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## CRITICUS MUSICUS

A World Première: Josef Tal's Opera MASADA 967

by Don Harrán

The episode is related by the historian Flavius Josephus. Three years after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Emperor Titus (70 A.D.), ten thousand Roman soldiers, under the command of Flavius Silva, massed in the Wilderness of Judah to lay siege to the hilltop fortress of Masada. There 967 mutinous Jews held out, fighting for the right to worship their God and lead their own destiny. The end was inevitable; yet rather than submit to their conquerors, the insurgents took their own lives, husbands smiting wives, their own children and themselves. Nine hundred and sixty of them perished; seven remained to tell the story.

The gory events of Masada have only recently been turned into an opera, with music by Josef Tal. As originally conceived in the late 1960's, the work was to be presented at the site of the slaughter itself. But since the idea of performing operas in deserts is more intriguing than it is practicable, the proposed *vox clamantis in deserto* was eventually abandoned. A few years hence, the Israel National Council for Culture and Arts commissioned the work as part of the festivities marking the 25th anniversary of the State. Its première was held, under less arid and perhaps less cumbersome circumstances, in Jerusalem, August 1973, in the then brand-new Jerusalem Theatre.

Tal found his von Hofmannsthal in Israel Eliraz, a gifted young Israeli playwright and novelist who has won plaudits both within the country and without. Their collaboration began with *Ashmedai*, a work commissioned by the Hamburg State Opera (first performance, Hamburg 1971). *Masada 967* is their second venture. (A third work

again commissioned from Germany, is in the offing.) Eliraz presents the libretto as an uninterrupted sequence of fifteen scenes with prologue; the tales unfold *après fait* through an account of its survivors, five children and two women. The author invests the work with a symbolism that operates on three shifting planes: *Masada 967* as an actualization of the events precipitating the Six-Day War (1967), as a signal case of the oppression of religious minorities, and as a foreboding of the tragic history of the Jews in dispersion from their homeland. None of this was lost on the audience.

The story bristles with contrasts. It pits Romans against Jews; an Historian (the only speaking role) tries to fathom the incidents of the past through the survivors who reveal them only fragmentarily. Living soldiers contrast dead martyrs; the Roman leader Silva is seen against the Jewish leader Eleazar (their confrontation takes place, surrealistically, towards the end of the opera). One sees a people clinging to a solitary height set against an army thirsting for conquest of vast expanses, and is witness to the unswerving faith of the one against the obtuse misconceptions of the other (Silva: "It's against all reason and sense!" Historian: "He was right - it was against all Roman reason and sense"). The longing for freedom is articulated by its opposite, the will to impose tyranny (Silva: "This is hardly a mountain, but a thorn in the flesh of the Empire, which you are to pluck out today - to prove that smaller nations belong to greater ones"). Fortress contrasts wilderness, children contrapose adults, the blood-shedding of Jews is the more appalling for the wine-drinking of Romans. Ironically, too, physical defeat enfeebles the attempt to triumph over spirit (Eleazar: "With all your engines of war and your thousands of men you can conquer a mountain, but you can never conquer a people that's ready for the sake of that

mountain to die"). These contrasts are the tensile strength of the drama and aid the composer to achieve a similar mode of differentiation as he adapts the music to the event. Indeed, the idea of contrast seems inherent in the score.

Tal plays off sonic divergencies between the voices of the actor-singers and electronic sound. The traditional orchestra in the pit is replaced by pretaped music generated electronically and powered through loudspeakers, a technique which is "a first" in the annals of opera. The effect is to create a two-dimensional music in which machine-produced sound links up in the listener's mind with the mountain, the faith, the timelessness of the Masada episode; the voices join with the more "mundane" features of human drama.

Tal has ever been intrigued by problems that attach to pairing a music scrupulously controlled in its every detail with one whose performance depends on the capacities of musicians: *Masada 967* may be viewed as a "testing ground" for working out the solution of this problem. Add, too, the juxtaposition of an artificial and a natural *matière sonore* with the elements of speech and song, of *Sprechstimme* and pitched tones, of ensembles and solo singing, of styles that range from the pointillistic to the expressionistically lyrical and the musical contraries increase apace.

Tal's fascination with coordinating different sound media is of long standing. He began his professional career as an accomplished pianist, and time and again in his composition he has experimented with various accommodations of solo instrument to a *ripieno*. The concertato idea is deep-rooted in his musical thought. He has composed numerous concertos: two for piano and orchestra (1944, 1953), one for tenor solo, piano and orchestra (1956), a concerto for viola and orchestra (1954), another for 'cello and strings (1961), three concertos for piano and electronic music (1962, 1964,

1970), one for harpsichord and electronic music (1964), another concerto for harp and electronic music (1971), and a double concerto for violin, 'cello and chamber orchestra (1970).

The contrast of concerto-form with that of theatrical drama is no small step; however, Tal has been moving in that direction since the late 1950s, when he first composed his two chamber operas *Saul at Ein Dor* and *Amnon and Tamar*. Other works of his also take on the accoutrements of a dramatic cantata or oratorio. Thus, *The Mother Rejoices* (1949) for mixed chorus, piano and orchestra, gives us a foretaste of *Masada* in its theme. (Peter Gradenwitz described it as "an ancient legend from the Maccabean period, in which a heroic mother rejoices over the steadfastness of her sons although their refusal to bow before the Cross costs them their lives; Hannah, the mother, takes her own life in an exalted spirit, praising the one and only God"<sup>1</sup>). Tal also composed the *Death of Moses-Requiem*, for soloists, mixed chorus, orchestra and electronic music (1967), and *Parade of the Fallen*, for soprano, baritone, mixed chorus and orchestra (1968). His excursions into the theatre include a number of works for ballet (three of them for electronic scores: *Ranges of Energy* [1963], *From the Depth of the Soul* [1964] and *Variations* [1970]), in which he grapples with problems of conciliating musical sounds to bodily movements. That these efforts over the past few years have culminated in the composition of two large-scale operas must strike one as only natural. Tal seems to have found himself in a medium most congenial to his talents.

Seen in this light, other contrasts in Tal's work fall readily into place. His repertory divides itself between examples of absolute music and compositions which draw their textual (though generally not their musical) sustenance from Biblical or historical sources. In his own life, Tal also moves between two worlds, that

of teaching (at Hebrew University) and composition. As an educator, he has trained students for over two generations in form analysis, focussing particularly on the works of Beethoven, Mahler, Bartók and Schoenberg. As a composer, he has been unfailingly the musical adventurer. Never resting content with one style or one system, he has carried forth an ardent campaign for new music at times and under circumstances when few in Israel were willing to lend an ear. "You have to work and fight. Ever since the year 1934 I've been a professional fighter in this area"<sup>2</sup>. He has pioneered efforts in electronic music in the country since the 1950s. Working at first with the most primitive machinery, he is now heading the well-appointed Israel Center of Electronic Music, at Hebrew University. His music oscillates between expressionistic Schoenbergian gestures and the sounds and methods of the *avant-garde*. His approach to writing is experiential and he often speaks of the composer's "sharing his personal experience in sounds". He is concerned with problems of communication, of the possibility of utilizing the expressive capacities of voices and instruments, as he puts it, "to fuel the artistic imagination". He is involved with the spiritual conception which lies behind works, realizing the act of listening as a process of creation.

Tal enjoys enlightening his audience on some of the mysteries of his own creative efforts: "The modern composer should give the listener at least a little finger to lead him to the composition". Yet he is not prepared to do this by sacrificing the means for achieving integrity and originality of expression. New sound, Tal claims, imposes on the artist the requisites of a new structure and syntax: "Only thus can the spiritual idea and its actual realization be coordinated". His drive to experiment with electronic music issues from the challenge of exploring the novel, of exploiting possibilities that lie beyond traditional sound media:

"He [the composer] is in a position to create musical passages which, being unplayable, have never yet been invented." In *Masada* 967 Tal has juggled two incompatible demands, those of his own and those of the public, and he has carried off the feat with great aplomb. The opera represents a viable compromise between the composer's explorations "into the unknown" and preserving "the limits of perception of the listener". That he is able to "get away with" so much that is his own, musically, derives in no small part from virtues inherent in the libretto itself. When in the opera the Historian turns to the audience and asks: "How to present what has taken place thus, that people may find it believable? Who'll believe?" the credulity registered in the facial expressions of the spectators is an affirmation of the combined powers of drama and music. The old message of the Masada episode is renewed through the persuasive art of musical theatre, forcefully testifying to the fact that despite the efforts of the Romans to wipe the fortress from the map of history, Masada and its story live on meaningfully, as ever.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *The Music of Israel*, New York, 1949, p. 275f.
- <sup>2</sup> This and other quotations below are drawn from various reports in the local Hebrew newspapers.