

Tsippi Fleischer:

Between East and West, from Ancient to Contemporary

Editorial comment:

Nathan Mishori wrote his article “Tsippi Fleischer Writes Music for Peace” shortly before his untimely death in 2001. In preparing it for publication here, we needed to edit his text and supplement it with biographical details that would reflect the composer’s current activities. Wherever possible, we confined these additions to footnotes. We also included a sequel article, by Uri Golomb, presenting several of Fleischer’s major works of the last decade.

Tsippi Fleischer – a prominent representative of the third generation of Israeli art music – was born in Haifa on May 20, 1946. At age 3, she was already drawn to music, in part thanks to her music-loving father, who worked in a music store. The economic difficulties that plagued her parents – both Polish-born pioneers – did not prevent them from providing their daughter with the finest education. At age four, she began to sing and to play the piano at her parents’ house, and at age six began to study the piano with a private tutor. By the age of 16, she had already graduated a four-year course at the Haifa Conservatory. She arrived at her other cultural focal point – the Arabic language – at the age of 10, expanding upon it at the Reali School in Haifa, where she chose to specialise in Oriental Studies. Her natural cultural inclination to Israeli issues – the Zionist pioneers; love and devotion to the Land of Israel and its roots – intensified at the age of 16 thanks to her activities as a member of the Scouts movement. It intensified to such a degree that, when she had to choose between her two loves – pioneering self-realisation on the one hand, and music on the other – she needed the moral legitimisation of her friends in the youth movement. At the age of 18, her attraction to music education and music-making led to her enrolment in the Music Teachers College in Tel Aviv.¹ Her early mental maturity allowed her to study several subjects in depth at Tel Aviv University, pursuing the themes which captured her interest since childhood – the Hebrew language, Arabic language and culture, and the history of the Middle East. Already in 1966, when she had finished her studies at the College, she began to teach at that institute, cultivating generations of young

¹ At the same time, Fleischer also completed her first book – a pioneering, wide-ranging and voluminous study of *The History of Hebrew Song*. The full text, in Hebrew, can now be downloaded from the Publications section on her website, www.tsippi-fleischer.com.

musician and educators. Today, she is still intensely engaged in the pursuit of educational projects related to her world as a composer and as a researcher of Israeli song.

In 1969, she completed with honours – and within one year – her first degree at the Jerusalem Music Academy. Her academic studies in Israel and abroad covered many areas; in addition to music (music history, music analysis and its methods, music education, the links between art- and folk-music), she completed degrees in Hebrew and Arab language, and the history and culture of the Middle East. In 1995, she received her PhD from Bar Ilan University for her wide-ranging study of Cherubini's opera *Médée*.

In light of these achievements, she was invited to lecture at the Department of Musicology at Tel Aviv and Bar Ilan Universities, and at Prof. Jehoash Hirshberg's Hebrew Song Project at the Hebrew University Jerusalem; at further education courses for music teachers; and at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem.

Since 1995, being aware that any additional cultural knowledge improves the creative process, she began to attend a series of lectures in philosophy and linguistics at the Tel Aviv and Haifa Universities. Her lectures and teaching topics also testify to her wide-ranging knowledge, which also informs her creative work. In the 1960s, she taught "Harmony and Composition" (Palestrina, J. S. Bach) and "Musical Forms" (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin); in the 1970s – "History and Improvisation in Jazz and Pop Music" and "Song Harmonizations";² in the 1980s – "Methods of Music Analysis"; and since the late 1980s – "History of Israeli Song"³ and "Eastern Music, European Music and their Interconnections". She has also lectured in the United States, Europe and Japan. Her private students included composers such as Amnon Wolman, Yair Dalal, Shlomo Gronich and Avishai Yaar; and performers such the late orchestral conductor David Shallon, pianist Ilan Rechtman, and prominent choral conductors (Michael Shani, Naomi Faran, Maia Shavit, Ronit Shapira and many others).

Alongside her many academic pursuits, Tsippi Fleischer's early career involved a significant engagement in light music. In the early 1970s, she directed the

² Fleischer recently published a treatise on the subject; see the Publications section on her website for details.

³ Two wide-ranging studies – one focusing on Matti Caspi's harmonic language, the other on Hebrew song – are in preparation.

female vocal trio “Bnot Chava” (The Daughters of Eve), for whom she composed and arranged songs and light-classical works; she was also music director of the then recently-founded Beer Sheva Theatre. She was commissioned to write music for The Orna Porat Theater for Children and Youth in Tel Aviv, and also worked frequently with actress Gila Almagor. At the same time, she created, in collaboration with director Hanan Snir, the renowned musical *Alei Kinor (Upon a Fiddle)*, based on a play by Sholom Aleikhem. The move to dance theatre came naturally: in 1974-1976, she created music for the Kibbutzim Contemporary Dance Company; in 1978, composed *Rattles, Baskets and Kindling* for the Inbal Dance Company. She was also instrumental in rejuvenating Sara Levi-Tanai’s 1930s choreographies on Biblical themes, such as *The Song of Deborah*.

The experience of composing dozens of stage works intensified her love and appreciation for the roots of Israeli art music. Among the composers of the founding generation, she especially praises Mordecai Seter for his cohesive musical idiom, linguistic sensitivity, dramatic power, expressivity and inner truth; she also holds the second-generation composer Ben-Zion Orgad in high regard, citing a special affinity with his profound literary knowledge and his sonorous approach to the Hebrew language.

Since 1977, she has devoted herself to the composition of art music imbued with an Israeli, Semitic and universal spirit. She notes at least three strands within her *oeuvre*, sometimes operating together and sometimes separately:

- “Oriental Music”, originating in her study of Near-Eastern, regional music (Maqamat, folklore) and continuing in its combination with non-Western traditions from around the globe;
- “Jewish Music” – based upon Biblical themes and other sources in Jewish history;
- “Israeli Music”, inspired by specifically Israeli sources (Hebrew poets, Israeli landscapes).

Her Oriental approach is already apparent in two unique works composed in 1977, which remain in the repertoire to the present day:

- A) The symphonic poem *A Girl Named Limonad*, after a poem by the Lebanese poet Shauki Abi Shakra. The work is characterised by alternating metres and impressive melodic writing, notable for its

transformation of musical themes with an oriental-folkloristic character. The work's four sections, played without a break, reflect the content of Abi-Shakra's poem in descriptive and interpretive sounds.

- B) *Girl Butterfly Girl* – a cycle of four songs for soprano and instrumental ensemble, setting poems by contemporary Lebanese and Syrian poets combined into a dramatic structure.

The musical style developed in these works, based on Arabic scales combined with modulations and transpositions, also served as a basis for many of Fleischer's subsequent works. In *Girl Butterfly Girl*, Fleischer employs vocal expressionism and modal impressionism. Through the use of rich chromaticism, she evokes a sonority reminiscent of quarter-tones; she also uses octave doubling to intensify the Eastern character of her textures, and alternating metres further enhance the distinctly non-European sense of time. The original version already contained two alternative versions of the instrumental accompaniment: one for an Eastern ensemble (violin and oud or nai), the other for a Western ensemble (flute and piano). The affinity with the East is also apparent in a later version for Renaissance instruments: harpsichord tremolandi, in octave doubling, evoke the oud, whereas the sound of a group of recorders – playing in quarter-tones – evokes the nai (a pastoral flute). More instrumental arrangements were produced at later dates, and singable versions in French and Spanish were added to the initial versions in Arabic, Hebrew and English. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's poem *I'm Sick of You* – an attack on hypocrisy in human relations – similarly inspired Fleischer to compose a series of six works for various vocal and instrumental ensembles, which received a single over-arching title: *Hexptychon* (1996/7).

These "Oriental" works represent one of the composer's prominent stylistic characteristics, apparent in her vocal and instrumental writing alike: the selection of notes, rhythms and timbres inspired by the sound of the languages and by cultural associations. Alongside the free forms, this selection represents Fleischer's personal interpretation of the texts. Given the composer's profound knowledge of Semitic languages, she frequently includes detailed pronunciation instructions in her scores.

Three of Fleischer's works are musical settings of texts by Else Lasker-Schüler: *Weltschmerz* (2001); *Mein Volk* (1995); and most prominently – *Lamentation* (1985), written after the death of Fleischer's five-days-old infant son.

The same traumatic event also inspired *Resuscitation – Five Miniatures for Cello* (1980); rapidly-alternating pitches charge the work with an expressive intensity. Yet many of Fleischer’s works, though inspired by tragic themes, nonetheless reveal her underlying optimism; examples include the cantata *Like Two Branches* (1989); *Ballad of Expected Death in Cairo* (1987); *Scenes of Israel* (1981/3) – a series of choral madrigals setting texts by six Hebrew-Israeli poets;⁴ *War* (1983) – an outcry of protest against war.

Fleischer’s personal optimism is clearly reflected in the educational aspect of her persona, manifest, for instance, in humoristic works such as the choral song *The Clock Wants to Sleep* (1980) and the miniature cycle *Spielmobil* (1995) – works imbued with startling, even theatrical sonorities. A sense of optimism also imbues the many works inspired by the hope for peace. It is connected with the landscapes and the musical-poetical culture of the Arabic countries she visited, receiving honour and recognition. Another important aspect of her work and personality is globalism, manifest in her treatment of the innovative sonorities she adopted, especially since the mid-1980s. Her music has accordingly received international acclaim, evident in the many live performances and recordings of her works around the world.⁵

Thus, two of Fleischer’s early electronic works (written in 1988) were selected for performance at the 1989 Unesco Composers’ Forum in Paris. *The Gown of Night*, based on a text by the Arab-Israeli poet Muhammad Ghana’im, depicts 19 nocturnal events which last until morning; the work is based on 70 readings of the text by Bedouin children. A similarly rich sonority is obtained in her work *In the Mountains of Armenia* through the combination of solo singing, clarinet playing and the voices of a girls’ choir.

Innovative sonorities are also apparent in Fleischer’s more “conventional” works; a German review of her *Lamentation* likened Fleischer’s sensitivity to timbre with Ravel’s. Fleischer, the “eternal student”, became familiar with this topic while attending lectures by analytic scholars like Jan LaRue (style analysis), Leonard Ratner (musical rhetoric) and Roger Kamien (Schenkerian analysis). Her close collegial relationship with György Kurtág, George Crumb and Dieter Schnebel in the 1980s

⁴ The work was dedicated to the memory of Fleischer’s childhood friend Uri Maimon, killed during the Yom Kippur war.

⁵ Full information and updates are available in the Discography and World Activity sections in the composer’s website.

and 1990s also enhanced her knowledge. In 1984, she met Kurtág for the first time in Budapest, and was enchanted by his writing methods. Subsequently, she dedicated to him her *Ten Fragments for Oboe, Clarinet and Bassoon* (1984), written in the maqam saba-zamzama. Fleischer's profound engagement with sonorities is already apparent in her early guitar suite *To the Fruits of My Land* (1981). This work combines archaic textures – which reflect the inspiration of her “first teacher”, J. S. Bach – with contemporary, virtuosic musical thinking, which evolves from monophonic writing to textural and tonal complexity.

The composer's subsequent interest in the performance methods of oboist Heinz Holliger, cellist Siegfried Palm, and kanun player Vartuhi Lepejian is clearly apparent in *Like Two Branches* (1989) and in her *Oratorio 1492-1992* (1991), written to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of Spanish Jewry. These works represent a particular peak in Fleischer's *oeuvre*, both in their fascinating sonorities and in their explorations of linguistic, human, national and universal themes.

Like Two Branches sets a text by the 6th-century Bedouin poet Al-Khansa, mourning the death of her brother in a tribal duel and promising to remember him forever. The work, consisting of 10 sections, was written for Avner Itai's Cameran Singers, and led to a moving encounter with Shimon Peres, erstwhile Foreign Minister. The music is rich with sonorous word-painting: the chromatic representation of the tree and its branches; the slipping, drowning horses (represented by the female voices' glissando and chromatic writing in the cello); the fall of the ripe fruit (represented by descending whole tones). This interpretive, pictorial music is masterly example of the combination of contrasting elements – Eastern and Western, archaic and innovative – in several parameters: **pitch** (maqamat, tonality, polytonality, and a-tonality); **texture** (from unisono to polyphony and harmony); **rhythm** (symmetrical and a-symmetrical combinations of words and tones); **dynamics** (alternating rapidly between extremes); innovative and traditional **timbres** (invoked through the use of various instrumental techniques); and the **sonorous-musical aspects** of the text and its setting, which is faithful to the ancient Arabic with its emphatic consonants while also serving the range of pitches demanded by the score.

Oratorio 1492-1992 is a more epic work, whose literary materials – derived primarily from medieval poetry – arouse more identification in Jewish-Israeli

audience. The epic character is manifest, not just in the work's dimensions, but in the three-way combinations of ancient sounds and texts – Hebrew, Spanish and Arabic – evoking the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The tragic context of the expulsion is portrayed in the work's second, third and fourth movements. The first movement is devoted to a description of Spain, and the final movement presents an optimistic conception, which views the return to Zion as a positive outcome of the expulsion. This is a moving work in several ways – aesthetic, folkloric (evoking the folk-music of most Mediterranean countries), dramatic, historical, documentary, psychological, personal, cultural and philosophical.

The 1990s multimedia cycle *Four Old Stories* represents a further development in Fleischer's creative examination of the contemporary, the Semitic and the Israeli; the Semitic elements, in particular, are explored further in geographical space and historical time. The cycle consists of four works:

- A) *The Goddess Anath* (1993), in Ugaritic; the style of this work incorporates a-tonality and *Sprechgesang*.
- B) *Appeal to the Stars* (1993/4): A prayer in Old Babylonian from the first half of the second millennium BC; this work combines singing, playing and ritualistic movement.
- C) *The Judgement of Solomon* (1995): An operatic scene in Biblical Hebrew, accompanied by magnetic tape. The live element – in singing, playing and movement – is entrusted to a children's choir.
- D) *Daniel in the Den of Lions* (1995): A setting of a Coptic text, inspired by the Coptic community's art and music. The sounds of the string quintet are combined with the vocal dissonances, creating powerful descriptive and psychological effects. This work is arguably the cycle's climax – the most powerful of the *Four Old Stories*.

Since these Semitic works impressed Arab listeners – both musically and in evoking the promotion of the peace process – *Daniel in the Den of Lions* was performed on September 19, 1996, at a gala event organised by the Peace and Middle East Division of the Israeli Foreign Office, which took place at Beit Gavriel (where the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan had been signed), in the presence of Egyptian and Jordanian artists and academics. The occasion was marked with speeches by Prof. Sasson Somekh, then head of the Israeli Academic Centre in Cairo;

Prof. Avner Itai, the conductor on the recording; and Egyptian writer and journalist Afaf Abd-el-Bari.

A year earlier (May 1 1995), Fleischer received a letter from Shimon Peres (then Foreign Minister), honouring her as the “Composer of Peace”. Among other things, Peres wrote:

Your multi-disciplinary artistic talent, combined with your awareness of the importance of promoting understanding and tolerance as basic values in the process of reconciliation in our region, endows your activities with an inestimable merit!

Over the years, Fleischer visited many countries around the globe. As an Israeli-Semitic composer and educator, she combines elements of the contemporary international style with ethnic music and various Semitic and European languages. This combination is apparent, for instance, in her magnetic tape cycle *Ethnic Silhouettes* (1988-1998), based on a series of materials recorded by groups of Georgian, Croatian, Eskimo and Tunisian musicians, electronically transformed by the composer. Thanks to all these, Fleischer is frequently invited to present lectures (even on the topic of peace – for instance, in Germany), and her works are performed frequently in North America, Europe, Egypt and Japan. She received several scholarships in Germany and the United States, to facilitate her creative activity.

Nathan Mishori

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Nathan Mishori’s article provides a wide-ranging panorama of Fleischer’s manifold achievements. It focuses particularly on her combination of Arab, Israeli and Jewish elements – which is indeed a major aspect of her *oeuvre*. Thus, Prof. Jehoash Hirshberg writes in his article “Tsippi Fleischer: Musician between East and West”:

Tsippi Fleischer represents the boldest attempt so far to integrate Arabic culture into a musician’s personal world as a composer, not as scholar or explorer, but as a sensitive and motivated artist.

Fleischer does not view her affinity with Arab music as rooted in ideology. Instead, she attributes it to other factors – such as awareness of her demographic environment, and the study of Arabic as a subject in its own right. The results, she argues, might **serve** a cultural-political purpose, but she does not set out with this aim in mind. Over the years, her aspiration for cultural synthesis has intensified. Towards the end of his article, Mishori already discussed two cycles which reveal her ambition to cast the net of inspiration beyond the present-day Middle East. *Four Old Stories*

constitutes an attempt to revive moribund languages; *Ethnic Silhouettes* derive their inspiration and materials from the documentation of living languages. Old texts (in *Four Old Stories*) and traditional materials (in *Ethnic Silhouettes*) are combined and modified through the creative use of new, innovative technologies; in *Ethnic Silhouettes*, Fleischer's electronic treatment captures temporally-frozen snapshots of free, improvisatory materials. Here too we can sense the unification of extremes – from folkloric improvisation, in which major compositional elements were determined in the act of performance, to the magnetic tape which leaves nothing to chance.

These characteristics are even more apparent in Fleischer's 21st-century compositions. The creative use of technology, for instance, is clearly apparent in *Saga-Portrait* (2002) – a setting of a poem by Dan Pagis, in which Fleischer allows the Israeli vocal artist Ety Ben-Zaken to engage in a fascinating dialogue with herself, confronting her live singing with pre-recorded tapes of her own voice.

Above all, the transition to the new millennium inspired Fleischer's entry into the symphony and the opera. Fleischer's five symphonies, written between 1995 and 2004, all carry poetical titles; they are relatively concise, one-movement works (lasting between 10 and 25 minutes); and each of them is a heterogeneous work – combining diverse thematic materials (as in the *Third Symphony*) or contrasting musical worlds.

These contrasting realizations of common denominators are apparent, for example, in the fourth and fifth symphonies. Both works reveal, in their own way, Fleischer's striving for the synthesis of opposites – East and West, written and improvised. *Symphony No. 4* (2000) is sub-titled *A Passing Shadow* (“The Al-Aqsa intifada [...] determined the fate of the symphony's poetic title [...] in a belief that the shadow shall pass. Nowadays, it seems more likely to engulf us in darkness”); in her notes, she called the work “an Oriental symphony”. It was inspired by the Irish artist Ross Daly, renowned for his improvisations on near-Eastern string instruments. The orchestra is joined by two soloists, who play and improvise on ethnic woodwind and percussion instruments. The work is essentially based upon a continuous melodic line – a kind of prolonged, a-symmetrical cantus firmus, played by the strings and surrounded by hollow sonorities (fourths and fifths) and heterophonic ornaments. The double-bass and the harp intone a rhythmic-melodic cell, which merges at key

moments with prominent points on the continuous basic line – signposts which evoke baroque elements (the continuo and the ostinato). Above all this floats the three oboes' chromatic line. The two ethnic-instruments players, who have internalised the basic line, improvise around it; the work therefore changes in each performance. The symphony is divided into five sections, but sounds, according to the composer, like “a single organic intensification, which preserves a continuous line moving from contrasting visions of the Middle East – from a peaceful utopia to an energetic, dynamically-terrifying vision”.

The *Fifth Symphony* (2002/3) is based on different aesthetic principles, already apparent in its sub-title: *Israeli-Jewish Collage*. This is a work for symphony orchestra and magnetic tape, the latter incorporating a variety of materials: versions of the Day of Atonements prayer Kol Nidrei sung by cantors from different communities (Cochin, Persia, Syria, Kurdistan and Morocco); shofar fanfares played by musicians from the Renanont Institute in Jerusalem; and an excerpt from a song by Israeli rock singer Shalom Hanoch (“Yes, the situation is difficult”). Most of these materials originate in oral musical cultures, characterised by a prominent improvisational element; but, unlike *Symphony No. 4*, this work leaves no room for spontaneous-improvisatory transformation in each performance. The materials are pre-recorded, and have undergone a process of electronic transformation aiming, as the composer put it, to facilitate “the shaping of their ‘narrative’ flow into five sections in a single continuity”. The *Fourth Symphony* enacts a vivid dialogue between traditions through the constant give-and-take between the musicians on the stage. In the *Fifth Symphony*, on the other hand, the entire responsibility is shouldered by the conductor and the orchestra: the representatives of the Western tradition must ensure that “in each performance there will still remain a spark of creativity – finding the ultimate balance between the magnetic tape and the live performers”. In the process, a dramatic, sometimes blatant confrontation emerges between the different elements.

A dramatic element is also apparent, as expected, in Fleischer's operas. At the time of writing, she has completed two full-length operas – *Medea* (1995), *Cain and Abel* (2001/2) – as well as scenes from *Victoria* (2001/5), an opera-in-progress based on a novel by Sami Michael; *The Judgement of Solomon* is also described as an operatic scene. The two completed operas share several elements. Both are based on ancient myths, which had already inspired many artists and musicians, and which

focus on humanity's murderous nature; according to Gerhard Koch, music critic for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, both reveal "Tsippi Fleischer's passion for archaic subjects of deadly fundamental combat, the mythical confrontation of brothers or lovers who are bound together in hatred".⁶ In both cases, libretto and music alike offer a creative, original approach to the myth.

In the case of *Medea*, the unconventional approach is already apparent in Fleischer's treatment of the operatic genre itself. The opera is written for one singer, who mostly portrays Medea – but in one key scene also portrays Jason, and therefore engages in dialogue with herself. The four players who accompany her are also actors, who portray the citizens of Corinth and their predominantly xenophobic, threatening treatment of Medea; in the version of the myth upon which this opera is based, Medea's children were murdered by the Corinthians, who subsequently framed Medea for the murder. The libretto is mostly written in English, but also includes segments in Georgian (the language of Medea's homeland); the Corinthians' words are to be spoken in the local vernacular. The music combines diverse stylistic elements – from Georgian folk music to *Sprechgesang*.

In *Cain and Abel*, the basic story remains close to the familiar Biblical narrative: the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice, and the rejection of Cain's, lead to the first homicide. Librettist Yossefa Even-Shoshan, however, expands the story and enriches it, and also alters several key elements. Adam and Eve are only mentioned in passing (and not by name); God is replaced by North – thereby evoking a pagan, rather than monotheistic, worldview. Most importantly: in *Genesis*, the two brothers offered fundamentally different sacrifices ("Cain brought of the fruit of the ground", while Abel "brought of the firstlings of his flock, and of the fat thereof"), whereas in the opera, each of them offered his Lamb – who is part lamb, part lover. The Lambs appear on stage as full-fledged feminine characters; the split between lambs and humans only takes place after the murder. Compared with *Medea*, this is a lyrical, conventional opera, with a clear division between singers and orchestra. The orchestration is modest, but successfully conveys the libretto's mythical, archaic atmosphere; as the composer writes in her notes, "oriental, ancient and local musical languages merge easily within that of the avant-garde. Side by side with modernism,

⁶ From a lecture delivered by Koch at an event celebrating the incorporation and cataloguing of Fleischer's works into the National Library in Jerusalem (November 6, 2008).

elements of antiquity flavour the tonal texture (harp, lute, harpsichord, recorders, certain Semitic sounds, and vertical columns of perfect intervals)". The music successfully portrays the libretto's human drama, with its rich potential for contrasts – from mythic-ritual distance to the erotic drama of the complex relationships between the characters.

Each of the two operas received two full staged productions in Israel and abroad (*Medea* in Cologne, *Cain and Abel* in Vienna), which presented different visions of the musical drama. The radical differences in approach between these productions demonstrate the multi-layered character of the works.

At the time of writing, Fleischer is completing several books and articles summing her work in music education and research on Hebrew song. At the same time, she is also investing her creative powers into three large-scale projects: the philosophically-inspired *Symphony No. 6: The Eyes, Mirror of the Soul*; the oratorio *Avraham Avinu [Our Father Abraham]*, portraying the birth of monotheism and commissioned for a premiere in Germany; and the grand-opera *Adapa*, which epitomises, according to the composer, her most lofty ambitions. In an interview with Esther Madar, Fleischer pointed out that opera had been her favourite genre for years; and the libretto (in the Akkadian language) reveals Fleischer's broad horizons and her ambition to preserve ostensibly-moribund languages, serving, in her words, as "evidence for the universality of the near east as the cradle of civilizations".

Dr. Uri Golomb

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