

Vocal Music composed in Israel to Arabic texts :

TSIPPI FLEISCHER

THE CANTATA "LIKE TWO BRANCHES"

for chamber choir, two oboes, kanun, cello, tar-drums with supplements

How vocal art music draws inspiration from its environment...

Tsippi Fleischer studied composition, theory and conducting at the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem (B.Mus.) and Music Education at New York University (M.A.).

In 1995 she obtained a Ph.D. in Musicology from Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan. (Diss.: Luigi Cherubini's "Médée" (1797) : A study of its Musical and Dramatic Style). She also studied Hebrew and History of the Middle East as well as Arabic Language and Literature at Tel Aviv University (B.A.).

She has held numerous positions, academic and other; she received several scholarships, awards and prizes; she has published a number of articles and 16 scores of her music as well as five recordings of her works (instrumental, vocal and choral). Her music is performed all over the world.

An authorised copy of the score of her cantata "Like two Branches" is deposited at the ICCM in Namur.

Tsippi Fleischer is an example of how it is possible to deal with ethnic sources (European techniques and oriental tradition) in an aesthetic, creative, serious and innovative way.

(Extracts ; the complete article - in English - together with numerous musical illustrations may be obtained by writing to the editor.

Analytical aspects from a paper by Israeli musicologist Shulamith Feingold -SF- have been included).



Genesis of the Composition

... After years of Oriental studies and the composition of art music inspired by Arabic literature (the song-cycle Girl-Butterfly-Girl to surrealist texts from Lebanon and Syria of the 60s, Ballad on Expected Death in Cairo to words by Sallah Abd El-Sabur of Cairo of the 80s, The Gown of Night of 1988, based on the voices of Bedouin children from the Israeli Negev desert) I was keen to work with an Arabic text again, but this time with old, pre-Islamic Arabic, and to create a well-designed musical setting for it.

This is how the idea was born for a cantata to be performed by the foremost Israeli chamber choir of the time, the Cameran Singers. I suggested to Avner Itai, its conductor and musical director, that my text should consist of a selection of verses by the extraordinary 6th century Bedouin woman poet, Al-Khansa. A chamber ensemble would support the singers - two oboes, cello, kanun (a plucked zither of the Middle East with 50 to 100 strings) and a set of oriental tar-drums with some supplements. My immediate response to the rich language and daring philosophical ideas of this Bedouin poet was a tonal image focusing on a particular Arabic *maqam*, the *Hijaz* - well-known throughout the Middle East - with voices and instruments together evoking the strong entity inspired by the lines of the text.

Preparations for the actual composition involved my intimate familiarisation with the idea... I read the poet's *divan* and deci-

ded upon the selection according to which I would plan the musical structure. It is important to stress : this poetry has been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, and the collections published lend themselves to many different interpretations in which I needed to orientate myself.

At the time I was becoming familiar with the Cameran Singers and their vocal potential. In addition, in order to clarify the possibilities of setting of Al-Khansa's text, I had ... to refer to the section of the thesis by Anayat Wasfi Shaalan of Cairo. Here she instructs contemporary composers on the usage of vowels and consonants for setting Arabic texts. (Shaalan is an expert on vocal music and holds a doctorate in this field from the Academy of Music of Bari, Italy).

The next stage was to deal with the instrumental aspect ; ... I took great pains to familiarise myself with the oboe (with the aid of Master Artist Heinz Holliger), the cello (with Master Artist Siegfried Palm), the concert kanun (with virtuoso Armenian kanun player Wartuhi Lepejian, previously coach of the girls' choir of the Armenian

church in East Jerusalem). It was obvious to me from the outset that I would use the instruments in a sophisticated manner in order to serve the aesthetics which I uphold unequivocally ; and that it would be necessary to choose the players very carefully, as they would need to perform both as chamber musicians and as virtuoso soloists.

The compositional work was done in a number of stages : after the whole draft had been completed, Itai went over it with me, ... Then came the stage of preparing the vocal score and passing it on to the choir, editing the montage with the instrumental parts - in other words, the completion of the full score - and providing the instrumentalists with their parts. Itai himself was the first to try out the Arabic singing during our long weeks of working sessions, and later I stood at his side during the extremely intensive rehearsals. I worked a great deal with the vocalists on their pronunciation of the text and with the instrumentalists, preparing them prior to the combined rehearsals of the entire ensemble.

The first three lines of the Bedouin poet Al-Khansa's Arabic text :

١. كُنَّا كَعُضَيْبٍ رِي فَهَرَمُومَةٍ بُرْفَا
فَلَمَّا إِذَا قِيلَ قَدْ طَلَّاتِ عُرُوقُنَا
أَهْنَى عَنِّي وَأَهْدِي رِيْبَ الرِّثْمَانِ وَنَا
هَيْتَا عَلَى فَيْرٍ مَا نَمُنُّ لَهُ آلْشَجْرُ
وَطَلَبَ عُنْدَ حَمَا وَأَسْتَوْسِقُ آلْثَمْرُ
يُعْجِبُ الرِّثْمَانُ عَلَى سَيْتِي وَرَكَ يَدْرُ

The literary translation (by Sasson Somek) of the poem is (extracts):

*Like two branches :
Of the same tree-trunk we grew.
The branches spread out, the tree
Flourished, fruit ripened -
When suddenly
One branch was cut off.
Nothing survives the cruel hand of Time.
.....
Every morning at sunrise I remember Sakr
And I remember him when the sun goes to rest.
Wherever I turn, I see a bereaved woman
Bitterly crying,
Crazed by grief at the loss of a brother.
No they do not mourn a brother as you were to me.
With soothing words I console myself,
But I swear by God : I will never forget you.
O, how my heart aches, remembering you.
I shall weep for you,
So long as the ring-dove on a branch laments,
So long as stars shine for travellers
In the dark of night.*

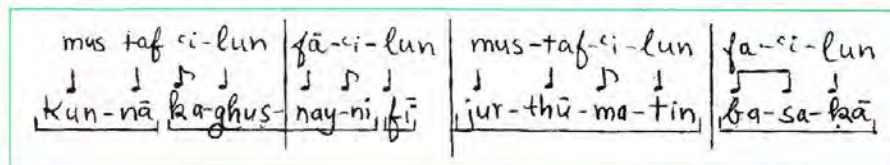
The work was premiered six times throughout Israel by the Cameran Singers during the second half of June, 1990, ... Immediately afterwards it was recorded in Tel Aviv for a CD, Arabische Texturen - Art Music Settings of Arabic Poetry (Aulos Schwann Koch 3-1420-2 ; this CD includes also "Ballad of Expected Death in Cairo" and "A Girl dreamed She was a Butterfly").

Text-Music Relationship

The tendency is to be as faithful as possible to the rhythm of the Arabic language

with its many repetitions and rich texture, but not to be constrained by the meter of Arabic poetry. To my mind, to preserve the recurring accentuation would be too mechanical, would ignore the descriptive and dramatic potential of the words, and would even weaken their impact unnecessarily.

Here, for example, is the poetic meter of the text with which the work begins (one notes immediately that the frequently used albasit metric patterns divide the words ; in the poem, the expression is extraordinarily concentrated in contrast to the stable poetic meter (long vowels and closed syllables are given in a long/heavy beat/accnt ; short vowels in a short/light beat/accnt):



" One of the prominent places in which one can illustrate how closely the text is followed, is in the work's codetta : 'I shall weep for you ... (from mm.735 to the end).

The perception of the eternal in this sentence is given a static expression musically : above the tonal effects scattered about in the instrumental ensemble, made up of varied ostinato lines, a spoken cluster with fixed dynamics (mp) appears, each of the 12 vocalists declaiming the text on his/her natural fixed pitch and in a fixed rhythm dictated by the natural rhythm of the spoken sentence. It is interesting to compare the rhythm of the

spoken chorus with the poetic meter (a : anacrusis, c : crusis ; m : metacrusis) :

" One notices that most of the original literal stresses are preserved, whether by the length of the tone or by its place in the musical meter. However, in contrast to the poetic meter which follow patterns, the musical meter adapts itself in accordance with the words themselves : the stressed syllables are situated at the beginning of the measure (crusis) whereas the unstressed syllables are arranged around them - before them (anacrusis) and after them (metacrusis). This arrangement makes for directional flow in the declamation of the text supported by more rhythmical variety than when the poem is

read according to the meter" (SF).

SF was interested in my compositional processes. How do co-ordinate the entities of text and musical language ? I replied :

" The first stage is intuitive. A general associative correlation is created with a particular motive being selected in order to serve a line or a verse of the text. At this stage a tonal, textural, dynamic and harmonic plan is designed.

In the second stage, I relate to the text and the melody almost as if I had written both. That is to say, my identification with them is so complete that some elements

attractive - advancing performance - electrifying

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text	fa-saw-fa 'ab-hai-ka mā nā-hat mu-tā-wwa-ka-tun
according to poetic meter	
in the music	
text	wa-mā 'a-dā-at nu-jū-mu llay-li kis-sā-rī
according to poetic meter	
in the music	

seem to latch automatically, even resulting in small changes being made to both text and melody. There are places where the solution is set aside for the moment.

Only the third stage are the materials finally co-ordinated, whether by means of melodic or rhythmic alterations, development, interpolations, elisions or treatment of the text - melismatic extensions, repetitions of certain syllables, parts of words or whole words."

The Melodic Aspect

Throughout the whole work, motives of my own are interwoven with borrowed motives - quoted in various ways and at various levels of elaboration.

An example of the borrowed motivic group: the following is taken from the book of Hijaz melodies El Hitami: Classical Instrumental Music of Egypt - Part IV (The Hijaz Group), American University Cairo Press, 1983 (It is a Hijaz melody by the Turkish composer Yusef Pasha, inspired by the samai tradition with its 10/8 meter):

... "the rhythmic flexibility of alternating beats and meters in the composed melodies is greater than that in the ethnic melodic sections quoted", and in this way, via the composer's thematic ideas, we approach the extra-European rhythmic world, negating symmetry.

SF feels that a detailed harmonic analysis has yet to be undertaken:

"The use of modal-maqamatic elements, the borrowing of ethnic melodies which are basically monophonic or connected to a rhythmic ostinato, the composition of atonal melodies - all these usually do not sit well with functional harmonisation. And at any rate, what is the logic behind the confluence between various layers? Is it possibly nothing more than a chance encounter, charac-

terising heterophonic or atonal textures? What types of chords appear in the work? To what degree are they based on the tones of the *maqam*? Clusters? Triad formations? Fourth formations? What directs the progression of chords - functionality? Parallel formation harmony? Do the different layers of texture proceed in a similar fashion from a tonal-harmonic point of view, or can one come upon various types of behaviour patterns at one and the same time?"

Looking back on the process of composition involving the cantata, I can testify that the harmony is a result of linear massing in most cases - either by layering or by polyphonic juxtaposition. I have no doubt, for example, that the fourth formations were inspired by the tradition of organum singing which has survived until today.

Sound and Textural Aspects (Main Components)

Since 1986 I have become intensely aware of sound in the broad sense of this term (and according to Jan LaRue's definition). I

have developed sensitivity to colour, ensemble, methods of vocal and instrumental production, the exotic value of language, registers, articulation, texture and dynamics. Thus in the cantata *Like Two Branches*, in addition to its important function of fully exploiting the Hijaz maqam, a central position is given to sound: it helps to achieve atmosphere, interprets and supplements the text, at times defining cadential cutting-off points, and is pivotal to the formal design generally.

The Chorus

The vocal body employed is a mixed chamber choir. Choral timbre as regards the division of voices is extremely varied: basically it is a chorus of six voices (S, MS, A, T,

Br, B). As such it appears in the cantata in fugal and polyphonic segments which create a dense vocal fabric (mm.53-63). But in addition, there is a maximal division into 12 voices, division into pairs of voices - in unison or at a fixed interval - or into partial groups - high or low voices only. The most conspicuous example of the great polarity in effect that the difference in texture create, is situated in the seventh section, where the men's chorus with soloist appears, followed by the women's chorus in the eighth section.

In many places the chorus is clearly treated as an ensemble of soloists with many virtuosic functions - melismata, the use of very high registers, large intervals, complicated polyrhythm, etc.

Another aspect of sound as applied to the chorus is the approach to the voice: the pronunciation of the Arabic language - its resonance and intonation - dictated the registers, the design of the melodic line and the choice of the performing ensemble.

"In the specific case of the cantata *Like Two Branches* by Tsippi Fleischer, the data system (the creative artist, the title, the sources, the period and the place) represents an encounter between extremes:

- A Jewish woman composer; and a Bedouin Arab woman poet
- 20th century music; and poetry from the 6th century
- Traditional European musical genre with liturgical religious connotation (cantata); and pre-Islamic *Jahiliyya* (however, this cantata has no divisions between sections; in this it is reminiscent of the "anti-structural" additive basis in Arabic music)
- A western trio ensemble (2 oboes and cello) with mixed chorus; and kanun, tar drums and darbuka (a goblet-shaped drum of the Islamic world with a single head)

• In the melodic and textural fields, western harmonic and polyphonic development; and motives springing from the Hijaz maqam.

The multitude of possibilities of stylistic attributes arising out of these data may lead to twofold expectations:

1. Stylistic eclecticism which allows for contrasting sections to lie side by side or even to be given simultaneously, like in a kaleidoscopic collage;
2. An attempt at synthesis which gives birth to a "mixed style" - not necessarily in the negative sense of the term - a style which bridges cultures, nations, religions, periods and compositional techniques.

The result: what can be described as a breakthrough to Israeli reality and to the ancient Semitic East, by the blending together of similar elements and the collaboration between different ones." (SF)

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