

BERLIN'S 750TH BIRTHDAY

"Musik aus dem Exil"
is the theme of a
mammoth celebration

James Helme Sutcliffe

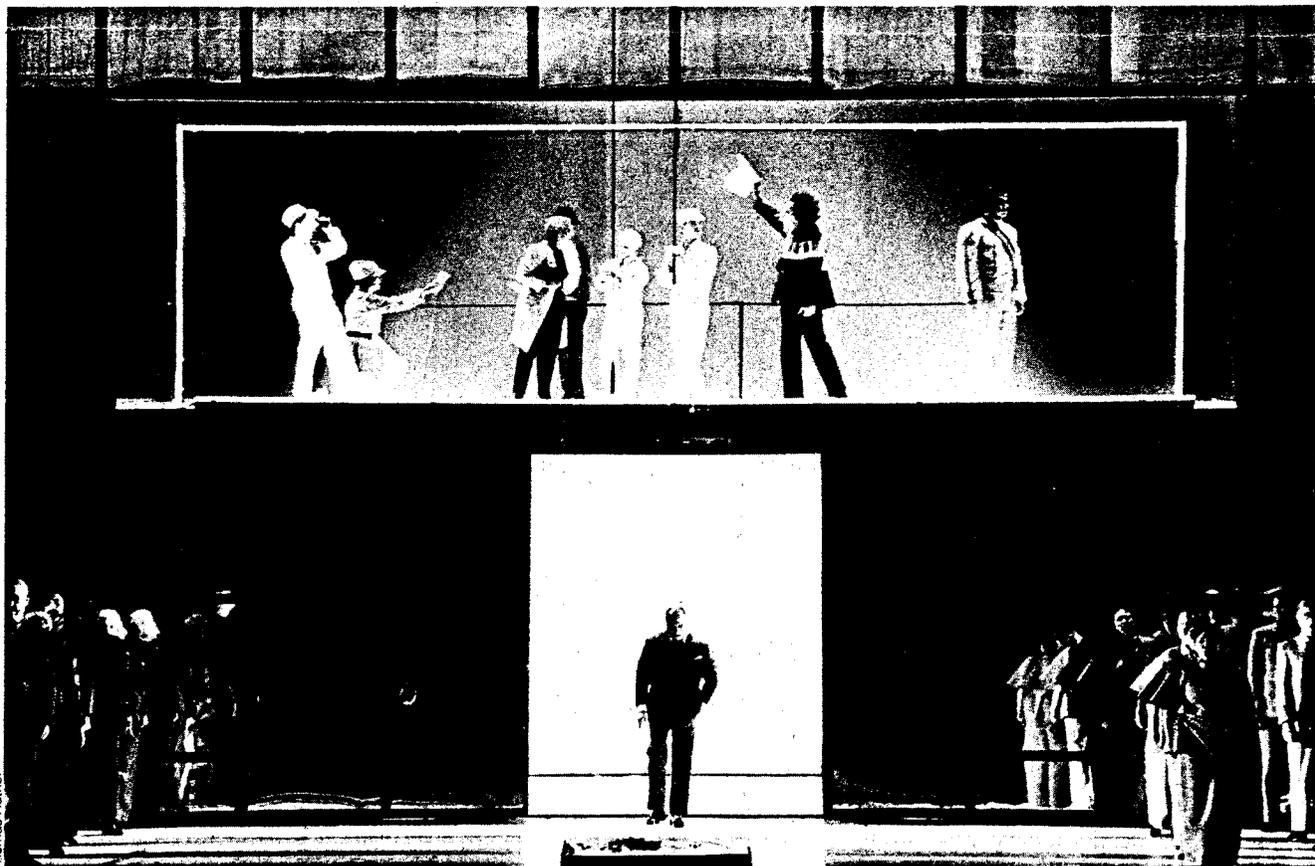
The twin villages of Berlin and Kölln had long flourished on adjacent islands in the Spree River when their existence was first fixed in a Brandenburg document dating from 1237. Seven hundred and fifty years is worth celebrating, and so—starting over a year ago with the world premiere of a musical derived from E.T.A. Hoffmann's Schlemihl figure—no fewer than 18 world premieres were commissioned for the occasion. They were supplemented by the visits of an international array of dance and drama companies, as well as opera companies from Kiev, Milan, Vienna (two), Munich, Hanover, and Kassel. Although the celebrations officially ended with the opening of the spanking new Chamber Music Concert Hall last October, the last of the commissions was not heard until mid-November—Erhard Grosskopf's ballet *Lichtkanall* (Light Bang), an apocalyptic vision choreographed by Lucinda Childs.

Situated immediately behind the world-famous Philharmonie (long dubbed, maliciously, "Circus Karajani"), the Kammermusiksaal is a smaller carbon copy of its big sister, connect-

ed by an umbilical second-floor walkway; it seats 1,136. Projected at a cost of \$50 million, it reached almost twice that amount.

The anniversary celebration's Leitmotiv was "*Musik aus dem Exil*"—works by German and Austrian composers driven out by the Nazis, from Adorno through Foss, Goldschmidt, Hindemith, Schoenberg, Tal, Toch, Weill, Wolpe, and Zemlinsky. Among the significant premieres was that of the Fifth Symphony (in five movements) for baritone soloist and large orchestra by the Berlin-based South Korean Isang Yun. (It was performed on September 17, his 70th birthday.) Yun had settled in this city in 1964 and was abducted by Korean secret police three years later. A worldwide protest secured his release in 1969, and he became a German citizen. He studied with Boris Blacher and Joseph Reger.

Yun's series of five symphonies was begun in 1982, and each deals with a different problematical aspect of contemporary existence. The Fifth Symphony, dedicated to the memory of the German-Jewish poetess Nelly Sachs,



Josef Tal's "The Tower": the subject was fruitful, but the composer's efforts, with a poor libretto, fell short

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uses material from 11 of her poems to create movements entitled "Memory," "We Saved Ones," "Call," "You On-lookers," and "Peace." Yun's dense textures, constantly undulating though apparently motionless clusters of sound, are illuminated by exotic instrumental effects. Trills and glissandi in strings, winds, and trombones, for example, form the substance rather than decorative elements in his incandescent music. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau intoned the syllabic settings with his usual command. The 55-minute work, played by the Berlin Philharmonic, was sensitively conducted by Hans Zender.

Also focusing on peace in our time was *The Tower*, the fifth full-length opera by the German/Israeli Josef Tal. It was premiered on September 19, the day after the composer's 77th birthday. *The Tower* was composed in 1982-83, when Tal and his librettist, Hans Keller, were guests of Berlin's Academy of Sciences. Staged by Kassel's opera company and presented by the Arts Council of the State of Hessen as an anniversary present to Berlin, 17 superb singing actors encompassed the 31 roles. The

Kassel orchestra under its new chief conductor, Adam Fischer, gave its dedicated all. Sadly, this dedication was wasted on a useless object—try as he might, Tal was unable to transform the often embarrassingly bad libretto into a true opera; he contented himself with composing texturally beautiful dodecaphonic accompaniments to the texts. Written in both English and German, a

curious concept to begin with, the basic Tower of Babel idea had been turned into a plot that—told straight—did seem like fruitful material. The attempts of the world's peoples to create a common society (the tower) must fail because they speak different languages. Only the universal language, music, can achieve unity. The tower is sabotaged. In the concert hall built on its ruins, a string quartet (after the rejection of jazz and electronics), performing a work in dodecaphonic style, finally achieves universality.

The premise is full of obvious holes, for Western music is by no means a universal language. Add to this a 1950s setting and direction that seized on clichés like "good protesters" being beaten up by "police-state guards," and the 90-minute work seemed very long indeed.