Radio Review

Electronic Music for Israel

The premiere of Yoseph Tal's electronic choreographic ballet was an important radio occasion representing a daring venture. The composer himself added a lucid and succinct preface on the subject of electronic music.

Borsoni once pointed out that the symphony orchestra could never provide more than a tiny fraction of the great range of sound in the universe, and this is the basis of the creed of electronic music. Two main schools have already grown up. The French school of musique concrète starts with an existing sound — the whistle of a locomotive, the slam of a door, the dropping of a tiny tray as well as a human voice — and the piece of tape on which this is recorded is the concrete start point. The other is the composition, It is then up to the composer, assisted by the technicians, to adapt this basic sound into any pattern he wishes, with the aid of the tape recorder. He can play it back, forward, slow or fast, drop it up and through filters, and out of all this come his patterns of tone and rhythm. The result is the discovery of a new world of colours, for the first time at the composer's disposal.

The German and Italian schools are abstract and philosophical. It refuses to admit the introduction of any recording of existing sounds. The composer, synchronously analyse the sounds they wish to recreate in terms of frequencies and then recreate these vibrations on electronic machines. Composition becomes a mathematical equation, and even if they wanted the effect of blowing a whistle, they would never think of anything so simple as blowing a whistle — the whole sound has to be created synthetically.

Fortunately, Mr. Tal has adopted the common-sense attitude of taking the best of both possible worlds. As La Fontaine (I believe it was) commented on exchanging mistresses: "Je préfère mon bien où je le trouve," so Mr. Tal has endeavoured to combine the more acceptable characteristics of both worlds. However, he would be the first to admit that he is only at the beginning of the way and that his work, "The Exodus from Egypt," is a first empirical effort, a long way behind the achievements of other countries which have been working on electronic music for years.

What is the future of electronic music? This medium imparts music in the same fascinating stage of experimentation in which other arts were forced to find earlier in the century. The work of Joyce and Picasso could offer instructive parallels. Joyce too broke down his sound and pursued his analysis to a logical conclusion, but it turned out to be a dead end. After "Finnegan's Wake," there was nothing to say. Indeed in literature, Joyce's experiments have been far less influential than the more modest innovations of Hemingway. The 20th century art revolution, on the other hand, escaped from the potential blind alleys into which certain schools nearly led it and found its way back to the mainstream and leave a permanent impression. The break-down of light by the Impressionists and of form by the Cubists have been major revolutions. It is too early to predict whether synthetic music will be similar to the parallel they may be more with the new concepts of art (which like music speaks in abstracts) than with literature (which is an in- evitable distraction of meaning, and cannot abandon itself solely to form). Perhaps, as in art, we will eventually see a rapprochement between electronic and traditional concepts (think what Stravinsky did introducing electronic effect into his "Rites of Spring") In any event, it is an exciting experiment which we in Israel are privileged to be witnessing.

MUSICAL DIARY

"The Exodus from Egypt, the electronic ballet by Yosef Tal, presented at Kol Israel (at the U.A. J. musical laboratory on March 19) and executed by Avraham Gat and Avner Levy.

The world premiere of Yosef Tal's first electronic work was introduced by the composer's short but illuminating explanations of this new branch of music or possibly" if you like the characteristics of musique concrète and the hitherto widely unexplored possibilities of sound produced by oscillators and other devices which remain to be invented. There was a conspicuous absence of photographers, who usually pester an innocent public as during the performances of Shanta Rao, the University Orchestra and similar occasions. The "stage" presented the "New Look" of the Future: instead of an orchestra or instruments, human beings and other accessories, only an austere loudspeaker occupied the centre. It also served as pulpit for the composer who looked like a preacher delivering a sermon on a new creed.

The composition itself employs a male voice (Yehoshua Zohar) and a soprano (Antonia Lavanne) almost always in their normal quality. Most effective use of a second loudspeaker across the Auditorium is occasionally made. The structure of the work is clear, quite conservative and the "score" transparent, as Tal and his technicians tread cautiously on new ground. The subtle tones (tones without their natural overtones), enriched by passing them through resonators, which add colour and individuality, are of a similar quality as the tones produced by electric organs (without the Hollywood vibrato), and very often one was reminded of the musical noises a busy harbour emits in a deep fog. Although Yosef Tal begged the audience not to be influenced by similarities with the noises of our everyday world, one cannot help regarding the question of their use in musical composition.

The composition contains many highly dramatic moments; the four-part fugue, with its rhythmical pattern, is most interesting. After the composer's analysis and a repeat performance, the work presented no difficulty to understanding.

There remains the question of its aesthetic value as music of the future. It may well remain only an experiment in technical ingenuity which will run its course until its synthesis with the traditional or its rejection by audiences. Meanwhile Yosef Tal has promised more elaborate electronic works, to which one looks forward with the great interest of a patient and efficient collaborators, Avraham Gat and Avner Levy, who will deserve special praise for their laboratory work of a high order.