

הרי אריאל אריאל סגור אנד זיוו

*Ho, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped (Isaiah 29,1)*

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# Joseph Tal's Homage to Else

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In 1975 the composer Joseph Tal was commissioned by the Israel Festival to compose a piece for a singer with a chamber ensemble. It was only natural for Tal to collaborate once again with the poet and playwright Israel Eliraz, who had written the libretti for his three recent operas. Over the past five years they have established a close mutual understanding, and they immediately agreed on a subject which had a personal significance for both, that is, the enigmatic personality of Else Lasker-Schüler. Tal, who was born in 1910, studied at the Royal Academy in Berlin, where he had the opportunity to become acquainted with Lasker-Schüler's poems which were widely read in Germany in those years. He settled in Eretz Israel in 1934, shortly after he had finished his studies. Following a short stay in Kibbutz Gesher, he moved to Jerusalem, where he has been living ever since. The outbreak of World War II meant severe economic hardship for him and his fellow musicians and artists. The only diversion that they could afford was to meet occasionally in a bohemian and pleasant café on Ben-Yehudah Street, in the centre of the city. As Tal vividly recalls, he was sitting at the table when an old woman turned to him and asked permission to join him. She sat down and watched him in silence for a while, until he introduced himself. Only then did she disclose her identity as Else Lasker-Schüler. There was nothing exceptional about the tiny, poorly dressed old lady, except for her expressive, dark eyes. Her habit of visiting cafés and meeting people is described by Werner Kraft: "Despite her disdain for people, she used to feel safer and less haunted by demons when she was with them. She readily went to cafés where she found people with whom she could talk . . ."<sup>1</sup> Afterwards she used to join Tal whenever he came to the café. There was hardly any exchange of words between them and for the most part she would just watch him in silence. He often felt somewhat

embarrassed and even thought of avoiding the café for a while, but there was something powerful about her personality which did not allow him to do that. Once he was asked to guide a friend to her lodgings at the Hotel Vienna, which was the only time that he saw her bare, nearly empty and destitute room. Else died not long afterwards and they never had a chance to establish any meaningful communication, but the effect of her unusual character, as well as his admiration for her poetry never left him until his memories were awakened by his conversation with Israel Eliraz. Although Eliraz was only nine years old when Else died, in a curious way he never forget her. He recalls: "I knew Else Lasker-Schüler as a queer woman, or, as the children regarded her, 'crazy'. I was one of the seven- and eight year-olds who lived in the neighbourhood of Hotel Vienna in Jerusalem and who used to harass the old lady with her peculiar clothes and weird hats. Her personality must have impressed me deeply, since I always thought of writing about her and I even have some sketches for a play (which may be yet written) and *Else-Homage* is based on them." As a matter of fact, the text of the third movement is truly autobiographical.

It was undoubtedly the impact of Else's personality on Tal which dissuaded him from taking the obvious course of setting some of her poems to music. The resulting Lied cycle would have expressed her personality only indirectly, and he preferred the semi-dramatic medium of a monodrama, or, rather, an indirect dialogue between Else and the world, real and imaginary, which surrounds her. Eliraz has the special quality of combining within himself the character of a dramatic poet with the disposition of a scholar. The libretti of Tal's operas *Ashmedai* and *Masada*, as well as Eliraz' plays *Three* and *The Persian Protocols* are products of thorough research into relevant Jewish biblical and talmudic sources, and Eliraz made a comparable study of Else's biography, poetry and personality. He described his work as being "not a biography of the poetess but a 'homage' to her, influenced by the particular magic emanating from her poems and freely using motives distinctively Else Lasker-Schüler's."<sup>2</sup> It is obvious that the work was also conceived with a particular singer in mind for the complex role of Else, namely Adi Etzion. For several years, Etzion has been eagerly active in numerous performances of new works by the best Israeli composers, who have been attracted by her vocal and dramatic gifts as well as by her dedication. Etzion also had the experience of a performance of Arnold Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, which has much in common with Tal's work.

The libretto contains only two direct quotations from Else's poetry. The singer begins her part with the *motto* preceding the poem "Jerusalem" (*Mein blaues Klavier*): "Gott baute aus seinem Rückgrat: Palästina, aus seinem einzigen Knochen: Jerusalem." The motto is translated into Hebrew and is thus integrated into Eliraz' following lines. The work is closed by the narrator who quotes the first and last stanzas of Else's moving poem "Ich weiß" in the original German, thus invoking the funeral ceremony in which it was recited by the Rabbi. Otherwise the libretto is all by Eliraz. In addition to the reference to names of people related to Else (such as the painter and architect Leopold Krakauer, whose art is praised by her in a poem dedicated to him<sup>3</sup>), Eliraz makes use of themes from her poetry for his own imaginary scenes. For example, movement VII is based on her symbolic Blue Piano, which is the title of her volume of poems written and published in Jerusalem, as well as of a tragic poem in it. The blue piano of Eliraz is a real musical instrument, on which the famous pianist and teacher Leo Kestenbergr plays, thus creating a tiny scene of chamber-music-making in Jerusalem. The mixture of real and fictional characters in the libretto was typical of Lasker-Schüler's writings. An extreme example of this romantic trait is the bizarre expressionistic drama *Ich und ich* which is essentially an autobiographical monologue with interpolations of comments by biblical, fictional and real characters, like King David, Faust, and, typically enough, the great journalist, musicologist, and critic, Gershon Swet (1894-1969), who at that time was the Jerusalem editor of the daily *Ha'aretz*.

*Ich und ich* might be viewed as the dramatic prototype of Eliraz' play and as a justification for his own combinations of the poetic and the real in the portrayal of Else's personality.

Tal's selection of Lasker-Schüler as the theme of his composition is original and unusual. Themes of his previous dramatic works (and, indeed, for works by other Israeli composers as well) were derived from the Bible (*Saul in Ein Dor*), from talmudic legend (*Ashmedai*) or from the heroic history of the Jewish people (*Massada*). Such themes have a direct appeal to the collective memory of Jewish audiences. Associations are easily aroused and no special preparation is needed. Still, in *Ashmedai*, Tal employed a more complicated set of associations. Although the libretto is based on purely Jewish motives, the implications are universal and the allegory has a direct relevance to German audiences in that it awakens memories of the Nazi period. It is obvious that the emotional

reaction to such a work would be different when it is presented to a non-German audience. In the case of *Else*, the problem of associations is even more complex. From the biographical standpoint the work would most naturally reveal its rich complexity of associations to people who personally breathed the special atmosphere of Jerusalem of the '30s and '40s. From the literary point of view, however, it would have a direct appeal to a German-reading audience versed in the German poetry of the late nineteenth century, especially in Lasker-Schüler's poetry, of course. Else's close friend, Rachel Katinka, once related that she was reluctant to allow her poems to be translated into Hebrew, using the characteristically paradoxical claim: "But they are already written in Hebrew."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, publications of her poems in Hebrew were slow to appear, and even now only a handful of them has been issued in a fine translation by Yehudah Amichai (Tel Aviv, 1968). Yet, it would appear that Tal was not worried about the difficulties in communication, since he obviously hoped that the direct emotional effect of the work would inspire his listeners to find their way to Lasker-Schüler's poetic and emotional world (as has indeed been the case with the writer of the present article). Moreover, it should be noted that, while Tal's work is thematically unusual in the repertory of Israeli music, there has been a growing interest in the period of the British Mandate in Jerusalem, and the early years of the State of Israel, as inspiration, subject and background for several important recent Israeli novels, as, for example, Agnon's *Shirah*, Amos Oz' *My Michael*, Moshe Shamir's *From a Different Yard*, and Shulamit Hareven's *A City of Many Days*.

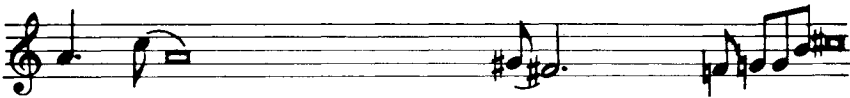
The work is scored for a mezzo-soprano singer, a narrator and a chamber ensemble consisting of piano, French horn, viola and cello. The model of Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* naturally springs to mind, and rightly so. Tal has always been known to have felt a deep admiration for the music and the spiritual world of Arnold Schönberg, and, indeed, the intense, concentrated, dreamy expression of *Else* has much in common with *Pierrot*, as have one or two traits of the vocal line, but otherwise the two compositions are stylistically quite different from each other.

The eleven short movements make use of various combinations of the six performers, as well as of different styles of singing and declamation. In the fourth and sixth movements the singer and narrator are unaccompanied by the instruments.

*Else* is portrayed through the vocal line of the singer, which is in recitative style. The whole work (with the exception of movement VII) is

written in a rhythmic style free of any regularly accented beats. The sparse instrumental texture allows some rhythmical freedom to the singer within the general limits of the written-in rhythmical values. Consequently the vocal line can be described as an imitation of Else's speech which constantly alternates between the excited and the dreamy. The dry, prosaic declamation of the narrator is in strong contrast to the vocal style of the singer. An example of that device appears in movement VI, whose text is devoid of any inherent emotion, being a formal invitation to visit. Eliraz, however, considers the invitation as an attempt by Else to establish communication with the outer world. The music represents the inner meaning of the text through the division of the words between the singer and the narrator. The abrupt, strange motives of the singer contrast strongly with the practical narration. No instrumental parts appear in that movement, so that the two voices act as the only musical element. An excerpt is presented in example 1.

Yom shishi shah  
Shalosh, Shloshim  
Ve'ahad Beyuli



Bo Mahar

Elay

Havila mismol

The work is essentially melodic and linear. However, the seemingly free, unrelated recitative-like motives are formally organized into long melodic phrases with certain pitches acting as temporary tonal centres, that is, points of departure and repose. For example, movement II opens with two long phrases. The second is related to the first through its overall melodic structure and direction. The first is based on the note D as centre, whereas the second centres on F. The only literally recurring motive appears in the viola, anticipating the beginning of each vocal phrase and articulating the relationship between them. The beginnings of two phrases are presented in example 2.

*Else Lasker-Schüler: Figures in the  
Jaffa Road. Graphite and coloured  
pencils. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.  
Bequest Gershon Swet*

Pa lestina A-mud Hashdra shel E lohim

Bli sh-mo nat pirkei shir hashirim ma yahzik et heharim

The excited, eccentric style of Else's speech is further emphasized through the unexpected accents on relatively unimportant parts of the sentence. For instance, the highest note in the opening phrase (see example 2) falls on the preposition *of* (Hebrew *shel*). On the other hand, significant words also receive special treatment, which sometimes borders on word-painting. Thus, the weeping in movement VIII is articulated through the only melisma in the movement and the word "moon" in movement II is depicted by high notes in the voice and in the viola part (see example 3).

Kol bo - Khim

Else Lasker-Schüler: 'The Aiming  
 Lightning' practicing with bow and  
 arrow. Graphite, coloured chalks and

The image shows a musical score for 'The Aiming Lightning'. It consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a complex, fast-moving melodic line with many accidentals (sharps and naturals). The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a few notes, including a half note 're' and a quarter note 'ah'. Both staves have a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic marking.

Ya re ah

This block shows the continuation of the musical score from the previous block. It features two staves. The upper staff continues the complex melodic line with many accidentals. The lower staff contains a few notes, including a half note 're' and a quarter note 'ah'. The *pp* dynamic marking is also present.

Another stylistic device is the association of psalmody in the tenth movement, which is a prayer. Regular psalmody (that is, straight declamation on a single note) alternates with a distorted, dreamy psalmody, and both are set off against Else's typical melodic line. The three styles are presented in example 4 (Desdemona's *Ave Maria* from

The image shows a musical score for 'Ave Maria'. It consists of a single staff in treble clef. The melody is a series of notes on a single pitch, representing straight declamation. The notes are: E, -sof, et, Bitkha, el, tokh, Hazohar, Pa, - -. A *pp* dynamic marking is placed above the notes.

E -sof et Bitkha el tokh Hazohar Pa - -

This block shows the continuation of the musical score for 'Ave Maria'. It consists of a single staff in treble clef. The melody is a series of notes on a single pitch, representing straight declamation. The notes are: zer, Ay- fut, hatsaar, she-li.

zer Ay- fut hatsaar she-li



Verdi's *Otello* might be mentioned as a probable model for Tal).

The four instruments are used not as a unified chamber ensemble but as separate, individual parts. The melodic style of the three melody instruments resembles that of the singer. It is significant that the horn is used not as a warm, romantic, soft instrument, but as a crisp, metallic, cruel one, whose sound contrasts sharply with the expectations of the listener, as shown in the following example from movement III.



Tal's deep and continuing interest in electronic music is reflected in the relationship between movements IX and XI, where the piano plays in the extreme low and high registers so that it is the sound colour rather than the individual pitches which act as unifying musical elements.

The seventh movement is exceptional in all respects. Dramatically it is the only one in which Else establishes communication with her friends through the language of music. Aesthetically it is related to the "Waltz by Chopin" from *Pierrot Lunaire* (in its turn rooted in the world of personal and stylistic associations of Schumann's early piano music, notably in "Chopin" from the *Carnaval*). Tal makes use of waltz-like motives and snatches of phrase all of which sound like well-known classic-romantic music. This is the only movement with a real harmonic counterpoint. Still, even in it there are three independent melodic lines. The viola and the piano play two dance-tunes simultaneously, the vocal line hovering over them in an atonal melody organized in waltz-like rhythms, as shown in example 6.

The seventh movement thus serves as key to the meaning of the musical style of the rest of the work. Only in it is Else's emotional world free of conflicts, and she succeeds in establishing communication with people whom she likes. But the muted, weird sound of the horn penetrates the final chord, sending her back into loneliness and pain.

*Else* was written during a highly productive period in Tal's work. His three operas reflect an increasing concern with universal and Jewish problems. Still, *Else* is more closely related to the powerful *Treatise* for cello solo. Himself an immigrant from Germany, Tal can fully appreciate and understand the tragic struggle of the poetess with reality and her

Bi y rusha-la - yim

repeated journeyings between Europe and Palestine. What thirty years ago was just an incidental meeting with an unusual and powerful personality, is now fully understood by him as the tragedy of a whole generation. While the *Treatise* for cello is a symbolic representation of Tal's optimistic faith in today's world, *Else* is a homage full of tenderness and love to a world of the past.

<sup>1</sup> Werner Kraft, "Nachwort" to Else Lasker-Schüler's *Verse und Prosa aus dem Nachlaß*, München, 1961, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Israel Eliraz, Programme notes to the performance of *Else* by the Israel Chamber Orchestra.

<sup>3</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, *Verse und Prosa aus dem Nachlaß*, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, *Dichtungen und Dokumente*, München, 1951, p. 597.