

Schach triumphs

DORA SOWDEN: Jerusalem

PROBABLY the finest achievement of Leonard Schach's career came in Jerusalem when the Israel Festival presented the world premiere of an opera, "Masada", at the Jerusalem Theatre — Music by Israel composer Josef Tal, text by Israeli writer Israel Eliraz, conducted by Israeli Gary Berrini and stage directed by Leonard Schach.

The 90-minute opera is a static collection of 15 scenes that follow each other without interval or stop. The theme is the Roman attack on the Herodian fortress of Masada where the Jewish resisters made their last stand and killed themselves rather than be taken by the enemy. The story is told in Josephus Flavius but the librettist used it very freely — and rather woodenly.

Leonard Schach, however, us-

ing a multiple set of geometric design, kept the scenes moving and the characters animated by sheer directional inventiveness.

The music — electronic, with live voices mostly in recitative — was extremely avant garde, but, taken as sound, was very well devised. A male chorus left the ear more at ease at the end.

In my view, the success of the performance — to be repeated five times — was almost entirely due to Schach's dynamic handling of the cast of 35.

The opera was commissioned by the National Council for Art of the Israel Ministry of Education. To prepare the electronic tape, an expert, Dr. Eckhardt Maronn, came from Hamburg. Josef Tal's previous opera "Ashmodai" had been commissioned and performed at the Hamburg State Opera in 1971.

Schach's next production will be in Italy where he will direct a new opera by Giulio Ferrarini at the Music Festival in Barga.

Congress and complaints



Zubin Mehta conducting the World Youth Orchestra. (Starphot)

THE 27TH WORLD CONGRESS of "Jeunesses Musicales" has closed after a week's deliberations and consultations, in which a thousand delegates from 24 countries participated. Besides committee sessions, there were many musical events — chamber music, solo recitals, dance groups and "Blue Tunes" — climaxing in performances by the Young Philharmonic Orchestra, under Shalom Ronli-Riklis, and, most outstanding of all, the appearances of the World Youth Orchestra under the great leadership of Zubin Mehta in Jerusalem and Caesarea.

I understand that there was high praise of the organization and programme of the congress from committee and delegates alike.

As is customary at international congresses, a great deal of time was devoted to greetings and formal addresses; but a half hour of speeches before a public concert is hardly likely to stimulate the eagerness of a young audience to listen to fine music. Some children, for whom a visit to Jerusalem's Binyanei Ha'ooma was their first excursion into

the world of the concert hall, were so tired by the talk that their parents had to take them home after the first part of the programme. They thus missed the singularly beautiful and impressive performance of Mahler's First Symphony.

THE 15TH Summer Courses held at the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem have been the most successful to date. It is estimated that up to 450 people attended the various lectures, courses and demonstration lessons. Some 20 students from abroad helped to give this gathering of learning an international air.

Every morning, from 9 until 1.30, the house in Peretz Smolenskin Street buzzed with the hectic comings and goings, with the afternoons reserved for singing instruction by Jennie Tourel, of New York, and Re Koster, of Paris. For the first time, plans were made so ingeniously that instrumentalists could watch singers at work, and vice versa.

The faculty members mostly came from abroad; they included Professors Dorothy Taubman and Boris Schwartz from New York,

and Frances Larimer of Chicago. A "Cavalcade" of Piano Sonatas was presented by pianists Vardi, Foss, Kalichstein, Saltzman, Bar-Ilan, Wagman and Oren — ranging, according to the pianists' inclinations, from Scarlatti and Haydn to Liszt and Prokofiev.

The Summer Courses are partly subsidized by Mr. Samuel Rubin, whose name the Academy bears in recognition of his generous help over the years. Mr. Rubin also sponsors the course which counts towards a New York University master's degree in music. This is the third year that the month-long course, which goes on until August 17, has been held in Jerusalem. The lecturers are Professors Frances Aronoff and John Gilbert of New York, and two Israelis, Zvi Avni and Dr. Dalia Cohen. Contemporary music and notation, music of the Middle East, questions of teaching and learning in music education, and problems of harmony are some of the subjects provided in this year's programme.

The stimulus provided by these courses cannot be measured in statistics, as the exchange of ideas and the demonstration of new angles have to find the right soil in the recipient if they are to germinate into fruition and application. It needs, of course, individual thinking out of the points studied if benefit is to be derived from a rather short and, despite the concentrated intensity, only sketchy confrontation with new approaches. But this year, the great majority of participants have been teachers, instrumentalists and singers with a certain amount of professional experience behind them, with far fewer students who may not be able to digest advantageously all the information and knowledge offered.

I HAVE recently incurred the wrath of some of my readers with my personal views on certain composers or works. Apparently entirely lacking in a sense of humour, they often get my meaning wrong.

Once I was attacked by an Armenian fellow-citizen for not declaring Khatchaturian to be one of the world's greatest com-

posers; now I am brought to book for disliking certain works of Sibelius. Dr. H. Cross, of Jerusalem, lectures me on the role of Sibelius in the history of music and — taking my tongue-in-cheek parallel to film-music composer Addinsell in earnest — tears me to pieces for my praise of "this trite, ill-orchestrated, naive, fatuous piece beloved of your critic." The same gentleman was exasperated by my review of Fischer-Dieskau's recital, in which I declared, "The critic is redundant."

I have fared even worse at the hands of another doctor, Dr. Fella Livov of Ramat Aviv, who writes:

"I was present at the premiere of this so-called Opera (Masada 967 by Eliraz and Tal), which in my opinion is not an Opera at all, but a horrible cacophonia of sounds unable to bear, boring, anti-musical, and shameful production presented as a festival opera. If Mr. Boehm considers himself a music critic and advises

opera lovers to hear and appreciate such trash, then I wish to take this occasion to tell Boehm that he is not qualified to be a music critic of a distinguished newspaper such as *The Jerusalem Post*."

Opera, I would point out, is not only Rossini, Verdi and Puccini; and I am glad that I do not need to defend myself for lacking qualifications. I certainly appreciate intelligent criticism of my point of view, which cannot, in the nature of things, appeal to everybody's but I expect such criticism to adhere to accepted standards of cultured behaviour and respect for other people's opinions.

I have lately been getting complaints from both performers and readers about the headings of music reviews in *The Post*. I should have thought it was common knowledge that no critic anywhere in the world has any influence whatsoever on the headings that are given to his articles!

133N
THE JERUSALEM
POST

IN RETROSPECT, it seems almost unbelievable that we really survived that mammoth orgy which made this summer one of the liveliest in our musical history. There was the congress of the international "Jeunesses Musicales" with its *ad hoc* symphony orchestra contributing one of the finest programmes to the Israel Festival. There was the eighth *Zimriah*, with some of its participating choirs adding to festival programmes; there were chamber music seminars at Zikhron Yaacov and Ein Karem. There was a special "seminar" at the Jerusalem Khan, allowing hundreds of people to watch Pablo Casals and Alexander Schneider getting another *ad hoc* youth orchestra into shape for public concerts within the Festival and dozens of rehearsals, auditions and working sessions of chamber music groups with Eugene Istomin, Isaac Stern, Leonard Rose and Alexander Schneider, looking for new talents, opening up new horizons, encouraging and promoting promising young musicians. All this — and probably more not in the public eye — happened parallel to, because of, or in spite of the 13th Israel Festival, which was planned to be a special one in honour of its own bar mitzva and the State's 25th Anniversary.

THERE WERE certainly more than a few extraordinarily fine concerts and performances. And, of course, some let-downs. Criticism levelled at the Festival management depends on the critic's tem-

perament. The optimist says that the hall was half full, the pessimist that it was half empty. The one says, "It wasn't too good," the other "It wasn't too bad." In general, however, the balance is on the credit side.

There were around 90 performances all told — 28 in Jerusalem, 31 in Tel Aviv and 18 in Caesarea, two in Haifa and five in Ein Hod, not counting various fringe presentations.

The Israeli side was represented by all its orchestras and choirs and practically all its chamber music groups and individual soloists, including singers and conductors. One new feature was a series of programmes by new immigrants from Russia at the Jerusalem Khan; another was a series of recitals at the Tel Aviv Museum by Israeli artists living abroad. These should be incorporated in future Festivals.

THREE WORLD premieres were presented: Josef Tal's "Masada," Darius Milhaud's "Ode to Jerusalem," and the prize-winning "Yiddish Songs" by Ami Maayani. Israeli composers, like Orgad, Bos-covich, Ehrlich, Seter, Ben-Haim, Partos and Tal were included in recitals, though of course the general choice of works fell on Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Schubert, Mahler and Bach.

This year was a record year as far as audiences were concerned; it is reckoned that about 90 per cent of all Festival tickets sold, bringing in an estimated sum of about IL1.25m.

— which should mean a smaller deficit than usual. As always, some programmes paid for others. Manitas de Plata, the Ballet Folklórico de Mexico, the Royal Ballet, the Casals-Schneider concerts, the Schubert evening with Barenboim-Perlman-Zukerman-Wiesel-Mehta, the Istomin-Stern-Rose trio, with Alexander Schneider, did well financially, supporting the deficit events — the orchestral concerts and the *hazanut* programme. Chamber music and recitals at the Khan, at Ein Hod and at the Tel Aviv Museum paid their own way. None of this includes "Masada" which was subsidized by special grants from the Public Council for the Arts.

As for planning, virtually every thing went according to schedule: only two recitals (Ran and Vered) were cancelled by the artists. When Pablo Casals wanted his "Hymn of the United Nations" included in his concerts, a choir was organized, at very short notice, Stanley Sperber taught it the music very efficiently, and a Jerusalem composer orchestrated the work from a piano score, as the original score for large orchestra was not available. In good craftsmanlike fashion, for lack of time, he wrote the instrumental voices straight into the individual parts, and nobody at the concerts was aware that he was hearing the results of a remarkable feat of speed and efficiency.

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PAGE THIRTY-FOUR

THE JERUSALEM POST MAGAZINE

sonal experiences plus the impressions gained by others.

The outstanding event of the Festival was undoubtedly the presentation of "Masada." Though described by librettist Israel Eliraz and composer Josef Tal as an opera, this 90-minute work is a surrealistic attempt to re-create the atmosphere of death and destruction, the confrontation of the seven survivors with the "victorious" Romans in flashbacks, the two worlds of thought of the Hebrews and the Romans. In 15 scenes, partly unrelated events appear on the stage, in intentionally static, stylized acting, with electronic tape providing musical and atmospheric background and accompaniment to the human voices, coordinated firmly by conductor Gary Bertini.

Of course, there was no *bel canto* singing (though there were some remarkably singable lines), there was no love or plotting, as in conventional opera. The extreme modernists were probably disappointed because Tal does not go in for innovations for their own sake, and so his score was quite "harmless"; for others, this was too modern, too unreal, too unusual. But all the participants helped to make this presentation a dignified comment on the "Masada complex," and the professionalism shown by everybody concerned (nearly all Israelis) was most encouraging.

Emotionally, I would vote for the Schubert evening as the loveliest music, presented in the most outgoing manner. But then, what

about the Istomin-Stern-Rose-Schneider combination? And what about Mehta directing the International Youth Symphony of the "Jeunesses Musicales"? And the unforgettable experience of seeing Pablo Casals conducting his "Hymn" and a lovable Mozart Symphony with another youth orchestra? And Isaac Stern playing the Mozart Concerto in A Major? I missed the IPO-Bernstein-Brahms, of which I heard only the most enthusiastic comment from all sides. For me, the most serious music-making was the performance of Bach's "Art of the Fugue" in Zeev Steinberg's new setting, played by the New Israel String Quartet, an absolute highlight of musical performance.

IF A JARRING note has to be sounded, it is to record the most regrettable lack of rapport between Daniel Barenboim as conductor and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, which resulted in unsatisfying performances, and the catastrophic appearance of the Haifa Symphony Orchestra with the Royal Ballet.

What was new in this Festival was the big role played by youth, and this trend should be pursued in various forms. This year's experience has shown that young orchestras, chamber music groups and soloists are able to contribute a great deal to the quality and the spirit of the Israel Festival, which is so efficiently directed by Aharon Zvi Propes, who always keeps himself far too modestly in the background.

MUSIC/Yohanan Boehm
A memorable
mid-summer
in retrospect

AT THE ISRAEL FESTIVAL

Anti-climax and climax

Opening of the Israel Festival 1973: The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim, conductor; Stella Richmond, soprano; Mignon Dunn, Mezzo-soprano; Menasse Hadjes, tenor; Siegmund Nimsger, baritone; the Zamir Chorale of New York and Boston, Bin-yenei Ha'ooma, Jerusalem — July 16). Milhaud: "Ode to Jerusalem" — World Premiere; Beethoven: Symphony No. 9, in D minor, opus 125.

A FESTIVE mood for the opening of the Israel Festival, a full house expectant of elating experiences, a first-class symphony orchestra, excellent soloists, a conductor of world reputation — all point to a special occasion. The Festival even showed its goodwill and commendably did without speeches. But the concert was an anti-climax, the prolonged applause at the end notwithstanding (it had partly extramusical reasons).

Darius Milhaud's "Ode to Jerusalem," written at the age of 80, shies away from any associations with atmosphere, geographical or folkloristic, and does not compromise with public expectations. It is more the musing of a master at the end of a long road about the heavenly Jerusalem than thoughts about the earthly Jerusalem we have the privilege to live in. His music does not seek effects or climaxes, and therefore does not cause an extraordinary impact on the listener; it is good vintage Milhaud though perhaps not what many people expected.

Daniel Barenboim is a marvellous musician and the Israel Philharmonic does not have to prove that it is a major orchestra, so what happened with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was hard to understand and even harder to tolerate. The first three movements sounded as if they were being played after just one rehearsal, so imprecise were many

MUSIC

YOHANAN BOEHM

entrances — including an unforgivable wrong entry of some double-basses in the Scherzo — and so completely uninspired the reading we were offered. True, Barenboim has a reputation for slow tempi (this is the reason he is often compared with Klemperer or Walter!), but after enduring an hour of dull, dry and dreary counting of bars, with all the heavenly music falling apart, one was left wondering if one's love for Beethoven's greatness has been a mistake all along.

Relief came at last with the baritone's recitativo—Siegmund Nimsger has a most beautiful powerful, well-balanced voice. He immediately re-awakened dying interest and put us back on the alert. The other singers were also fine and fulfilled the demands of their parts, making up an acceptable quartet despite differences in vocal timbre. The massed choirs from New York and Boston produced a lot of sound, though, for ears trained in European tradition, the sonorities were too harsh and the attack too aggressive. The Orchestra seemed disinterested throughout and played with obvious tiredness — to open a Festival parallel with subscription concerts and exhausting opera performances seems a rather unfair demand on the musicians' stamina — but to present a concert like this one is unfair to the musical public.

Shimon Bar (the Scribe), in a spoken part, was more than adequate; outstanding was Guenter Hillel Reich (Silva), who acted the Roman commander with personality and sure stage-sense but also made good use of his fine voice; Adi Etzion-Zak (the Old Woman) sang well and acted convincingly. David Cornell (El'azar) was too stiff and limited in expression; John Mitchinson (a Poet) and Dan Friede (Young Rebel) were rather pale in their small parts. The Chorus — members of the male section of the "Rinat" Chamber Choir — was well attuned and produced rich sonorities. Many other ensembles were equally well done — including the three washerwomen (Gila Yaron, Sylvia Shamai, Mira Zakai), the merchants (Abraham Salomon, Jerome Barry, Tibor Herdan) the young woman (Lois Yavnieli) and the children as well as all the soldiers, dead Jews and Roman officers.

(Readers are advised that two more performances are scheduled: Tonight at 8.30 and Saturday at 9 p.m.)

THE ISRAEL FESTIVAL. "Masada 967." Opera by Israel Elliraz and Josef Tal. Stage Production: Leonard Schach; Design and Lighting: Arnon Adar; Sound Producer: Dr. Eckhard Maronn and Heinz Luetzow; Conductor: Gary Bertini (The Jerusalem Theatre — July 17).

THE Israel Festival can be proud of presenting "Masada 967." The selection of the subject matter harboured many dangers: it could have turned out to be chauvinistic in content; there were many occasions where cheap effects could have turned the scenes into banal, crude reporting, leading into either orgiastic or inadequate acting and bombastic pageantry; the taped music and effects might have turned out oppressive or unacceptable.

True, to treat Masada on the stage can never do real justice to the unbelievable happening 1900 years ago, but Israel Elliraz has avoided all pitfalls, and his 15 scenes of unreality have a great impact.

Josef Tal's music cannot be gauged by conventional standards — it is not an orchestra *ersatz* but tries to add commensurate electronic sounds to the surrealist world of symbolism and dream-like flashbacks.

Highest praise for Leonard Schach's production, which solves problems of staging destruction, death, rape, raving, tenderness, grief, pride and prejudice — with a never-wavering sense for good taste. There are excellent costumes by Andrea Meltzer. The sound — very plastic in its all-directional application (only once did an unwanted feedback noise creep into the electronic world) — was excellently reproduced by Dr. Eckhard Maronn. The preparation of the singers and chorus was in the hands of Yitzhak Steiner, whose conscientious preparation could be felt in the outstanding performance of soloists and ensembles which surely provided a great help to conductor Gary Bertini, who masterfully kept all his singer-actors together with the taped music.

Tal's approach is one of utter economy of applied means. Electronic sounds, of course, lend themselves admirably to the creation of an eerie atmosphere. His treatment of the voices is reasonable; parts are difficult but singable, and the musical line grows out of the dramatic situation. The ensembles avoid exaggerated elaboration, but even connoisseurs of counterpoint can appreciate occasional application of polyphonic writing. Text, music, production, all fit tightly and persuasively into a complete whole which can not fail to deeply stir even the most sceptical or conservative member of the audience.



MUSIC/Yohanan Boehm

A memorable mid-summer in retrospect

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23 JULY 27, 1973

Mendel Kohansky

HAVING STARTED my column on such a high note, I shall now proceed to recount the week's disappointments.

At the world premiere of *Masada 967* — which has already been reviewed from the musical point of view by any colleague, Yehanan Boehm — I was troubled by the clash of styles: the ascetic austerity of Joseph Tal's electronic sound versus Israel Eliraz's conventional, emotional, story-telling libretto. With Arnon Adar's modular, geometric set further stressing the austere character of the opera, the text becomes the odd man out. It also does no justice to the subject, even within the conventions of the style in which it is written.

I am not sure that any libretto, or play, or poem can do justice to the subject. The story of *Masada*, where 960 men, women and children chose to die rather than fall into the hands of the Roman enemy, is too stark in its tragic simplicity to provide grist for the fiction-writer's mill. What writer in his senses would take it upon himself to describe, in any medium, the scene in which men slit the throats of their wives and children, then slew each other, until there was only one man left to die by his own hand. Historian Josephus Flavius, who often confused the role of historian with that of a fiction writer, gave this scene only a few laconic, hushed sentences.

Israel Eliraz has walked where angels fear to tread, and though he has wisely refrained from depicting the actual events, only telling the story in the words of

the survivors and a narrator, his libretto, with its shallow verbiage that adds nothing to our understanding of the awesome event, does not measure up to the subject.

In my first — rather bewildering — encounter with electronic music, I was impressed by the opening sounds, a forceful introduction to the drama about to unfold; but after a while I found the eerie sounds becoming a mere background, asserting itself only sporadically, with the singers' recitatives dominating the stage.

As a spectacle, *Masada 967* is on the static side. Director Leonard Schach has laid stress on creating tableaux which are uniformly beautiful in their geometric severity, assisted by the stark costumes and the unobtrusively dramatic lighting. Some of the performances, notably those of Hillel Gunther Reich as Silva and Adi Ezion-Zak as the Old Woman, have moments of high drama, while Shimon Bar as the Scribe flatly delivers the flat text.

The Festival management has done well to include a great deal of explanatory text in the programme in order to help the viewer to understand the proceedings. Unfortunately, the English-reading audience which needs it most is handicapped by the abominable translation, which renders whole sentences unintelligible.

OPERA NEWS

SEPTEMBER 1973

TEL AVIV

While neither *Il Trovatore* nor its main participants—Richard Tucker, Gilda Cruz-Romo, Mignon Dunn and Zubin Mehta—needed any introduction to Israeli audiences, the electronic opera *Masada 967* by Josef Tal, commissioned for the Israel Festival, was an interesting, daringly novel undertaking. The *Trovatore*, though in concert form, emerged powerfully, the cast singing splendidly; but it was Mehta who gave the performance its form and shape.

If any art can do justice to the happening 1900 years ago when 967 men, women and children, at the end of a three-year siege, chose to kill themselves rather than fall into the hands of the Romans, the production presented at the Israel Festival was it. A hushed audience followed the stage proceedings with increasing tension. Librettist Israel Eliraz has wisely refrained from depicting the actual events of 73 B.C., telling the story of the fall of Masada in the words of the few survivors and a scribe. His fifteen scenes of unreality have great impact.

Josef Tal's music cannot be judged by conventional standards. Instead of an orchestra he has employed the possibilities offered by the electronic synthesizer and the sounds expressed by those means fit the world of symbolism and flashbacks, adding immensely to the drama. The soundtrack is a composition with distinct sonorities and expressiveness. The tape—recorded at the center for electronic music of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem—was prepared in two-channel stereophonic sound. The notated singing parts are difficult, but the musical line grows naturally out of the dramatic situation.

Leonard Schach's production deserves praise for his taste and resourcefulness in staging rape, destruction, death and grief. If there are some overstatic moments, he has nevertheless created beautiful effects of geometric severity with utter economy, helped by dramatic lighting and Andrea Meltzer's excellent costumes. The scrupulous preparation of the singers in the hands of Yitzhak Steiner resulted in an even and secure performance of soloists and ensembles, and Gary Bertini masterfully kept his singers together with the taped music. Gunther Reich as Silva and Adi Etzion-Zak as the Old Woman must be singled out. The opera was commissioned by the National Council for Culture and Art at Israel's Ministry of Education. *

TRUDY GOTH

Israel

EXCERPT from " O P E R A " November 1973

Josef Tal's new opera

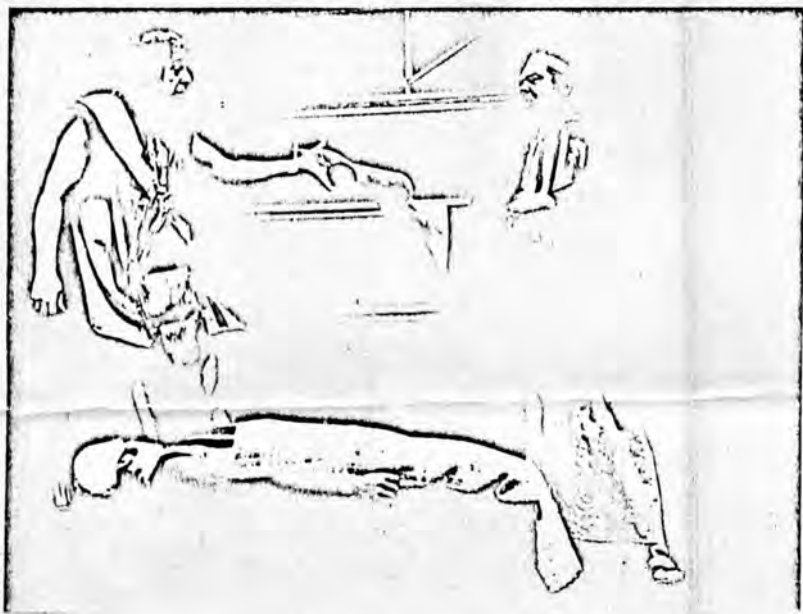
Dora Sowden

In a series of events which included outstanding concerts and a visit of the Royal Ballet, perhaps the most significant 'happening' at the Israel Festival this year was the première of a new opera *Masada 967*. Commissioned by the National Council for Culture and Art of the Israel Ministry of Education specially for the 25th anniversary of the State of Israel, it was created by two Israelis – Josef Tal (composer) and Israel Eliraz (librettist). Four performances were given during the Festival in the new Jerusalem Theatre.

The opera consisted of 15 scenes in which solo singers and choruses combined with electronic orchestral music non-stop for 75 minutes. The theme was the cataclysmic event in Jewish history when the Romans attacked the Herodian fortress of Masada and the Jewish resisters made their last stand at the close of the long war with Rome. The number 967 refers to the 960 who killed themselves rather than be taken by the enemy and the seven who hid and survived.

Josephus Flavius is the main historical source of this story, but the librettist has used it very freely – permissibly so, but, in spite of so many scenes, rather

Hillel Günther Reich as Silva, John Mitchinson as the Poet in 'Masada 967'



statically and even woodenly.

Josef Tal was both enterprising and effective in his use of mechanical and human sound forms. The overture was evocative of coming tragedy in the soft, slow progress of the electronic structure, and some of the arias were impressively dramatic with hardly a hint of diatonics.

Yet, despite fine singing and excellent co-ordination of the electronic and vocal scores by the conductor, Gary Bertini, the opera might have missed its mark had it not been for the production by Leonard Schach, who for the past ten years has been a resident producer of the Cameri Theatre in Israel. He has also, from time to time,

been staging productions, including opera, in South Africa (where he was born) and in other countries. His latest achievement had been another world première – *I Mantici* an opera buffa by Giulio Ferrari at the Barga Festival in Italy.

What dynamics there were in the performance of *Masada 967* came mainly from the sheer inventiveness of Leonard Schach's production. He used a multiple skeletal set of geometric design (by Arnon Adar) so skilfully that he kept the scenes moving and the characters animated. This was a feat that gave continuity to choppy and ill-balanced episodes, and interest to music that tended to sameness. For instance, there was a chorus of dead Hebrew defenders for 13 minutes, but a rape scene for four; a mad woman's solo for 11 minutes, but the principal character, Flavius Silva, commander of the Roman Tenth Legion, got no more than half that. It needed much resourcefulness to make these and other items including five children stiff with concentration on their vocal atonalities, look as if they hung together. They could so easily have been reduced to charades.

There is this to be said for the librettist – that the story is too big for the compass of time given to it. It needs Wagnerian or Berliozian proportions to make any real impact beyond the traumatic feeling inspired in those who know that the Romans spent 12 months and had 10,000 men engaged in the siege of Masada. Indeed, the conquest of Judaea took them longer than the Gallic Wars!

As for the music, except for some fine moments in the solo of the Old Woman who raves against fate, and of the Roman Commander who rages against the rebels, the rest was largely recitative. The electronics tended to grow monotonous, but in this too there were memorable effects, particularly where the reddening of the scene symbolising the final destruction was blended with dying sonorities – and then silence.

According to a programme note, the electronic sound-track is not just a background 'conglomeration of noises' but 'represents a composition worked out in its own structure and logic'. It is doubtful, however, whether it could sustain itself on its own as so many opera scores can. There were moments when the electronics were not only against the voices but an irritant – seemingly irrelevant.

It must be said, nevertheless, that the stereophonic sound was admirably recorded by the Centre for Electronic Music of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Dr Eckhardt Maronn, 'Tonemaster' of the Hamburg State Opera (which staged Josef Tal's opera *Ashmodai* – also conducted by Gary Bertini – in 1971) came to Jerusalem to aid in the sound production. (It is of interest that the Munich State Opera has now commissioned an electronic opera from Josef Tal for 1975).

Towering among the singers was Hillel Günter Reich (baritone) as the Roman commander Flavius Silva. He projected personality in voice and manner and gave a fluency and force to the dramatic implications. His management of the difficult vocal line was grand. Other singers who contributed strongly were John Mitchinson (tenor) as a poet commenting on the situation, David Cornell (bass) as Elazar, leader of the Hebrews, and Ady Etzion-Zak (soprano) as the Old Woman lamenting the destruction. Some of the best music fell to the 'Rinat' Chamber choir and they sang with stirring effect.



Hillel Günter Reich as Silva, Lois Yavnieli as the young woman survivor

ISRAEL FESTIVAL

Masada & Jerusalem

PHILIP GILLON

In musically conservative Jerusalem, Masada 967, an opera with electronic music, has scored an astonishing success. Perhaps because the music is interspersed with many moments of conventional song and speech, perhaps because it is comprehensible despite advance billing of surrealism, Israeli audiences reacted with relief and a warranted enthusiasm.

"Masada 967" with libretto by Israel Eliraz and music by Josef Tal, given its world premiere at the Israel Festival, is one of the most arresting of Israel's contributions to the creative arts.

It depicts the last day of Masada. The Tenth Legion, led by Flavius Silva, has burst through the double

walls and, in the Prologue, Silva gloats about the pending slaughter, rape and enslavement for the greater glory of Rome.

But the Romans are defeated by the vanquished. The number in the title refers to the 960 suicides, two women and five children found dead by the Romans.

Silva tries for 15 scenes to understand what has happened but by the end of the opera the might of Rome has been defeated by the spirit of Masada and it is clear that Israel will live again.

This simple account of the plot is unfair to its subtleties. Poet Israel Eliraz has depicted these anguished souls, Jewish and Roman, in flexible, sensuous language. Josef Tal's music is eerie—supernatural cries coming from Dante's Inferno, tortured and tormented. But they fit the theme.

The Rinat Choir and the soloists, brilliantly conducted by Gary Bertini, met the great demands of this opera with fine singing and sound dramatic sense.

Another world premiere has been Darius Milhaud's *Ode to Jerusalem*, commissioned by the festival authorities.

There are two Jerusalems. One is the city fought for and restored

to Jewish dominion with its controversial high-rise buildings. The other is a Jerusalem of the mind, "Ir Shalom," City of Peace.

It was this Jerusalem that Milhaud portrays. The audience, expecting drama, with memories of paratroopers bursting through the Lions' Gate, weary soldiers weeping at the Wall and all the other excitements of recent history, were accordingly disappointed.

Milhaud was not concerned with any of this. His piece is conventional and traditional. The three movements portray a spiritual quest and the Israelis felt that the octogenarian French-Jewish composer had not delivered the goods.

But when the 25th anniversary and the Six-Day War have become history, the deeper qualities of the "Ode"—the spirituality and intellectual search which are there—will be appreciated.

JERUSALEM POST

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Electronic opera, 'Masada 967,' given premiere

By YOHANAN BOEHM

Post Music Editor

The world premiere of Josef Tal's electronic opera "Masada 967" — named for the 967 Jews who fought Rome from the rock fortress — was given last night at the Jerusalem Theatre as part of this year's Israel Festival. A hushed audience followed the dramatic production with ever-increasing tension and intense participation.

The performance was impressively directed by Gary Bertini, who kept his singers and actors attuned to the electronic tape which had a perfect all-directional sound. The surrealistic scenes kept the audience spellbound throughout.

The production was a major contribution to Israeli theatre and a most interesting experiment in new media.

There will be performances at the Jerusalem Theatre tonight, tomorrow and on Saturday night.

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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"¹). 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"². 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

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