

It is the parched desert of the Book of Exodus; two Jewish children go off to find water but there is none; then two Bedouin children rescue them and lead them to an oasis, dancing an Arabic 'debka', and, to the same tune, a Jewish 'hora'. The Bedouin children form a loving, peaceful friendship with the Jewish family, yet eventually part from each other, each following their own destiny, their own traditions.



Photo: Roland Fraenkle

DREAMS OF COEXISTENCE

Composer **TSIPPI FLEISCHER** in conversation with MALCOLM MILLER

“This is the dream of the opera, and it is our dream too,” observes Tsippi Fleischer of her latest opera *Oasis*, commissioned by the Karlsruhe Kantus Juventum Choir and premiered to great acclaim in Germany last November.

Fleischer’s interest in the dream of coexistence of Arabs, Christians and Jews has been the ‘mission’ of her musical career ever since her earliest works of the 70s, such as *A Girl Named Limonad*, a symphonic poem, and the song cycle *Girl Butterfly Girl*, inspired by Lebanese and Syrian poetry. That thread connects her works of many genres, including five symphonies, several operas and multi-media works, choral and chamber works, all of which have made her one of Israel’s most vibrantly topical, avant-garde, yet accessible composers, performed and recorded worldwide. I was fortunate to speak with her in London about her personal credo and her background while she was on her way to Germany for rehearsals for the operatic premiere.

“My style is always a bit oriental. I am a Semitist, well acquainted with languages of the area.” Indeed Fleischer’s interest in Arabic culture stems from her home city, Haifa, where she was born in 1946 to Polish émigré parents and where her father, whose family perished in the Holocaust, owned a shop selling pianos and radios. “I was educated from childhood to be very open to coexistence with Arabs. I used to see Arabs buying in my father’s shop. One of my friends was from an aristocrat Arab family.” From the age of eight, the young Fleischer learned Arabic, alongside Hebrew and religious studies at the Reali School, “the best private school in Israel”, one of the first to teach Arabic, a practice which became more widespread after 1967. “This world of

Arab culture got into my brain, into my blood, since I was a linguistics lover from the very beginning.” That love was nurtured in her university studies, where she combined a music degree at the Rubin Academy, Jerusalem, with composers such as Noam Sheriff, Yizhak Sadai and Tzvi Avni, with a BA in Arabic, Hebrew and Middle East History and postgraduate studies in Semitic Linguistics. “Till I was 30 I did not know whether to be a musician or a linguist.” However, Fleischer was always involved in music; in the early years in pop

Fleischer creates a narrative unity. “The first is about the loneliness of a person in the desert, who, in the second, finds no place in his tribe and is thrown from place to place; in the third he goes mad, losing his contact with the world, and the last is a dream, a girl who dreams she is a butterfly. It is based on an old Chinese tale that I learned from the Lebanese.” Fleischer’s main aim was to evoke atmosphere in each poem, without limiting the sonorities, hence the many versions that exist. The original LP was in seven different languages, and recently a CD

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and jazz, including a Bialik song for Chava Alberstein which is still performed.

Her unique grasp of Semitic languages gave Fleischer the edge: her first major work was a radical and innovative symphonic poem inspired by a Lebanese poet, Shauki Abi-Shakra, which decided her career. “*Girl Limonad* was the first opus that made me understand I was going to be a composer.” Since its composition in 1976, this symphonic poem has been widely performed and even choreographed as a ballet. One of its innovative features was the use of Arab style and melodies, for which Fleischer did field work, living for half a year in a Druze village, Dalyat al-Carmel, in the Galil, meeting local musicians “who played for me”.

Her most popular work followed in 1977: the song cycle *Girl Butterfly Girl*. “The cycle sets four poems by different Lebanese and Syrian poets of the 1960s which I had learned about from my Professor, Sasson Somech, a renowned Arabic translator.” To the four poems

(released by the IMI label) has appeared with the cycle in many guises, including with Middle Eastern instruments such as the oud, kanun and zurna.

Fleischer stresses the influence of oriental improvisation in her works. “I write for oriental instrumentalists so it is still possible to improvise, so they can breathe; I notate the line but the player can still add a lot, ornamentation, duplication, octaves, special touches, and many other things.”

Since those ground-breaking works, more Arab-inspired music has flowed from Fleischer’s fertile imagination. In 1988 she wrote *The Gown of Night*, (a setting of Muhammad Ghana’im), for magnetic tape, a studio processing of recordings of Bedouin children, in the village of Rahat, north of Beersheva. “They could not sing,” she explains “as there was no music education there, so I recorded their hissing, and whistling. I came to their class; they were wonderful – so cooperative and well behaved, and they did everything as I asked them to.” Putting the piece together at the Jerusalem

Music Centre, Fleischer devised a colourful graphic score with Arabic notation.

Her ease with Arabic has enabled Fleischer over the years to become involved in education, especially with Arab musicians, at the Levinsky College of Education, Tel Aviv, where she has taught for 35 years, and in Haifa, where many of her students have become teachers in their communities.

It was in the early 90s that Fleischer turned to her Jewish heritage, composing a major choral orchestral work for the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of Jews from Spain, which she hopes may soon be premiered in the UK. Entitled *Oratorio 1492-1992*, its Sephardi subject made possible an eclectic mixture of Hebrew, Arabic and Spanish texts and musical elements including ancient Christian-Spanish sources. "I learned them, but then I composed them in a different way." In general, Fleischer's approach to folk sources is akin to that of Bartók or Kodály; only occasionally are quotations used, while elements, like Arab *maqamot* (modes) are recomposed in her own voice. "I work with the maqam like a western scale. For me it is not 'exotic' but a tool."

More radical fusions flowed in her five symphonies composed between 1995 and 2003. The last is a post-modern collage, mixing an Israeli rock singer, synagogue cantors, shofar sounds and electronics with choir and orchestra. *Symphony no. 4* combines two Arab solo instruments, wind and percussion with the main orchestra, evoking improvisation.

Fleischer's radicalism also stems from her main compositional influences: Debussy, Stravinsky and the Hungarian György Kurtág, with whom Fleischer has enjoyed a creative dialogue. "We were together a lot from 1984 to 1994; I went to hear him in Berlin and Budapest and I showed him my scores."

Fleischer has written extensively about her creative methods, which are also documented in several films and videos about her music. Indeed the National Library of Jerusalem houses a large archive of her manuscripts ready for any eager researcher to plunge into. She told me how her music evolves in three basic stages. "I need time. I gather my inspiration, absorb my thoughts; it takes quite a while. I don't start writing fast; I feel the atmosphere, go to concerts and study scores; I drink the wine. Then comes the catharsis; I must be totally concentrated and with myself; that is how the draft is done. Then I start to copy it and deal with production. These are the three stages and they are always the same."

Fleischer described the stages of her opera *Oasis*. The director, Sebastien Stiebert wanted a new work to go with *Brundibar*, the children's opera performed in Terezin, and found her via the internet. He was inspired by her focus on the morality of friendship and coexistence. She immediately started to work with the librettist, Yael Medini whom she knew from her children's Bible stories. "I asked her to make one of them into a drama. Ten days later she sent me her draft for *Oasis*. Then I went to Sinai. I stayed there for inspiration, in a *husha*, a Bedouin camp. There were no sanitary facilities and I was shocked; I had never thought about it. The atmosphere served me imaginatively both ways, the same for the oasis and the Jewish camp. I did the neat score straight away and in two and a half months I produced a score which could be rehearsed. Quite a tall order! The rehearsals with children were very intensive." The work is entirely for children and was performed by a 13-piece ensemble drawn from a youth orchestra of high professional standard. The instrumentation almost matches *Brundibar*, but includes Arabic drums, oboe and clarinets.

A significant collaboration between Christians, Moslems and Jews of the 90s was the multi-media *Daniel in the Den of Lions*, to be presented at the JMI conference 'Art Musics of Israel' in March 2011. Following the peace treaty with Egypt, from 1987 to 1997, Fleischer travelled to Cairo a lot, and was intrigued by the limestone depictions of Daniel in the Coptic Church. "I went to the Coptic Community and they said, 'as a minority we really identify with Daniel'. So I decided to study their music. I went to church services and developed a friendship with one of the leaders, a professor of music, who enabled me to go to monasteries on the

Sudanese desert border. There I got my strongest inspiration, and filmed, later adding studio shots of the singers and players. Much of the music is Coptic in style, like ancient 'organum', and much is my own style; the text sounds half-Greek. Though I originally wanted the Coptic choir, I would have had to stay there for an extra month and it was deemed too dangerous, so I imitated the sounds of their choir."

"The Copts thought it would be a documentary film rather than an artwork, and some religious Jewish organisations objected to it as there are a lot of crosses in it, decorations from the Crusades. I never thought about it – it was just a part of it."

Though the DVD has not been shown in Egypt, Fleischer's music is unusual in being performed and broadcast across the Middle East. "My CDs are located in the Israeli Academic Centre in Cairo. It is accessible to anyone interested in culture." Moreover, Fleischer described how she received "an excited letter from a young man from Gaza in 1987 who heard *Girl Butterfly Girl* being broadcast on the Arabic channel of Israeli radio and was fascinated with it".

Tsippi Fleischer's oeuvre represents a much-needed bridge between cultures that one hopes will nurture dialogue and coexistence for the future. Her latest opera *Oasis* articulates that dream powerfully, and we can look forward with anticipation to its UK premiere, as well as to those of other recent works such as *Ancient Love*, settings of the Song of Songs and other texts, written for the German Tölzer Boys Choir. As the composer noted at the end of our conversation with an optimistic sparkle, "I am keeping up with my mission all the time".

Details of Tsippi Fleischer's recordings and publications can be found at tsippi-fleischer.com

Tsippi Fleischer will be one of the eminent Israeli musicians appearing at the JMI – IMR Conference **ART MUSICS OF ISRAEL** 28-31 March 2011. See **WHAT'S HAPPENING** page 34

