

THE ISRAELI COMPOSER TSIPPI FLEISCHER

an Interview with

Dr. Hanoach Ron

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"Israel needs the kind of composer whose mind is both analytical and universal, who can intelligently, lovingly and without any Western snobbishness, introduce a meaningful musical vision to this country's cultural pluralism", the composer Luciano Berio once said. Berio did not know at the time that all the qualities he was looking for in Israeli music, could be found in the recent works of Tsippi Fleischer, who had emerged as a rather unique composer onto the local Israeli scene.

Fleischer delves deeply into Israeli cultural pluralism by bringing together two worlds - that of Western music with all its historical strata, and that of the Arab music with its unique qualities. This encounter which is socially and culturally so agonizing, and politically so painful and violent, has become in Fleischer's work so absorbing, so real, even exciting, in its various musical manifestations.

Tsippi Fleischer was born in Haifa, Israel, 1946. She studied composition and theory at the Music Academy in Jerusalem. Subsequently she was awarded her Master's degree in musical education at New York University. All this time she studied Middle Eastern studies: Arabic language literature and culture, and has an M.A degree in this field. For her Ph.D in musicology she is completing a thesis on the Opera "Medea" by Cherubini.

- q. - How did you start your musical exploration of Arab music ?
- a. - It was simply an integral and inseparable part of my biography. In the "Reali" High School in Haifa I chose the Middle Eastern trend. As a result of my intensive studies of classical Arabic, modern Arabic and Arabic of the media, I was imbued at graduation with Arab culture and literature. When I began studying music, it was naturally pure Western music. Yet I upkept my interest in Arab culture. In fact I did never abandon it, so that in 1977 these two fields of interest converged in my first works in this style.
- q. - Is any encounter possible between Western music, which is basically harmonic, and Arab music, which is based on different patterns and is essentially monodic and replete with microtones ?
- a. - I am one of those who were enchanted by this boon called "harmony" in Western music. It is part of me. Yet Western music lacks the wonder of micro-tonality of intonation. Now I know that intonation in Arab music is much richer than that of Indian or Japanese music. There is no richer combination than that found underneath the half-tones of the scale system of Arab music. What fascinated me most were both the micro-tonal riches of the language and its sound, as well as its rhythmic aspect which is rather additive, but not banal. What I have done is combining the richness of Western music with the charm of the Oriental elements I have mentioned.

The problem is how does one go about it. How does one cast Oriental elements into the rich mold of Western music. My way of building the musical edifice is to follow the freedom of forms and rhythms. If I take for instance an Arab song, I treat it with respect: I try to carefully preserve the sound of the Arabic language. My goal is to use the language itself as part of the acoustics of the work.

This characteristic did not feature in my first works. My primary goal then was, before anything else, to have the Israeli audience understand the work. Consequently, my past works, my visit card, presented the Arab-Western encounter. For example "Girl - Butterfly - Girl" is performed both in Hebrew and in Arabic. But beyond the two languages, there still remains the problem of effectuating the atmosphere and tackling the text.

- q. - In this work, "Girl - Butterfly - Girl", which version is your favourite - the Hebrew or the Arabic ?
- a. - Naturally, I prefer the Arabic version, because it is more compliant with the text itself. When you hear the Arabic text you realize its acoustic value. It best comes to life in Arabic and when played on oriental instruments. Even today a certain Ensemble performs the work in a way of its own: the members of this Ensemble play it on flutes and a harpsichord (cembalo). They make an adaptation of the two oriental features, and it sounds rather unique. The oriental flavour intermingles with the sound of the Renaissance genre - and both coexist.
- q. - Is this some kind of a composer's statement, made by a Jewish composer in Israel while attempting to work with Arab music and integrate it with Western music ?
- a. - This is not necessarily a statement.
- q. - Not even a political statement ? By this I mean an extra-musical declaration.
- a. - A certain process has taken place. I have responded to the stimuli of the environment without issuing any manifestoes. The Arab world figures predominantly in our region. I am not attracted to it on false pretences. We live in this milieu. I consider myself an integral part of this region where I was born and where I continue to live. For me this is not a particularly courageous act. This consistency of composing one work after another with an Arabic text, the penetration into concert halls, and the assimilation of forms such as the Cantata and the Oratorio into Arab music, have all become irrefutable facts. This is a consistent work of a person who has found himself artistically and linguistically. As far as linguistic development is concerned, in the beginning I was not aware of certain aspects. In "Girl - Butterfly - Girl" for example, my view of the "Makamat" was not systematic. In one of the songs I rather favoured the quarter-tones, while in another I left them out altogether.
- In "Ten Fragments for Oboe, Clarinet and Bassoon", composed in 1984, I insisted on using a certain Makam almost the way Mozart insisted on (using) the major or Beethoven on his C-minor. I keep on exploring and probing this problem of composing in Makam. It is a process that is growing deeper and wider. I am going through a phase where I intertwine Arabic with various ancient and modern languages.
- q. - Are you committed to an ideology? Such as Mauricio Kagel or Luigi Nono?
- a. - I don't write music denouncing Sadam Hussein. No, I am not such a committed composer. I have adopted this symbiosis. In Israel we have always been steeped in this kind of music. That's why our audience is more willing to accept this music today. The Israeli audience does not look upon it as something exotic or as the epitome of the unconventional and fantastic. My music is conceived as part of a natural process, as part of a historical trend.
- q. - Every committed composer eventually falls into the trap of triteness. Is this what you are afraid of and is this why you are not committed to an ideology ?
- a. - I will never come out with a platitude. I don't even have to stir away from it, because I am not that kind of person, but I am adventurous. No work of mine will ever be like anything I have already done. I always write something new. I was requested once to compose a Cappella work for a children's choir. I simply threw the commission away, since I have already composed a work of this kind and I never repeat myself. But this commission spurred me to go further, to seek new musical trends for children's choral singing. That is how it occurred to me to use materials in Arabic, and this time with voices of Arab children, in this case Bedouin children. This happened when I composed "The Gown of Night".

q. - When was "The Gown of Night" written, and how did you go about composing this special musical work with Bedouin children -

a. - I can hardly speak about writing in this case, since it was not done in the conventional way, the pre-domination. It was a fascinating experimental process that took about an entire year during 1988. My curiosity led me to these children, living 40 km north of Beer-Sheba in the Negev, where I could listen and absorb impressions to my heart's content. Then I decided to "compose" along with them, with their immature voices and their native Arab accent, still unspoiled by civilization.

I got my inspiration from the barren rocks and encampments, and realized then and there that the work will be based on their speaking - whispering - yelling voices. I wasn't attracted to their singing. Then the central idea of an image of sound and form began to crystallize: The night generates the morning. From that moment on everything was subjected to this goal: Exploring the sound effects produced by the native Bedouin children, recording the raw material in the studio, preparing the sketches, processing the materials in the studio again down to the finishing touches.

q. - The early years of Israeli music, the 40's and 50's, were characterized by a special style fashioned by composers, natives of Germany or regions influenced by the Austro-Hungarian culture, who wrote in a "Mediterranean style". The principle they followed was taking the traditional music of the Sephardi Jews and moulding it into the cast of Western patterns. People claim that these composers were in fact filled with conceit, as they arrogantly looked down upon oriental music from the high pedestal of the Western composer, and admired it quite naively.

These composers lived in the centre of Tel-Aviv, read the "Time" magazine, (glanced through "Life"), indulged in their afternoon nap, a habit they had brought with them from Germany, and composed music about camels. They watered the potted geranium in their city balcony, but wrote music about a desert they may have never seen. Some Israeli critics consider it as a cultural-musical "fraud", since it did not originate from a profound understanding of the Orient, but rather from a German's or European's marvel at the exotic Levant. Is there no danger that your pursuit of Arab music might revive this kind of fraud ?

a. - I hope not - what you consider arrogance, I see as an innocent or even hollow pursuit of exoticism. I am afraid that even today Israel is looked upon as the Levant by the Germans. As long as we cannot prove that we are capable of taking these materials and putting them into a work that is distinguished by purely artistic qualities, there will be Germans who insist on looking upon us as Levantines. As far as I am concerned, the process was an integral part of me. I have always been enveloped by this music. I also received the kind of education that provided me with the compositional technique of a different level. This is why I tried to preserve the human dimension of the children's voices in "The Gown of Night". At first I had 70 colours that I had selected out of the raw material. I kept eliminating the colours, till I retained no more than about 40 timbres. Consequently, I was left with such a "depleted" texture.

q. - What do you think about the "folkloristic quotation" ?

a. - I have kept away from Bartok's aesthetics. Folklore is only one phase, beautiful in itself. We Israelis don't have folk songs, because we know all the composers, they are not anonymous. A folk song is anonymous. My materials are never a mere quotation. In my most recent Cantata "Like Two Branches" I took a book of a Makam Hijazi as a starting point. The book was published by the University of Cairo, and it is a collection of tunes which are widespread in the Mediterranean Basin. I copied for myself the tunes I liked onto a page, and started to work out the Cantata. I broke the materials apart and stretched them and then started creating things of my own and adding them. I never quote, not even from folklore.

- q. - How did the Israeli audience respond to this aesthetic approach ? We know well that our audience does not understand Arabic, and this refers to the audience of classical music exclusively.
- a. - I have tested it with my last Cantata. It was performed in several concert halls all over the country in front of large audiences of classical music, known basically as conservative. They found it interesting, even remarkably good. They responded very well. The sound of Arabic was not unfamiliar or bizarre, especially as I would never use a political text. I have no political inclinations and I do not identify with pro-P.L.O. texts. The Jewish Israeli audience consists mainly of two kinds: one is conservative and finds it hard to accept any form of contemporary music, including mine. And the other kind is wonderful, always eager to hear things and very receptive when innovative works are presented. This kind of audience reacted very well to my new work.
- q. - How did the Arab or Egyptian audience respond to your works ?
- a. - I haven't had a chance to perform my works in public concert halls in Cairo, but I introduced them privately to my colleagues over there. In Cairo it was the easiest, because the conductors, the musicians and musicologists are familiar with the texts and the music made sense to them more than to the intelligent audience in Israel. In Cairo I was encouraged and reassured. I couldn't consult anybody here, in Israel, because who knows and who understands these texts ? The Arab Israeli audience is a different story altogether. When I introduced my works to them, part of the audience treated me with suspicion, thinking: who is this woman, what does she want with us ? Another part of the audience reacted with flattery, but I find both approaches - suspicion and flattery - unacceptable. So the only real feedback I got was from my friends in Cairo.
- q. - Who wrote the texts of your song cycle "Girl - Butterfly - Girl"? Have you ever met these poets ?
- a. - They are Lebanese and Syrian poets. I have never met them because of the political situation. One of them is a very popular Syrian poet, Mouhamad al Marout. His plays are frequently staged, and he is specially well liked in Cairo. Let's not forget that Beirut had been badly damaged. Lebanese writers and poets meet not only in Beirut, but also in Paris, quite a lot so. There is a particular café there which they frequent. I corresponded with one of them, Shauki Abou-Shakra, who wrote the text that inspired me to write one of my early works: "A Girl named Limonade". We exchanged letters at the end of the 1970's. I used the pseudonym Odelia, and the letters reached him via Stockholm. I kept it up to the time of the scheduled première. Since I wanted him to come to Israel (it was possible at the time, through "The Good Fence"), I exposed my true identity as Israeli. Once he found that out, he asked to sever our connections. Nonetheless he did not break them off completely. He contacted me through an Italian monk who was writing his doctoral thesis on his works and sent me with this monk some of his poems and unpublished works. He also sent word with the monk that any connection between us was unwarranted due to the political barriers. I still dream of writing an Opera once, using the text of one of the Arab poets of this school.
- q. - The musical avant-garde of the 50's and 60's has actually vanished. Today there is a tendency to return to tonality, sometimes even to neo-Romanticism. How do you personally feel about this trend?
- a. - Tonality features in some of my works. If I take a Makam as a basis for a work, this in itself constitutes a clear statement of a particular kind of tonality. This is why I don't think I have to wait for something to happen in the future. On the contrary, I think the young composers of the new trend are probing compositional concepts I have been using all along. I like three composers most of all: One is Lucciano Barrio. There is something in his timbre, his technique, that I admire. In each of Barrio's works there is a touch of the divine inspiration. He is not a technocrat. In his works, the boundaries between voice and instrument are quite indistinct, and this interests me in particular.

My second favourite composer is Ravel. My reason for preferring Ravel today may stem from my partiality to colour and timbre.

The third is György Kurtág, because his approach to folklore is rather like mine – an immediated bond of an artist in touch with his environment. I particularly identify with the purity of his artistic concept and especially with his diverse forms and expressionism.

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Tsippi Fleischer's growth into greater sophistication and complexity takes place in the realm of the profound bond between music and the milieu. It is a musical-social-cultural-mental milieu feeding on two sources: The Jewish-Israeli and the Arab. Luciano Berio may be right in saying that Israel must look for a composer who will know how to mould this special reality into an ingenious oeuvre. Tsippi Fleischer is the first truly authentic pioneer to explore this territory.

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