

# ALON GOLDSTEIN /

---

## Josef Tal: Piano Sonata



**Josef Tal** was born in Poland in 1910. He studied composition with Paul Hindemith and Heinz Tiessen at the Akademische Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. In 1934, following the rise of Nazism, he immigrated to Israel. His early compositions were strongly influenced by choreographic ideas and the impact of rhythm is keenly felt in his instrumental music. In

the 1950's, Tal developed a special interest in problems of sound. Only a short distance separates works like his orchestral piece *Festive Vision* (1959) – where an architectural design is transformed into music by way of 'themeless sound' – from music produced by electronic devices. In 1958, Tal founded the Center for Electronic Music at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and produced his first electronic work (*Exodus II*). Among Tal's electronic compositions are a *Harp Concerto*, a *Harpichord Concerto* and three *Piano Concerti* which utilize electronically produced accompaniment.

Tal's compositional style is characterized by intense and concentrated expressive gestures. His music is clearly indebted to the a-tonal German tradition from which he emerged. On the other hand, his love and devotion to the Jewish heritage is clearly evident in the subjects he has chosen for many of his vocal and dramatic works, and in his use of old Jewish tunes in several of his instrumental works. He rejected the 'Mediterranean' style, finding its mixture of oriental and western elements artificial and contrived. Instead, he argued that his music reflects the modern, open and heterogeneous character of Israeli society.

Tal received many awards, both in Israel and abroad, among them the Israel

commissions from the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the New Israeli Opera, the Hamburg City Opera House and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. He is an ordinary member of the Berlin Academy of Arts and an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The **Piano Sonata** belongs to his earlier compositional period. It is a concentrated and highly expressive work. The first movement has two opposing thematic materials, which represent contrasting states of mind. The first emerges out of silence and is heard from a distance while the second is dramatic and energetic. When playing this movement for the composer, he said that these materials are *like two different worlds; the first has an inner calmness while the second is its opposite. When the piece starts it is as if a world, a baby is born.* Concerned with the limitation of the instrument, he continued: *don't play the piano, play the music.* In the development section, the thematic ideas that were introduced earlier are now put together: *the 'melodic cell' [the opening thematic material] is trying to sing.*

The second movement is a *passacaglia* (variations on a ground bass) based on a popular Hebrew melody composed by Yehuda Sharett to a song by Rachel. This twelve-bar *basso ostinato* is repeated six times throughout the movement, albeit with subtle changes: it becomes an eight bar theme as well as a seven bar theme. Over this repeated melodic line an elaborate counterpoint emerges. The movement starts very peacefully, but the tension and intensity increase gradually as the ostinato's note values become shorter and appear increasingly on the off-beats. Eventually, the tension subsides, and the movement ends, as it began, in calm and serenity.

The third movement, the shortest, is a virtuosic *Perpetuum mobile*. There is a beautiful moment in the middle section when a memory of the opening theme of the piece is heard. Thereafter, the music breaks loose and ends triumphantly.

My interpretation was inspired by my work with the composer. I recall especially his frustration with the limitations of notation. *The content of the music is what we should hear in our inner ear before we press the key down,* he said. *Merely playing the notes as they are written is obviously not sufficient; the tension that arises between the notes is what's important.*