

THE  TIMES  
**ARTS**

## Snake charmer

WE HAVE heard far too little of Joseph Tal's music in this country, but a start was made with the first performance of his 80-minute chamber opera **The Garden** at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on Sunday, part of the month-long International Jewish Music Festival. Tal was born near Poznan in 1910 and emigrated to what was then Palestine in 1934. He has since been central to the musical life of Israel. His two full-scale operas, *Ashmedai* (1971) and *Massada 967* (1973), have been widely performed, and *The Garden* (1988) certainly deserves wider circulation.

The setting of Israel Eliraz's libretto, given here in a free, very singable translation by Gila Abrahamson, is the Garden of Eden. A middle-aged Adam (Darren Fox, tenor) and Eve (Diane Atherton, soprano) return and ponder what has been achieved with the Knowledge that occasioned their expulsion, achievements as varied as Stalin and Marilyn Monroe, the Bomb and the Internet. Eve attempts to re-seduce the elderly Serpent (actor Timothy Davies), unsuccessfully. Adam, exhausted, wants

to stay, the discontented Eve to move on. Eventually both leave, Eve newly pregnant. Better luck this time?

Tal's score is for six wind players, cello and two percussion. He writes gracefully for the voice, often accompanied by a single instrument and with the constant contrapuntal interest that that would imply, but the lyricism, wit and paciness of his music easily conquer any whiff of the academic. There is life in atonality yet. The only possible problems with the piece are the characterisation of Eve as an air-headed flibbertigibbet, and a false ending, a legitimate dramatic device but a perilous one. The ten minutes that follow seem a little detached.

Both problems may have had something to do with John Abulafia's production for Thameside Opera, which made free with the stage directions. For the performers, though, nothing but praise. The instrumental ensemble from Trinity College played brightly for the conductor George Badacsonyi.

RODNEY MILNES

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*Tal's 'The Garden'*

The octogenarian Israeli composer Joseph Tal and librettist Israel Eliraz joined the Thameside Opera cast and their conductor George Badacsonyi to receive warm applause for the stirring UK première of the chamber opera *The Garden* at the QEH on 29 November. The production, directed by John Abulafia, formed the climax of the 9th London International Jewish Music Festival, and was the world première of the English version by Gila Abramson, as well as only the second performance of the work, composed originally for the Hamburg State Opera in 1988.

*The Garden* is a contemporary reinterpretation of the Biblical story in which Adam and Eve attempt to reclaim their 'paradise lost' and emerge wiser after a process of self-discovery at the urging of the Serpent. In its emphasis of optimism over resignation Eliraz recasts the old story in a new stimulating light, a provocative dramatic and symbolic allegory about the conflict of intellect and desire, in which the Serpent emerges as a hero in the scheme of life. The musical style is equally adventurous, suitably atmospheric yet always tautly structured. Tal, Israel's senior composer, born in Poland in 1910 and a student in Berlin with Hindemith before emigrating in 1934, is a progressive spirit, whose neo-modernist atonal style is suffused with a strong melodic element that seems inspired by the more Eastern influences emergent within Israeli music. The brilliant dramatic evocation of the music in *The Garden* attests to a profound affinity for music theatre characteristic of Tal's extensive operatic output. This includes the earlier Biblical operas *Saul and Endor*, *Amnon and Tamar* and previous collaborations with Eliraz, *Ashmedai* (for Hamburg, 1971), *Die Versuchung* (for Munich, 1976) and the recent *Josef* (1995).

In general Tal's vocal writing has a lyrical melismatic richness that allows the text to emerge with clarity and conviction, its sinewy atonality lightened by a zestful rhythmic vitality that blossoms into powerful climaxes and outbursts. The highly contoured melodic lines were projected with impressive richness and colour by the young soprano Diane Atherton as Eve and the tenor Darren Fox as Adam, the text always clearly audible over the orchestra. Eliraz's libretto is full of layers of meaning and perspicaciously

witty from the very start, as when Adam recognizes something familiar about the odour of the Garden: '...Coriander? ...Apples...yes those apples...!' There is also wry humour in the portrayal of the suave non-singing Serpent as retired playboy, here played by actor Timothy Davies, clad in debonair white suit and boater. The underlying Angst of the couple as they return to the Garden is conveyed with mainly high registers in the first scenes. Eve's ploys to reawaken Adam's desires are rebuffed with Adam's worldly weariness, yet Adam's moving soliloquy about civilization's woes is shown by the Serpent, much later, to be mere 'words', masking Adam's suppressed erotic desires. By contrast Eve's attempts to seduce the Serpent, accompanied by a brilliant parody of Salome's dance of the veils, is greeted with indifference, coolness. To mask her disillusionment Eve tries to regain 'innocence', cleverly underlined by the quotation from Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. The couple's marital problem, the hollowness of their relationship, looms into sharper focus in the central scene, set to mainly slow and low music. After an exciting climax in Adam's dream, which echoes the story of Jonah, the Serpent finally succeeds in fanning the flames of the couple's romance. The Serpent's reflective (acted) epilogue, 'Nothing is as it used to be' is followed by a poignant vignette, in which the couple await the train to take them back down 'below', Eve heavily pregnant and Adam given a work permit.

The Trinity College Ensemble, mainly woodwind with cello and percussion, performed the prominent and demanding instrumental part with energy and precision. George Badacsonyi's focussed and precise conducting ensured maximum expressive effect from the deliberately sparse textures, for instance frequent soloistic lines dovetailed with the soprano and tenor soloists, single instruments, saxophone or flute perhaps, enriched with pointillist patterns or sustain pedal points to support spoken dialogue. I was most reminded of the operatic styles of Maxwell Davies and Henze, especially in the wonderfully ironic pastiche *Dichterliebe* for Eve's lost 'innocence', witty waltz for Eve's 'seduction', *à la 'Marilyn'*, of the serpent (an intriguing reversal), and spiky tango for Adam and Eve. The production gained tension and eloquence in Abulafia's keenly, sparingly choreographed stage action with only a suitcase – presumably the 'psychological' baggage – few props and a suspended 'Tree'. The performance as a whole highlighted the qualities of a provocative and entertaining contribution to the music theatre repertoire. Earlier on 25 November at the Purcell

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Room the Festival featured a fascinating concert of contemporary Israeli music by younger composers including UK premières of Gil Shohat's *Sparks from the Beyond* (1997) for piano, Yehezkel Braun's Sonata for Piano Trio (1987) and Kyla Greenbaum's *Bells* (1998). Both events underscored the timely need for greater appreciation of Israeli music and in particular Josef Tal's impressive musical oeuvre.

*Malcolm Miller*

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## FIRST NIGHT



## The Garden, Queen Elizabeth Hall

It's always good to hear a UK opera première, especially when the opera is of the quality of senior Israeli composer Joseph Tal's *The Garden*, staged in the Queen Elizabeth Hall tomorrow, from Thameside Opera, as part of the 9th London International Jewish Music Festival.

A distinguished Modernist, Tal was born in Poland in 1910. He spent his early years studying in Berlin but was forced to flee to Palestine in 1934. What ensued was an eclectic style built on a mix of Germanic tradition and exile at the same time. In recent decades Tal's reputation has soared again in Germany, though British performances of his music have been thin on the ground.

As a result, this is eagerly anticipated – and by the still energetic-sounding Tal himself, too.

"*The Garden* worked well at its première," the 88-year-old composer reflects from his home in Jerusalem. "It was commissioned for the Berlin Opera, which has two auditoria: a large one and a studio theatre. I have composed operas for full forces before, so here I decided to try a chamber opera. With my librettist, Israel Eliraz, we decided to take a wry look at the most archetypal story of all – the Biblical myth of Eden to give it a contemporary slant."

*The Garden*, which has just two singers, concerns a young couple in crisis. They return to Eden for a

solution, but what they thought might be paradise isn't, for along comes the serpent (played by an actor) to rear his ugly head.

"There are no easy answers is the message," says Tal, "as the Edenic myth shows us. We must live and learn from our mistakes, make the most of what we have, move forwards and not back."

As to another potential allegorical element, Tal muses: "It was poignant for me that *The Garden* was premièred in Berlin. In the 1930s this was the capital of the world: forward-thinking and exciting. At the same time, there was this immense menace in the air. You could say that, as a Jew, paradise was very soon not paradise after all... Yet my opera is deliberately open-ended – that's the joy of working with myth."

Though *The Garden's* plot might be populist, it's musical idiom isn't. "I'm still an *enfant terrible*," says Tal, "And *The Garden* is one of my quirkiest works. I employ a wind-based pit band, and they throw up some abrasive textures. Still, there's a sort of lyricism, too. I very much look forward to coming to London to hear it."

And so should anyone interested in intriguing contemporary opera at its best.

Queen Elizabeth Hall,  
London SE1 (0171-960 4242)  
tomorrow, 5pm

Duncan Hadfield

first impressions

# Up The Garden path

*Josef Tal is one of Israel's most respected composers.*

*On Sunday, British music-lovers will find out why.*

*David Sonin reports*

**F**ew British concertgoers would recognise the name Josef Tal. Fewer still would have heard any of his compositions.

Yet his reputation as the doyen of Israeli composers has brought him international recognition and a host of honours, most especially from Germany, where he studied and worked before emigrating to Palestine in 1934.

Despite the 60-plus years that he has lived outside Europe, Tal's musical inspiration and drive are firmly rooted in the 20th-century European tradition and reflect the influences of Arnold Schoenberg and, particularly, Paul Hindemith, with whom he studied at Berlin's Hochschule für Musik, and under whose influence he developed his abiding interest in opera, music theatre and electronic music.

At 88, Tal remains as inventive and ever-willing as ever to push the musical frontiers outward. Just how challenging his music is may be judged when his opera, "The



*Josef Tal: "We have yet to develop an Israeli musical language"*

Garden," is given its world première performance in English on Sunday, at the climax of the "World of Jewish Music" festival.

His fellow musicians, students and critics have long considered him the most intellectual of Israeli composers and teachers, but he is far from remote and his music has a power and vitality to challenge the listener.

Tal's musical language is very precise and it can be very dramatic, as he demonstrated in his Second String Quartet, and in the Second Symphony, which was performed here at a Promenade concert.

There is no discernible "nationalist" idiom in his work, but, as he says: "We have yet to develop a distinctive Israeli musical language; that could take another 30 years or so."

His loyalty to the European tradition may not have won him the plaudits of the Israeli musical public, but it has earned him their deepest respect.

"The problem for Israeli composers was the public's desire for something definitive within 10 years of independence. They had brought their traditions with them, and they wanted something familiar in their new setting.

"I am confident that we will arrive, but it will take time."

His optimism reflects the considerable changes in music throughout the century.

"Music is the result of evolution, not revolution and, from a Western perspective, it remains in flux. Developments have come, and they have faded; composers have wandered up blind alleys, but even those adventures have helped music to move forward."

His contribution to the development of Israeli music has not been at the expense of his musical convictions. His fellow pioneers, Paul Ben-Haim and Oedoen Partos, attempted to create a distinctive Israeli idiom through a fusion of Western and Oriental music through an exploration of Near Eastern chants.

He avoids discussion on "Jewish music," a subject that draws a wry chuckle and a jocular admission that he is not entirely sure how to define the genre.

Perhaps his most important contribution to Israeli musical life is in the field of opera and music theatre. His catalogue of works in both forms is very impressive.

Apart from "The Garden," his large-scale works include "Ashmeda'i," written in 1971, which is based on the talmudic legend of a demon who takes over a kingdom and becomes the personification of evil.

Another is "Massada 967," a depiction of the events in the last Jewish stronghold during the war against the Romans in 73 CE, while "The Experiment," written

for the Bavarian State Opera, is an allegorical tale that pits humanity and morality against the misuse of power and corruption.

In these works music has a less

dominant role than the dramatic content, a balance reversed in his 1995 opera, "Joseph," based on a Kafkaesque libretto by his long-standing collaborator, Israel Eliraz.

"The Garden" is a chamber opera in seven scenes and, as with his earliest operas, "Saul and EnDor" and "Amnon and Tamar," draws on biblical narrative for its inspiration.

With a libretto by Eliraz, translated by Gila Abrahamson, it observes contemporary society from the basis of biblical values by returning Adam, Eve and the Serpent to the Garden of Eden, so that they can reflect, in a wry and mildly humorous way, on their choices and the resultant aftermath.

Tal has also drawn inspiration from German literature and culture. For a Jew from Posen, they serve as a tap root for his creativity.

In tribute to that and his tireless work for Jewish-German reconciliation, he has been made a member of the German Academy of Arts, and has received numerous awards and prizes.

"The Garden" will open a vista on the music of a major figure in Israel's cultural life, and a lifetime of work that deserves to be more widely heard.

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*"The Garden" will be performed on Sunday at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the South Bank, at 5pm. For tickets, contact the box office on 0171-960 4242. See page 51 for full details of events at the "World of Jewish Music" festival's "Day of Jewish Music."*

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# review Cores and effect

**MUSIC:** *David Sonin spends an afternoon in paradise, otherwise known as the South Bank*



When the final scene of Joseph Tal's opera, "The Garden," faded to black in the Queen Elizabeth Hall on Sunday, it also brought down the curtain on the ninth — and the biggest and best — London International Jewish Music Festival.

It is difficult after a month of music-making, lectures, films and dance to remember every note, step or word, but much remains as an indelible impression of how the JC-sponsored festival has become an essential ingredient of Anglo-Jewish cultural life.

It was fitting that the final performances should be at the very crossroads of music in the metropolis. A nearly full Royal Festival Hall heard the Vienna Boys Choir, in its 500th anniversary year, sing one of the most poignant operas in the repertoire — Hans Krasa's "Brundibar," a children's fairy tale about the triumph of good over evil.

Divested of their sailor suits, patent shoes and angelic expression, the choristers, in jeans, T-shirts and trainers, were the antithesis of the children who gave it its première in 1938 in Prague's Jewish orphanage and who, in many cases, later "transferred" with it to Terezin.

Without detracting from the

performance one jot, or forgetting that the concert's proceeds were donated by the choir to the peace process in Northern Ireland, it seemed remiss that the words of the Austrian Ambassador, Eva Nowotny, which embraced all the hopes for a successful outcome to the peace process, should have overlooked the historical and moral context of "Brundibar," which points to the evil that men do.

No less close to the realities of the world was Tal's vision, in "The Garden," of a return to Eden by Adam and Eve, to ponder whether life would have been different if...?

The libretto by Israel Eliraz, Tal's long-term collaborator, which received its world première in English, cuts right to the quick of human relationships in the contemporary world, with all the permutations of the modern *ménage* — à une, deux or trois.

Soprano Diane Atherton, who has an exceptionally fine voice, proved a sensuous and susceptible Eve, but quite capable of playing, with every wile, the dominatrix to a pliant but dependable Adam, sung by tenor Darren Fox.

The white-suited and bow-tied serpent, played by Timothy Davies, moved lounge-lizard-like back and forth across the stage, still able to seduce Eve, while exposing every raw nerve of personal failure.

John Abulafia's direction gave a spaciousness to the staging in which the music, composed using Tal's favoured 12-tone technique, flows alongside the action, dramatising every nuance of what is, at times, a very funny account of human nature.

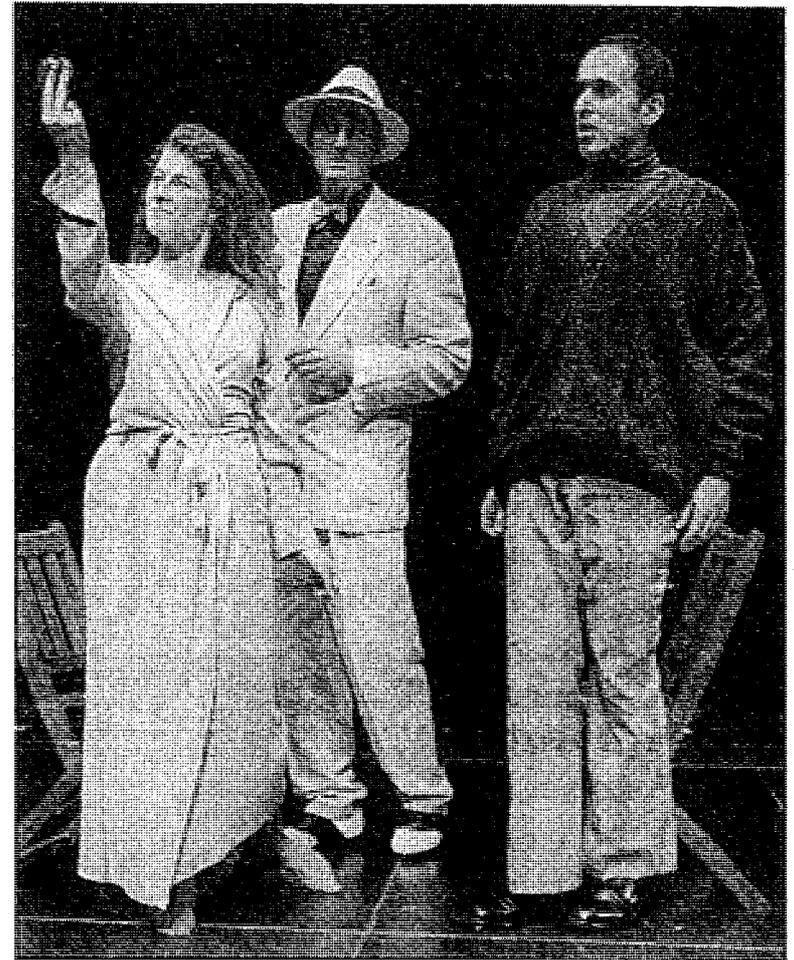
The playing by the Trinity College London instrumental ensemble, under the direction of George Badacsonyi, was impeccable. Certainly, a musically interesting high note to bring the month's proceedings to an end.

If the criterion of success is the number of occupied seats at any performance, then this has been the most successful festival in terms of public support. For festival director Geraldine Auerbach, it was a vindication of her belief that interest in Jewish culture is thriving, and will increase.

"I hope we can maintain, if not surpass, the standards that our performers have set during past month," she said.

Sylvia Lewin, the chairman of trustees of the Jewish Music Heritage Trust, under whose banner the festival is run, had one word: "Elated." But whether it was a seasoned concert-goer or an occasional listener, the post-performance observations included "wonderful," "marvellous," "fantastic" and "amazing."

Having seen most of what the



*The big apple: Eve (Diane Atherton) gets a tempting offer from the Serpent (Timothy Davies) as Adam (Darren Fox) looks on in Tal's opera, "The Garden"*

festival had to offer over the past four weeks, I can now reflect on what was my choice moment. Without a doubt, it was the European première of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's "Sacred Service," performed at St John's, Smith Square.

It could lay no claim to having reflected the ethos of the festival more than any other programme, but I suppose I perceive it that way. I hope the whispers that it may soon be recorded are not unfounded.

Other worthy performances

included those given by Henry Roche and friends of the music of his great-grandfather, Ignace Moscheles; Lucie Skeaping and the Burning Bush; the Maxwell Street Klezmer Band; and the performance of Russian and Polish romantic music by the Russian pianist Evgeny Soiferti and the Leo Smit Ensemble from Holland, which introduced outstanding music by Dutch-Jewish composers banned by the Nazis.

If it were possible, I wish they could play it again.

# EAST OF EDEN

*Duncan Hadfield  
talks to Josef Tal*

**T**he large and ambitious International Festival of Jewish Music, which has already been in progress for the whole of November, is now drawing to a close. Yet, before it does so, there are still several handsome treats in store, one immediately being this Sunday's UK première for senior Israeli composer Josef Tal's chamber opera, *The Garden*. A distinguished and revered Modernist figure, Tal was born in Poland in 1910. He spent his early years studying in Berlin, but was forced to flee to Palestine in 1934. What ensued was a very individual voice, built on a mixture of Germanic tradition and exile from it at the same time. Perhaps that eclecticism has prevented Tal's works from being extensively disseminated elsewhere - although many music devotees may well know his name, it might be difficult for them to recall when they last heard any of his pieces. Recent British performances have been thin on the ground, so this UK première for *The Garden*, which scored a considerable success in Berlin at its première in 1987, is eagerly anticipated.

And so it is by the still highly energetic-sounding composer himself, as I recently discovered when I had the privilege of speaking to the 88-year-old by telephone to his home in Jerusalem. "*The Garden* worked well at its première," he reflects. "It was commissioned by Rolf Liebermann of the Berlin Opera. The Berlin Opera House has two auditoria: a large one and a more intimate studio theatre. I have composed operas for full forces before, so I decided to try a chamber opera. Many of my collaborations have been with the librettist Israel Eliraz. Here, we came up with this idea of taking a new look at the most archetypal story of them all - the Biblical myth of Eden, but to give it a contemporary slant.

"The opera concerns a modern young couple who can't manage. They are having what might be called relationship difficulties and so they return to Eden for an answer, but what they thought might be Paradise isn't either, for along comes the Serpent to rear his ugly head. In a sense, the ultimate message might be called wry: there are no simple solutions, as the Eden story shows us from the very beginning. We must all live and learn from our mistakes, make the most of what we have, move forwards and not back."

And is there even a larger allegory than that occurring in *The Garden*? "I don't think so," reflects its composer, "though there might be a comment about the best of



Josef Tal: a UK première

times being the worst of times, and vice versa. I thought it was poignant for me that it was premiered in Berlin. By the mid-1930s, when I was a young musician trying to make my way in the world, this was the musical capital of the world, with a unique atmosphere - invigorating, forward-thinking and exciting. At the same time, of course, there was this immense menace in the air. You could say that for me, as a Jew, paradise was very soon not paradise after all. But I wouldn't read too much specifically into the opera. It's deliberately open-ended, almost inviting the audience to make of it what they will... but that's the joy of working with myth and archetypes."

**Y**et whilst *The Garden's* story might be deliberately populist, its precise musical idiom is perhaps deliberately the opposite. "I suppose I've always prided myself on being something of an *enfant terrible*," chortles Josef Tal. "Again, it may have a great deal to do with my background and the time at which I started thinking about music and composing. Again, when I came to Palestine, as it then was, in the 1930s there was very little musical tradition here. I made my own way - pondering, contemplating, doing what I wanted to do. Luckily, I've had a long and fulfilling life; and have eventually enjoyed the privilege of having my voice from the wilderness heard. Actually, I pride myself on *The Garden* being one of my quirkier works. The orchestration is spiky, angular, largely wind-dominated. But there is also lyricism there. From conversations I've had with the conductor of this forthcoming London performance, George Badacsonyi, he seems to be doing a fine job and has an intuitive understanding of what's required. So, I very much look forward to coming to London and hearing it." And so should anyone interested in contemporary opera at its very best.

*THE GARDEN* is at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on Nov 29. See South Bank and World of Jewish Music Classical listings