music, and later computer-generated music. As a student at the Musikhochschule in Berlin in 1927, Tal already joined Friedrich Trautwein's group of researchers, who performed the first experiments in electronic sound production. Tal's forced emigration cut short his work in this field, but he renewed it after joining the faculty at the Hebrew University, and in 1961 established Israel's first electronic music studio, located at the Terra Santa building (the University's main residence after it was forced to move away from Mount Scopus), which housed the country's first Moog synthesizer. Ten years later, Tal embarked on a research project with Shlomo Markel of the Technion (Israel Institute of Technology), with the aim of producing a notation for computer-generated music – allowing for the preservation, transmission and reconstruction of electronic music even if damage is caused to the original sound-carrier, as well as enabling a degree of pre-planning instead of the trial-and-error method that had characterised early electronic music.[*]

Notwithstanding Tal's considerable interest in electronic music, and the time and creativity he devoted to it, he composed very few electronic works, and these were not played very often – partly because the composer himself did not particularly encourage their public presentation. Moreover, two of his purely-electronic works are intended for choreography or theatre. Apparently, Tal could not quite adapt himself to the situation (which I too find rather uncomfortable) of sitting in a hall facing a set of two or four loudspeakers, and listening to the sounds emanating from them with no human performer in sight.

Tal's compositional involvement with electronic music therefore consisted largely of combining live performance with electronic sound. Four of his concerti were written for a soloist accompanied by a magnetic tape, and these created a fascinating challenge for the performer – first experienced by Tal himself, who was an excellent concert pianist. In a traditional concerto performance, the conductor ensures that the orchestra adapt to the soloist; when playing with a magnetic tape, however, performers must adapt themselves to an implacable accompaniment. As Tal pointed out in conversation with me, "the soloist learns the significance of a second". A magnetic tape is also incorporated into his work **The Wooden Horse** for soloists, choir and magnetic tape, setting a poem by Nathan Zach (1975; IMI 330). Tal's most ambitious work combining live forces with a magnetic tape is his opera **Massada 967**, first presented at the 1972 Israel Festival and clearly deserving a fully-staged revival.

I believe that the impact of electronic music on Tal's *oeuvre* extends beyond his actual electronic compositions. In *Reminiscences, Reflection, Summaries* (p. 192), Tal quotes – with evident approval – the conductor Gerd Albrecht's observation that "the traditional orchestra plays electronic music" in certain passages in the **Third Symphony**. And indeed, Tal's experiences and experiments in electronic music clearly enriched his imagination. Instead of encouraging him to create a substantial body of purely-electronic compositions, they inspired him to create original timbres and instrumental combinations in his orchestral and chamber music.

Hopefully, our experience of Tal's music will be enriched in the near future by revivals of the operas he wrote for German opera houses and festivals, allowing us to achieve a richer and more comprehensive assessment of his profound creative legacy.

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[*]   Their research is summarised in Markel's short essay "The Fusing of Art and Science in the New Notation for Computer Music", published as an appendix to Tal's own *Musica Nova in the Third Millennium* (Israel Music Institute, 2003).