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Music Review/BENJAMIN BAR-AM

Fine concert ignored

THE ISRAEL FESTIVAL, Josef Tal: "The Death of Moses" — Requiem for Soloists, Choir and Orchestra; Beethoven: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 4; "Eln Gedi" or "David in the Wilderness" Oratorio for Soloists, Choir and Orchestra (Tel-Aviv, Mann Auditorium, August 1). The Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Uri Segal; The National Choir "Rinat" (director Stanley Sperber); Mira Zakal, alto; Alexander Oliver, tenor; Stephan Roberts, baritone; Sally Le Sage, soprano; Rudolf Buchbinder, piano.

OUR concert-goers are a conservative lot. They flocked to the mediocre I.P.O. concerts to listen to the nth performance of Beethoven's symphonies but completely ignored this interesting concert, which posed an intriguing intellectual challenge and introduced a completely unknown Beethoven work.

Tal's Requiem, "The Death of Moses," is one of his most mature and stylistically crystallized works. Using a few verses from the Psalms and quotations from the *Agada* (commentary), Tal concerns himself with three decisive moments in the life of Moses: his call, his argument with God to avert his destiny and his death. This is immensely difficult material to put to music and must be treated with the greatest care, taste and respect, lest the result be artistically unworthy of the subject. Tal seems to have solved his problem brilliantly. He never becomes directly involved and avoids anything programmatic or descriptive. He creates an aesthetic distance which puts the subject, so to speak, on a pedestal. If vocal music can at all be called abstract, I would define Tal's Requiem as abstract music.

Yet, on the other hand, it has an unmistakable Jewish flavour. Indeed, most of the music sounds almost liturgical, even cantoral. But again, Tal achieves this without using actual ethnic or liturgical quotations. By employing recitative lines with inserted, broad melismatic figures, Tal's relationship to the liturgical idiom is solely one of association.

The performance, it seemed to me, could have been slightly more deter-

mined, especially in the orchestral and choral parts, but Uri Segal acquitted himself fairly well of this very demanding work. Singers and choir were both impressive and the tenor, Alexander Oliver, did great things. He impressed not only with his strong and beautiful voice and musical understanding, but also with his Hebrew diction. Few Israeli singers ever reach such a clarity of pronunciation. And there was not even the slightest foreign accent. An admirable effort.

Sandwiched between the two great works, Tal's Requiem and the Oratorio, was Beethoven's piano concerto No. 4, a completely unnecessary addition to the programme, which upset its balance and prolonged it till 11.40 p.m. Rudolf Buchbinder revealed a refined and sensitive nature and produced many truly absorbing passages but as a whole the performance lacked convincing character and did not fathom the content of the concerto. The first movement was underplayed, the second seemed so detached that there was no clear message and the third brought no real contrast.

The Oratorio was a most welcome "novelty" and the Festival management is to be congratulated for including it in the programme and especially for introducing us to the English text, written in 1842 and rediscovered by Israeli musicologist Prof. Edith Gerson-Kiwi. The oratorio is a beautiful piece of music and stylistically an interesting combination of Handelian tradition and Beethoven's own distinctiveness. Mr. Segal could have slightly hastened some of the tempi and added a few other points of interpretational interest, but in general it was a fine performance in which the orchestra, the "Rinat" choir and the soloists (soprano Sally Le Sage; baritone Stephan Roberts and tenor Alexander Oliver) all had their share. But again, it was Oliver who impressed particularly. His David was in the best English oratorial tradition and pleased immensely from beginning to end.