

Gerhard Koch on Tsippi Fleischer

Dear Tsippi, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I have to apologize: I cannot speak Ivrit, except: shalom! But even my English is not perfect at all. Nevertheless I will try to transmit my ideas to you. I am very glad and thankful, to be here in Jerusalem for this event and to talk to you und with you.

I have been to Israel several times, and I have met quite a few composers from Israel, both here and in Germany. One of them is Tsippi Fleischer, whom I know for many years. I appreciate her greatly as an original and prolific composer and also her vividly charming personality. When she asked me: would you like to come to Jerusalem, to give a lecture about me and my music? I agreed spontaneously. Now I am here, wondering a little bit about a new situation for me and look forward to fresh experiences. It is my first lecture, to be held in English. I am neither an academic musicologist nor an experienced expert in Israeli music. By profession I am a music critic. I have been writing reviews on concerts, operas, festivals and theatre with a strong emphasis accent on the contemporary production, travelling from Frankfurt, where I live, to many countries. Therefore, I overlook perhaps, at least partially, the international scene of composing.

With this in mind I ask you to permit some general remarks. With the increasing globalization a question of cultural importance is getting more and more important: what is the meaning of "identity"?

In 2006 a conference was held near Berlin with the subject: "What is German in German music?" led by a Russian musicologist. Participants were composer Dieter Schnebel, conductor Gerd Albrecht, the Israeli ambassador Shimon Stein and myself. During the discussion all clarity concerning the subject was fading. However, you must not be afraid: I don't like the notorious German passion for strict definitions. And I intend not at all to inform particularly you about the idiomatics of Israeli music. Instead I will try to find out what is characteristic and attractive in Tsippi Fleischer's music for me. I have heard of her some performances in Frankfurt and Cologne and of course quite a lot from CD's. And in addition I heard some works reading the score. If you would ask me: what is in your opinion fascinating in her music? I can answer: There is a strong unity of diversities, a kind of shifting of tendencies and even layers. The style is more heterogeneous than homogenous. For the European avant-garde, dominated in the fifties by the Darmstadt-based serialism in music, the crossing of aesthetic borders seemed somewhat heretic, in opposition to the severe ideal of the

so called "absolute music". Germany appeared once more as a centre of dogmatic purity and rigid structuralism.

I dare to put forward the thesis: Tsippi Fleischer did scarcely write mere "absolute music". Because her works, so far I know, have a programmatic character and make use of materials from quite different spheres. And very often they include the human voice, referring to words and literature. Her works are strict but not sterile. So I got the impression: her music has to do with the situation in Israel, mixing a variety of traditions and ethnic influences, ancient, even archaic roots: the oriental origins. But many musicians, fleeing the Nazi-Regime, brought their genuine European traditions, German or Czech for instance, to Israel. They must not necessarily have been representatives of modernism and avant-garde. Tsippi Fleischer's family came from Poland. Perhaps they brought some reminiscences to Chopin or Karol Szymanowski or polish folklore to Israel.

Under this aspect of Unity, resulting from separate roots, one work by Tsippi Fleischer seems to me extremely significant: *Like Two Branches*. It is a cantata, based on Poetry by the Arabian woman Al-Chansá, living in the sixth century and highly appreciated even by the prophet Mohammed. We hear a mourning poem of a woman, lamenting the death of her brother, killed in a fight, perhaps in a tribal conflict. The subject appears archaic and modern at the same time, existing, alas, all over the world. Therefore, you may call it realistic. But in a higher sense it is more surrealistic, because of Tsippi Fleischer's peculiar mixture of Arabic language textures and a complex system of musical layers, combining oriental scales, western instruments, the characteristic guttural vocalisms of the Arabic and quasi avant-garde clusters. The music is shifting in the realm between artificiality and folklore. But indeed it belongs neither to all over the world-modernism nor to the exotic. In this composition the Western listener may discover quite a lot of the many branches of culture in Israel: the traditions brought by the European immigrants, escaping the holocaust, the different oriental roots, Jewish and Arabic, old and new, and the tendencies of contemporary western composing. Stylistically the historic term from the art of mannerism, "conchetto", seems to me fitting.

Let's hear an excerpt from "Two branches".

I can not imagine, how "exotic" some kind of orientalisms will sound to Israeli listeners today. For comparison I will play to you an example not from the Near East, but from the Far

East. Isang Yun, composer of South Korea, was famous in the sixties for the transforming characteristics of traditional Korean court-music into the idiomatics of modern western orchestra. Perhaps you will hear some musical strategies similar to those of some Israeli composers. Here is "Reak" by Isang Yun.

I hardly can imagine today a country or mere region on earth as a basis for idylls or pastorales, peaceful sceneries, even paradise. The conflicts, the struggles seem to be permanently present everywhere. And nobody will get the idea: Israel must be the miraculous exception. Therefore it does not astonish me to detect Tsippi Fleischer's passion for archaic subjects of deadly fundamental combat, the mythical confrontation of brothers or lovers who are bound in hatred together, for instance the tragedy of Cain and Abel. resulting from jealousy. The cruel story of Medea is a topic of classical European culture by the ancient Greek dramatist Euripides. In this drama the woman of a foreign, atavistic tribal society has been brought by Jason, her lover, to a Greek court, in the so called "civilized" world. But he betrays her, marries a younger wife. Medea's revenge is terrible, poisoning the bride and killing even her own children to actually hurt their father. She is the type of "femme fatale", attractive but murderous, a kind of a witch - with a traditional bad image: a condemned woman - referring to the patriarchal point of view.

But views are changing. Today Medea presents one aspect of feminism strengthening the right of woman and mother against the ruling of man and father: an inversion of perspectives. But times are changing and therefore it is not accidental at all having three new operas showing sympathy for Medea - by Rolf Liebermann, the Egyptian born French female composer Michèle Réverdy and Tsippi Fleischer. Tsippi's "Medea", based on a libretto by Israeli author Rivka Kashtan, is written for a mezzo-soprano and four instrumentalists, who are acting and speaking also on stage, simulating the Greek citizens chatting about the mysterious Medea. In the end the opera keeps in balance. Whether Medea killed her children or whether they were murdered by the people stirred up to revenge against the foreign sorceress.

Centre of the work is Medea's big monologue, sharpening her aggressions towards the perfidious Jason.

I did attend the first German performance in Cologne and experienced a staging perhaps crucial to Israel. Medea's final act portrayed her as a terrorist, fighting against society in general, throwing a hand-grenade to destroy the whole repressive system itself.

We hear Medea's monologue.

I don't dare to define what could be essential or authentic music of Israel. And in addition I will not try to describe the development of Tsippi Fleischer's work chronologically. I prefer to select some aspects. But in Tsippi Fleischer's Fifth Symphony I feel an impression of the different possibilities of approach, a framework of styles, melting very old and rather new materials, using the normal apparatus and technical media. It's fascinating to hear a mixture of musical languages you won't experience in the world famous German Avant-garde-festival in Donaueschingen for instance.

Let's go back to the beginning: the motto of unity in diversion. The cantata *Like Two Branches* brings together ancient Arabic language and modern Israeli composition. The opera *Medea* transforms a mythical classical drama into present times, but it belongs to the Mediterranean sphere nevertheless, producing a synthesis of space and time. Tsippi Fleischer titled her Fifth Symphony *Israeli-Jewish Collage*. You have to understand "Collage" rather literally. Because it means not only musical materials from different regions but also a shifting of medial and technical levels, in a manner you could call "surrealistic" too. But in fact it is a religious work, synthesizing also attitudes. For instance, you will hear an Israeli rock-singer of today with a short, nearly rude shouting statement. You will hear the modern symphonic orchestra, in addition a group of shofar-players - and from the tape the voices of five Chasanim with ecstatic cantillations from old Jewish sources, from different Asian and African countries. Those microtonal melismas, nearly unknown in classical European music, have been electronically modified for the loudspeakers. Tsippi told to me how extremely difficult it was to synchronize such art or rubato-singing and to adapt the pitch to the levels of the orchestra. You will hear also instrumental overtones whispering magically. Tsippi Fleischer's Fifth Symphony evokes to me an impression of a nearly osmotic process, enthusiastic and sophisticated at the same time. In my opinion and to my ears the multiple metamorphosis of the Chasanims voices is most fascinating. Perhaps I am completely wrong: But I actually hear, from an occidental perspective of course, with an occidental approach a over all oriental manner of sacred singing, Jewish as well as Islamic. Maybe I am a little bit naive by detecting in these vocalisms "two branches" from one tree as well.

Homogeneity of aesthetics is Tsippi Fleischer's artistic aim not at all. Even a work of one perspective reveals some contrasts. For instance, her first Symphony, titled "Salt Crystals", based on bizarre mineral structures seen at the Dead Sea, results musically in the shifting of static surfaces of sound, extremely sharp singular signals and chaotic percussion. We hear the beginning.

Tsippi Fleischer is not at all the type of a hermetic composer, concentrated only on her own circles. She is familiar also with the European avant-garde. Particularly the Hungarian born composer György Kurtág with his extremely subtle music is one of her favorites. And she admires the famous German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. One of his few works operating mainly with permanent shifting, oscillating columns of overtones, leading to associations to the Jew's harp as well as to the overtone-singing of the Mongolians is his composition *Stimmung* for vocal sextet from 1968. Tsippi had the wonderful idea of continuing the excerpt from her First Symphony, *Salt Crystals* with a passage of the narcotic, psychedelic, nearly minimalistic *Stimmung*.

In Israel the situation of today always means, much more than in other countries, history too - and vice versa. It's not by chance that Tsippi Fleischer wrote an oratorio on Jewish history, which begins in 1492 with the expulsion of the Jewish people from Spain and ends in 1992. The composer is looking back to the past, searching for genuine Jewish identity, but with the precise knowledge, that such a remembering cannot occur without intense feelings of suffering and pain. In an European country such an oratorio nearly automatically would provoke the criticism of overemotional patriotism. But in Israel the conditions are quite different. And the two languages besides the Hebrew of the middle ages, Spanish and Arabic, guarantee an open minded, also musically diversified view. And the catastrophic attack of the third movement, depicting the terror of expulsion, gives a stirring impression of an everlasting horrifying situation, developing from long held depressive darkness to frenetic screaming of despair. Let's hear the beginning of the work with the oscillating layers of Hebrew, Arabic and Spanish, the lingual framework of the period before expulsion.

I have come to an end - and like to thank for your patience listening to my attempt to tell some fragments about Tsippi Fleischer and her music. Thank you very much. Shalom!