

NOTES ABOUT MY “ORATORIO 1492-1992”

Dr. Tsippi Fleischer

My work “Oratorio 1492-1992” for symphonic orchestra, mixed choir and ensemble of guitars and mandolas has the following five movements:

1. Of Wine and the Delights of Love
2. Of Turmoil (of Fear and Suffering)
3. Of the Upheaval and Storm of Expulsion
4. Of Wandering (of Temptations, Guilt, Persecution and of Despair)
5. Of the Return to Zion

I have aimed in my oratorio at presenting a bird’s-eye view of the history of the Jewish people. It starts with the Golden Age in Spain, through the trauma of the expulsion, the wanderings which followed in its wake, and closes with the redemption in Zion. This outline combines historical truth with my own subjective vision. In Spain, the three faiths – Judaism, Islam and Christianity – co-existed in symbiosis and I sincerely believe that this idyllic situation may yet be re-established. History has shown us that to confront the future with optimism is to triumph in the end: the Jewish people living once again as a nation in the Land of Israel is an eternal truth – a fulfillment of a need far superior to any manner of life in the diaspora. The expulsion, with all its concomitant suffering, may therefore be perceived as a positive point in the history of the Jewish people: it gave the impetus for the Return to Zion. At the outset of the work all three languages – Hebrew, Spanish and Arabic – are heard. Subsequently, we hear only Hebrew and Spanish and in the end, Hebrew alone.

Hebrew poetry from the Middle Ages appears in its original form, but I have introduced a connecting thread between the various verses of text in order to achieve a continuity of the outline described above. The poetry of Spain is redolent of earthy sensuality, whereas in the writings of the early poets of the Land of Israel (those who have never left the Holy Land), a certain feeling of spiritual distress pervades. Generally, Hebrew poetry of this particular kind is extremely concise in expression and contains surprising double-entendres.

Musically, this is a complex work for it combines the echoes of the past (formal melodies and conventions) with contemporary aesthetics (orchestration and tone-production). The melodic material has its roots in folkloristic motifs, starting with Spain (including medieval

Christian influences), through liturgical hymns of the diaspora in North Africa, Southern Europe, the Balkans and Turkey, and ending with my own Israeli-sounding motifs in the concluding movement. All these interweave spontaneously, responding to the dramatic requirements of the work; a Spanish flavour often prevails on account of the guitars, mandolas and harp added to the usual symphonic instruments. The orchestra, too, has an important role to play in the drama: more than once orchestral “actors” appear to take center-stage.

There are many sides to a work such as this: aesthetic, folkloristic, historical, psychological, cultural, philosophic. I feel I am but a link in the chain and have asked myself how far should I follow all these leads; can one compose this kind of work without delving deep into the relevant sources? I have built my work according to my perception of the aesthetic and historic concepts, creating a canvass touching upon my world of here and now. The rest is an illustration of a time in history – emotional and chronological – which I imbued with the characteristic of actual life.

Indeed, it is rather difficult to accept history as part of one’s personal and individual responsibility and yet remain detached. However, I have chosen this path quite deliberately and have made myself part of it.

Though the work presents historic aspects, the distant past and the more recent events merge within it. The boundaries between the past and the present disappear and I can even see the future therein because of my faith in the message it carries. The compositorial plan and the actual process of composition merge together in my work. The planning followed historic dictates and historic events much enriched my composition.

Here are some comments on the movements of the work:

First Movement: Though Jews were a minority, Jewish musicians enjoyed great popularity and were much in demand in Moslem urban centres. Naturally, their music reflected their surrounding and the prevailing motifs were adopted and adapted by them to suit their needs. In my work I have drawn freely upon the sources of ancient Spanish church music because the Christian music tradition of Spain attracted me greatly. I have avoided the use of accepted standards attributed to the music of Jewish communities. In the view of extreme theologians both Jewish and Moslem, music was considered provocative and corrupting. The ecstasy that music causes is clearly heard in this movement and is an accompaniment to both the indulgence in wine and amorous dalliance.

Second Movement: I was irresistibly drawn to the chants of various Jewish communities which, small as they might have been, had particularly rich musical tradition. Visual impact of the faintly veiled colours of El Greco's paintings affected me deeply and they too are reflected in this movement.

Third Movement: Here the inevitable shock of the expulsion is given a direct expression in music. The movement is very short and aggressive. The orchestra, plying mostly unisono, is heard in a drawn-out melody sustained by repeated shifts of quarter tones. This melody is joined by human voices in a siren-like sound which rises in volume to a scream in a descending melodic line.

Fourth Movement: It is an interesting fact that in Judaism, the Kabbala (secret mystic discipline) which had its beginnings in the Babylonian diaspora where such sect is first mentioned and which, according to written evidence, subsequently flourished in the Provence (France) reached its zenith in Spain with the publication of the book of Zohar. I perceived this as an expression of a refutation of God's omnipotence. The nebulous core of his Being becomes apparent and rationalisation begins.

Fifth Movement: In the 14th and 15th century the Kabbala spread to Italy and Redemption was at its heart. Following the expulsion from Spain the caucus of the sect moved to the town of Safad in the Holy Land. This longing of the Jewish people for national redemption is the link between their past in dispersion and their future in the Land of Israel. It is expressed in an aria for unaccompanied soprano solo which precedes the concluding hymn which symbolizes the return of the Jews to Zion.

Ethnomusicology and the efforts to preserve the folk melos flourish today and this is to be wholeheartedly commended. But we must keep in mind that in Israel, during the years of Mandatory rule and in the early years of independent statehood, the tendency was to put all ethnic music into the melting pot of national renewal. At the time only a few musicologists and some determined devotees had put up a fight to preserve the ethnic traditions in music etc. Although specific ethnic traditions were full retained in liturgical music and songs, in the field of secular and light music much of the original folkloric melos was lost.

The growing need and desire for interaction between the various communities caused composers writing in folk idiom to adopt a pluralistic ideology which served as a cultural leveler. My ideas have always been diagonally opposed: accentuating the folk elements in music was ever my artistic credo.

Of late attitudes have changed: today there is a deliberate return to the roots and origins of the various communities. Up to a point this trend is used for strengthening and building up of socio-political elements, an attitude which is entirely foreign to my own way of thinking. On the other hand I do appreciate the recognition by relevant official bodies of the beauty and importance of Oriental musical traditions and of the need for them to be accepted by all.

IMI NEWS 91/4-92/1