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The Music of Josef Tal
Selected Writings



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Expression of the Twelve-tone Row in the Works of Oedoen Partos and Josef Tal

At the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s, following a period of personal and cultural isolation, Israeli composers had the opportunity of going abroad and studying at important music centers.¹ Exposure to musical innovations in the world was to influence the work of many. A perusal of Israeli works composed at the time reveals that many of them are based on innovative techniques. Conspicuous among these are those compositions which make use of the twelve-tone serial technique.

Oedoen Partos and Josef Tal, two of Israel's most important composers, were no different in this respect from their fellows. At the end of the 'fifties and in the early 'sixties they each wrote several works based on a twelve-tone row.

From their earliest years in the country (Josef Tal immigrated in 1934 and Oedoen Partos in 1938), they found they had much in common and collaborated in performances. In 1960 Josef Tal dedicated a sonata for viola and piano to his friend Partos. That same year, the two musicians went together on a tour of Europe playing their compositions.

But each of them had a different approach to the twelve-tone row and each used it in a different way. This is borne out by an examination of the subject in two compositions by the two composers, both of them based on the twelve-tone row: Oedoen Partos's Second String Quartet, "Psalms", and Josef Tal's Concerto for Cello and String Orchestra.

The String Quartet, one of Partos's most important works, was written in 1960. The Concerto for Cello and String Orchestra, one of Tal's outstanding compositions, was completed in 1961. A comparison between the structures of the rows—that on which Partos's quartet is based and that on which Tal's concerto is based—and their expression in the compositions will illustrate the difference in the two composers' approach to the row.²

Oedoen Partos: Quartet No. 2

Oedoen Partos's Quartet No. 2 is called "Psalms" (in Hebrew *Tehilim*) because of its biblical cantillation-like motifs, especially in the second movement.³ The composer set out with the intention of building his composition on such motifs,⁴ and to do so he constructed a row which met his needs (see Example 1):

Example 1: The row in Partos's Quartet

Semitones between 1/2, 2/4, 5/6, 7/10, 9/10, 9/11

Its important characteristics are:

- 1) Absence of large intervals, the largest being a fourth.
- 2) The melody moves in small gradations in a gentle upward line.
- 3) The predominant intervals are seconds—major and minor.
- 4) Chromatic progression stands out, though it is sometimes "delayed", coming after a note or two.
- 5) Most significantly, the row is built on four motifs; that is, it has four groups, a, b, c, d, each having three notes, and each forming a short motif. The motifs are to resemble traditional oriental cantillations.
- 6) The row is built in a manner which ensures the presence of the motifs in all its forms, inversions and transpositions.

In the quartet, the row appears in all its 48 possible forms, original, derived (O, I, R, RI) and in all transpositions. That is to say, the transpositional relationship (and this is especially noteworthy) is of the minor second. The characteristics of the row are preserved throughout (See Example 2):

b. Expression of motifs c and d, and their repetition, as in the first movement.

Example 4: Repetition of motifs c and d (O)

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

c. Expression of motifs that constitute the row, as at the beginning of the Allegro in the Violin I.

Example 5: Motifs from the row (O transposed)

16 Allegro vivace vigoroso ♩ -126

1 2 3 4 5 6 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

d. Other examples of the motifs from the row:

Example 6: More motifs (O transposed)
[2nd movment, 1st violin]

7

O transposed

a: 1 2 3

Example 7: Other motifs (R transposed)
[3rd movement, 2nd violin]

368

R transposed

c: 7 8 9 7 8 9

Josef Tal: Concerto for Cello and String Orchestra

Josef Tal, as we have said, completed his Concerto for Cello and String Orchestra in 1961. Here, in his use of a twelve-tone row, Tal adopted an approach different from that of Partos. He was looking not for melodic motifs but for chords with special character and color to his taste. He therefore built the row which was to form the basis of his concerto in a way that would answer these needs.

Example 8: The row in Tal's Concerto

The component most in evidence in the structure of this row is the major third, which appears during the course of the row five times.

The row is presented in the course of the concerto in its Original form (O), in Inversion (I), in Retrograde (R) and in Retrograde Inversion (RI) and in one transposition of each of the above forms: eight derivations of the row in all. All four transpositions are at the interval of a major third:

Example 9: Transformation of Tal's row

Underpinning the concerto are also a number of rhythmic motifs, the dominant one being built on the major third (or its inversion):

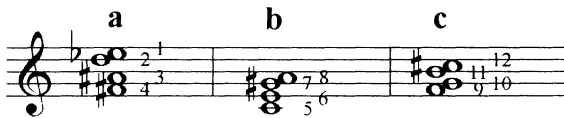
Example 10: Rhythmic motif



It may also be noted that the interval between the work's opening and closing notes is that of a major third.

Clearly Tal built his row around the major third because that interval was to be a central component of the concerto's overall structure. He also located the major thirds within the row so that he could derive from them the chords he desired. Thus his row is made up of three groups (a, b and c) of four notes each; each group is built on a major third and provides one of the chords he requires (see also Ex. 8):

Example 11: The row grouped



The row is also expressed melodically as it appears in the rhythmic motif (Ex. 10). But in constructing a row made up of three four-note chords, in classical fashion, in which the major third stands as a basic component, Tal's approach is clearly harmonic; i.e., the main expression of his row displays a primarily vertical sonority.

Following are a number of examples showing the use of chords as organized in the row (a, b, c), played simultaneously or in broken form—examples which testify to the distribution of the row as shown in Ex. 8.

Example 12

Example 12 is a musical score for five instruments: Violin I, Violin 2, Viola, Cello, and D. Bass. The score is divided into two measures. The first measure contains a triplet of notes in Violin I, marked *p*. Violin 2 and Viola play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked *mf*, *fsf*, and *ff*. The Cello and D. Bass also play this pattern, marked *mf*, *fsf*, and *ff*. The second measure features a *div.* (divisi) section. Violin I has a long note marked *p*. Violin 2 and Viola play a triplet of notes marked *sub. p* and *f*. The Cello and D. Bass play a triplet of notes marked *ff*, with a *(non gliss.)* instruction. The score includes various dynamics, articulation marks, and performance instructions.

Example 13

Example 13 is a musical score for Cello and D. Bass. It starts at measure 62, indicated by a boxed number. The score consists of two measures. Both instruments play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked *sf*. The notes are: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The score includes articulation marks and dynamic markings.

Example 14

Example 14 is a musical score for five instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and D. Bass. The score is divided into three measures labeled a, b, and c. Measure 13 is marked with a box containing the number 13. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The dynamics are *sf* (sforzando) in measure 13 and *mf* (mezzo-forte) in measures 14 and 15. The Cello part includes a *pizz.* (pizzicato) marking in measure 15. The Solo markings are numbered 1 through 12. Measure 13 contains fingerings: a: 4, 3, 2, 1 for Violin I and C: 9, 10, 11, 12 for Cello. Measure 14 contains fingerings: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 for the strings. Measure 15 contains fingerings: 9, 10, 11, 12 for the strings. The D. Bass part is marked *f* (forte) in measure 15.

Example 15

Example 15 is a musical score for five instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Cello Solo. The score is divided into three measures labeled a, b, and c. Measure 159 is marked with a box containing the number 159. The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4. The dynamics are *f* (forte) in measures 159 and 160, and *p* (piano) in measure 161. The Solo markings are numbered 1 through 12. Measure 159 contains fingerings: 1, 2, 3, 4 for the strings. Measure 160 contains fingerings: 6, 7, 8, 5 for the strings. Measure 161 contains fingerings: 9, 10, 11 for the strings. The Cello Solo part is marked *f* (forte) in measure 161. The trills in measures 160 and 161 are marked with a wavy line and the word *tr*.

Example 16

a **b** **c**

a tempo

121

\flat
1
—
—
—

\flat
6
—
—
—

\flat
9
—
—
—

Comparison

Juxtaposing examples of the two twelve-tone rows and comparing their functions in the two works demonstrates the difference of approach between Partos and Tal in these works:

1. The important interval in Partos's row is the minor second, whereas in Tal's it is the major third.
2. Partos's row is built of four three-note groups, each of which forms a melodic motif; Tal's is built of three four-note groups, each group forming a chord.
3. In Partos's Quartet, the row is primarily expressed melodically, whereas in Tal's Concerto the row yields a mainly vertical sonority.

This difference in approach springs from two different musical upbringings. Partos grew up and studied in Budapest and was influenced by Bartók and Kodály;⁶ Tal studied in Berlin and is a product of German musical culture and tradition, strongly influenced by Schoenberg and his school.⁷ Moreover, Partos was a violinist and violist, Tal a pianist.

Although each made use of the system in some works during certain periods in their compositional careers,⁸ neither Partos nor Tal considered dodecaphony as the only framework for composition. For both Using it changed neither their styles nor their musical outlooks. On the contrary: each designed and constructed his row in accord with his own particular musical qualities and inclinations.

Notes

1. This isolation was largely due to World War II (1939-1945) and Israel's War of Independence (1948). See Yohanan Ron, "The Instrumental Music of Josef Tal: Style and Artistic Concepts", Ph.D. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 1990 [in Hebrew], pp. 9-39.
2. My intention here is not to analyze all the parameters of each work but to deal with the structure and expressions of the row.
3. Avner Bahat, *The Life and Works of Oedoen Partos*. Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 1984 (in Hebrew), p. 159.
4. The work was composed also in homage to Arnold Schoenberg and his "Kol Nidrei" Quartet No. 4.
5. Bahat, Partos, pp. 206-7.
6. Ibid. The works of both Bartók and Kodály are based on popular melodic motives, as is Parto's row. Furthermore, both of these composers demonstrate a strong melodic bent in their compositions. Bartók said of his friend: "Kodály's compositions are characterized in the main by rich melodic invention" (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, v. 10, pp. 139-140).
7. Ron, "Tal", pp. 37-50. The movement of blocks of sound constitutes an important element in Schoenberg's works. In some works (e.g., the "Variations", Op. 31), he constructs a row made up of three sections of four notes each. Alban Berg also built rows with this structure, as in his "Lyric Suite".
8. See Bahat, *Partos*, and Ron, "Tal", *passim*.