

A Girl Named Creativity – Tsippi Fleischer's Biography On Butterfly's Wings over Lebanon and Mesopotamia

The dynamic musician moved from musicals to symphonic poems inspired by Arab poets. With the publication of her biography, which sums up decades of work, Fleischer explains why it is important to invest in documentation and preservation

By Amir Mandel | 29.4.18



"I love writing music," says composer Tsippi Fleischer. "I enjoy it. Producing, getting things moving, activating others – that's the hard part. I once said to my late husband, the linguist Prof. Aharon Dolgopolsky, that I want to spend all my life composing and leave the realization and production of the works to others. He replied, 'if you don't put in the effort to promote your work, no-one will do it for you'."

In March 2018, Fleischer had a triple celebration – the publication of *Tsippi Fleischer – A Biography*, edited by Dr. Uri Golomb, the performance of the children's opera *Oasis*, and the screening of the film *Tsippi Fleischer: Her Music, Her Life*. "This process has been developing and maturing over some years," she explains. "Right after the

completion and publication of the book, an opportunity arose for the children's opera to be performed live, in Israel. The film was a continuation of these events. "

In the spirit of the advice she received years ago from her husband, Fleischer is fully involved in the production of her works. She participates in initiating the project, in locating the team and performers and in the process itself. She is happy to work within formal and organized frameworks, such as the Israeli Music Celebration, but does not complain about lack of institutional support, infrastructure or public funding. She is driven by adventurous curiosity and an abundance of energy, which have also moved her work through different areas of interest and achievement.

In the 1970s, Fleischer, born in Haifa in 1946, focused on light music and *Zemer Ivri* – Hebrew Song [a genre also referred to as 'songs of the Land of Israel']. At that time, she composed original songs and musicals, and also wrote arrangements for Hebrew songs. She preserved a deep connection with *Zemer Ivri* as a scholar of the genre. In 2013 her book *Matti Caspi, The Magic and the Enigma* was published. The book takes the reasoned position that Caspi is a unique and important composer in the history of music. She compares his work to that of Gershwin and even Bach, while emphasizing one of her own most important fundamental principles in music, multi-disciplinarianism, the blurring of the boundaries between genres, cultures and styles.

When she felt that she had gone far enough in her work in light music, she began to delve into the work of Arab poets. She moved to the Druse village Dalyat El Carmel for a while, where she began to compose her first concert work, the symphonic poem *A Girl Named Limonad*, inspired by a text written by the Lebanese poet Shauki Abi-Shakra. Toward its completion and during preparations for its performance, she made indirect contact with the poet, through a friend in Stockholm, who told him that a symphonic work inspired by his poem was being written in Israel. The two corresponded for a while. This occurred during the period of the Good Fence between Israel and Lebanon, and the peace process with Egypt, and they hoped that they would be able to meet one day. However, when the situation on the Israeli-Lebanese border deteriorated, Shauki Abi-Shakra wrote to Fleischer asking to sever all contact.

Inspired by the text, by the environment in which she lived, and by one of the girls in the village, *Limonad* took form in Fleischer's imagination. With the extensive knowledge of Arabic that she had acquired and her interest in the culture of the region as described in her biography, "my first classical opus – in a strictly Western genre – just happened to be my first breakthrough toward a musical connection with the Arab

world." The second breakthrough was the song cycle *Girl Butterfly Girl*, of which Fleischer writes that "of all my works, this is the one that still draws me the most." It is also her most frequently played and performed piece. The poetic texts, as that of Abi-Shakra, are taken from an anthology of Arab poetry from Syria and Lebanon. The anthology, entitled *River Butterfly*, was given to her by Prof. Sasson Somekh, the Israel Prize laureate in the study of Orientalism, with whom she had studied Arabic and Islam.

Girl Butterfly Girl has been played and recorded in many versions and stands at an interesting balance point between 'Western' and 'Eastern' music. The song cycle has a Western musical infrastructure, a vocal line, and an instrumental line written in Western counterpoint. Fleischer, however, prefers to use oriental instruments and to improvise on the written musical score. The result is a work that brings these different traditions together, and each performed version of the work has its own unique nature. "The work has a simplicity which is almost naïve" says Fleischer, "and this has a certain charm."



Her marriage to Aharon Dolgopolsky deepened her interest in the relationship between music and Middle Eastern cultures. Dolgopolsky, an internationally renowned scholar in the field of Comparative Linguistics, immigrated from Moscow in 1976. He was one of the leading proponents of the approach that many languages originated from one common ancestral language, and studied the ancient languages of Mesopotamia, including Akkadian and Assyrian. Fleischer's interest in Middle Eastern cultures found its way into her musical work, and she began to examine ancient myths of the region as a basis for opera plots, and to explore the emotional and musical value of using texts written in ancient languages which are no longer in everyday use. In 2014 Fleischer composed *Adapa*, an opera based on an ancient Akkadian myth, all of which is sung in Akkadian. "It burned like fire in my bones," the composer says of *Adapa*. "I was always interested in Wagner's process, in the way he used myths as a basis for operas. This particular myth of *Adapa* is one that belongs to our region." The alien quality and mystery created by the sounds of an ancient language can be heard in Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, written in Latin. In *Adapa*, the use of Akkadian creates an atmosphere that is completely enthralling and transports the

listener to another world. It also enables the use of language as music, and emphasizes the special timbres selected for this composition.

"From the first, the opera *Adapa* was intended for video," explains Fleischer. "That's how it was created, and the quality of the performance, the recording and the visual aspect were very important to me. I don't compose for ratings, but I do hope that people will hear my work. That's why I invest a lot in documentation and preservation." For Fleischer, *Adapa* meant a step up in artistic terms. "The music makes use of multiple levels of pitches, of many quarter-tones in the orchestra, to create a mysterious, muffled feeling. This connects with the mythical nature of the work. In my view, despite the fact that the work occupies an unusual niche, it is communicative and, in some way, represents Israeliness - the connection and clash of languages and cultures. This is not a political statement, rather an artistic reflection of our demographics and of the multiculturalism in which we live. "

English translation: Vera Resnick