

By the Rivers of Babylon – Reconstruction Work

Etan Tal

On 2 January 1952 dancer Deborah Bertonoff (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devorah_Bertonov) premiered her solo dance drama *The Ascent to Jerusalem* (AKA 'Recollection of a People') in Jerusalem. The music for this 13 scene choreography had been written a year earlier by my father, Josef Tal. Set for six instruments (usually in solo or duo setting) and a singer, the work premiered with the composer at the piano. It is worth noting that four of these 13 movements had originated in Tal's *Exodus* (1946), an earlier work for choreography (for piano and percussion). No manuscript of *The Ascent to Jerusalem* seem to have survived, nor any recording of the complete work, although a recording of one of the scenes, in different instrumentation, was vinyl-engraved in 1953.

As a teenager, I was captivated by a recording of Tal's four-minute work, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, played by Klari Weissgerber-Szarvas (Harp) and Josef Weissgerber (Violoncello). The theme of this work was borrowed from Idelsohn's Thesaurus of Jewish Music (Table VIII p. 54 #2), which cites an old Jewish Portuguese lament. The same theme was also used in Tal's First Symphony (1952). *By the Rivers of Babylon* was actually a late version of *The Ascent to Jerusalem*. The recording, albeit of low quality, still strikes a chord in me. Having digitized the piece it is now available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09-Lb3SMvSg&feature=youtu.be>. Nevertheless, since no manuscript of this harp-violoncello work was ever found, experiencing a live performance was impossible.

Or ...

Modern sophisticated equipment enables experts to transcribe an audio file into music notation and re-create its score. In such a procedure, non-music 'noise' is first filtered out and the sounds of the two instruments are separated into two 'clean' tracks.

Here is the report of M. who describes his approach to this work:

...Once I set the tempo beat and the tonality, I started writing the cello part in the software. I always work with a melodic instrument to recreate and compare the melody. In this case, I used an Arabian Oud to play the melody of the cello and compare my playing with the audio. [To tackle] the harp's fast notes and the complex harmony, I [was helped] by [a fellow] musician. We worked in this way: separately, in our own homes, we transcribed the piece into software and then we reunited and compared our work to create a final transcription without mistakes...

While this work was in progress I was asked to assist in cataloging certain items of Debora Bertonoff's archive. Indeed I was pleasantly surprised to find the manuscript of *By the Rivers of Babylon's* version for piano (the work which was included in *The Ascent to Jerusalem*) as well as photos taken during a recording session, probably around 1951.



The first page of **By the Rivers of Babylon** version for piano.



Deborah Bertonoff with recording technicians



Werner Liebenthal (percussionist, left) and Josef Tal

Although the newly found piano manuscript in Bertonoff's archive assisted in clearing certain issues, the new score still contained many inaccuracies and naturally followed the tempo and dynamics of Szarvas & Weissgerber's interpretation. A strict editing work was therefore necessary. The score was examined and edited by the harpist Katharina Hanstedt (Germany) and the cellist Hillel Zori (Israel) who kindly agreed to undertake this unique endeavor, and perfected the score by adding specific instructions to reflect the probable 'original' tempo and dynamics.