

Josef Tal

The first time I met Wolpe was here in Jerusalem. That must have been the year '36. I was asked to teach at the Academy, and I met Wolpe, because Wolpe was then head of the composition department, and Irma Schoenberg, the head of the piano department. Wolpe already had a background as a known composer. His music, of course, at this time was eccentric, most problematic, and nobody could eat that. And as a person he was very demanding, not easy-going, very, very outspoken with everything. So he and Hauser together make a big fire. Two different minds, and they didn't speak any common language. So Stefan was not at all easy. To have furious arguments with Stefan was not a difficult thing, because to be furious was part of the whole behavior. You had to be furious. That was his way. He left the Academy, he left everything because he was furious. But he could be also a great charmer. [ . . . ]

I showed Stefan my compositions. He looked at it and then came a funny thing. He said, "Well, if you want, I will take you as my pupil." He knew that I had studied with Heinz Tiessen. I have nothing against being his pupil, but he had a demand, I had to go to psychoanalytic therapy. You can't study music, become a composer if you don't go to such a psychoanalysis. Well, I knew about that, because I had had some experience with it in Berlin with friends of mine, even with my own father in a very naive way. I knew what it was, and for me it was absolutely a clear antagonism. "No, Stefan, that's not for me. Sorry. It has nothing to do with my music." And he didn't accept me. The story had a sad ending. When he came [to Israel] in '63, he already was quite ill, and he trembled very strongly. We were sitting together remembering things from the old days. I said to him, "Well, Stefan, do you remember your psychoanalytical demand on me? Do you remember that?" And he said to me with a very sad expression, "Well, I wish I were as healthy as you, without the psychoanalysis."

I met Irma Schoenberg, and then came soon after this the request to play the March and Variations for Two Pianos. They couldn't find any other pianist but me. Nobody could play that at this time and understand this music. I jumped on it with great pleasure, of course, and we had endless rehearsals with Stefan and without Stefan. So we really worked on that and finally gave a recital in the YMCA, because it was the only concert hall at this time. And we played also classical things--Haydn Variations of Brahms, I remember, Busoni. And the whole high society came to this evening. For them the piece of Stefan was really indigestible, impossible, but there was great applause. It was quite sure that the applause was not for Stefan, but for those two pianists who unbelievably could play such a thing. How did they do that? How functions such a mind? Impossible! Because they were music-lovers, all of them, all the Germans came with their pianos and played four hands. So until the Brahms, somehow it worked, but now comes this bomb. But still there was big applause. This of course put me out immediately to the forefront. Hauser came immediately and wanted me to become another teacher of composition. This created certain conflict among us with Stefan and Irma. They wanted to be the only ones, which I understood. There were not many students, and they wanted to be the ones. Finally Wolpe wasn't very happy here, because he understood that as a composer he wouldn't have been accepted here, or perhaps in thirty, forty years' time. So he already prepared to go to the States. And instead of one of the main pupils of Irma as a pianist, Hauser gave me the job. And they were quite cross with me because of that. But I didn't push for that, not at all.

I tried to be on good terms with them, and we had a lot of talks about composition. He once participated in a choir competition in Moscow, in '37 or '38. He wrote some Hebrew songs for the kibbutzim and sent those songs. He tried a lot to work in this style, to make something typical for the Jewish settlers, because twelve-tone music at this time wasn't the right stuff to make out of it a Jewish music. He said to me one day that finally he got the music back, and there were corrections in the score. The too harsh dissonances were turned into softer consonances. This was a big shock for Stefan, he couldn't believe it. He tried hard to be simple, and very successfully. He kept his style. He was quite a good conductor. I heard him several times here making the Art of the Fugue once. Very good. He conducted very efficiently.

I remember his working room not far from here in a very old house. He had a small room with a long table, like an architect, on two feet. And all the permutations of the rows around the walls. And he went like Napoleon past all the parade of the permutations and wrote them down. I quite closely watched him while working and discussed his way of thinking about this. His approach to twelve-tone was absolutely different from Schoenberg, because he developed other tendencies besides twelve-tone. Schoenberg very much kept

form, the inner building, the texture, I wouldn't say on a really traditional basis, but the relations between motives, subjects, parts were still in line with let's say, after Brahms's time. Whereas Stefan had a very different tendency, I would say very much in common with his physical behavior, his way of looking at things and drawing consequences. He liked to split things. He was interested in a coffee spoon, not in order to take coffee with it, but in order to break this spoon into at least five or six parts and to see how each part is living on its own.

My function was to observe, not to speak, not to translate thoughts into words. Just look. It was a similar thing as Bach did with Buxtehude in L beckbeck. He just copied his score, and I did a similar thing. I watched him, it was a technical interest. How does he combine things? Why? I also did not want to disturb him with questions. This kind of thinking interested me. It certainly also has had a big influence on me. Everything, until today. I mean, you are eating and drinking. That's the way. It's the metabolism of the thought. It was my first confrontation with, in the beginning in a negative way, with the destroying of healthy forms. I saw this already in the March and Variations. But then I found out that it was done on purpose in his own methodical way. I used his shock and put it into order.

The whole idea of Hauer with the tropes is, of course, originally taken out of Eastern music, in fact, the Arabic maqam and the Indian ragas. I don't know how much Wolpe really knew about that at this time. This came later that we re-developed the Eastern part in music in order to demonstrate where we are living in the East. Wolpe was, of course, absolutely West, but if he would have stayed longer here, another ten, twenty years, most probably he would be interested in this too. Hauer's tropes is an Eastern idea, as is Schoenberg's permutations. Hauer and Schoenberg are really children of the same mother in thinking. It's very difficult historically to say who was the first. Hauer and his way of thinking tended much more to the East than to the West, whereas Schoenberg was the other way around. But all of this is not by chance. It is very likely that Stefan wanted to make a kind of synthesis of those two approaches. [ . . . ]

He worked with folk music on purpose as long as he was here. He tried to express himself as a Jewish composer, as we all did under a certain cultural pressure. I am sure that as far as he worked with Hebrew words he studied them thoroughly, because he was an excellent craftsman. No flimsy work. To speak Hebrew, he didn't really have time to study. He was still very much under his past influence from Berlin. First of all, he was with workers and not with the bourgeois. That the worker will turn out to be a bourgeois a little later, this we know, and he learned it in time. But at this time it was the classical picture of the worker, nearly a slave worker. So he had to express that with the worker, and he writes marches and songs for him against oppression. In Hebrew texts you find quite a lot of expressions of this in the Prophets. The Prophets give you a lot of texts which, if you are a good Communist, you can use them also. And there was another problem, how to use Jewish music in order also to be Jewish in musical expression. This was a problem for all of us in those days, because Jewish music then was mainly music from the waves of immigration. In the 1920s, in the middle 1920s, in the late 1920s, 1930s, different epochs of different groups from Poland, from Russia, Romania, and so on, depending where the pogroms have just taken place. So Jewish music in [Kibbutz] Ein Harod at this time was Polish music. Later came the Germans with their songs. And then started to come from the East the Yemenites. This was much more Eastern. And this interested musicians most, because this was leaning on the Arabic music, quarter-tone intonation, rhythmical figures entirely different from the Western, no symmetries, and went in line with Stefan's idea to break up. There was some meeting place. [ . . . ]

He liked being in Palestine, I know that. It was a kind of schizophrenic relationship, it was a split thing. He liked to be here because the Jewish people were aggressive. They were the sacrifice. He was with the Jewish people because he was persecuted too. He wanted to go here, but he wanted to be a leftist worker, not with those bourgeois, although these workers couldn't follow his music. But he was ready to work with them, to write for them simple choir music. He left too early in order to come into conflict with that too. I don't think he could do it here. He hadn't the patience to work for himself and to wait, and make an influence slowly. Everything had to be immediately. He was everything else, but not patient. I think in the States he changed a bit.

*Joseph Tal (b. 1910) was raised in Berlin and studied at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik. In 1934 he immigrated to Palestine where he later taught piano and composition at the Jerusalem Conservatory. When the Conservatory was reorganized as the Israel Academy of Music, he became its director from 1948-52; he later joined the faculty at Hebrew University, and in 1961 founded the University Centre for Electronic Music. He was named a member of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1971. Interview: AC, Jerusalem, 16 April 1985.*