

Amnon Shiloah:

Tsippi Fleischer – Between East and West:

The Quest for cultural identity in Israeli music

MS, 1990; prepared for the French periodical *Levant*. Section extracted from a longer article

For approximately eight years, Tsippi Fleischer seems to have been haunted by the topic of East-West integration. There are, I hasten to add, no negative aspects to this “obsession”; on the contrary, it reflects genuine enthusiasm.

In June 1982, the Israel Composers' League organized a symposium on the interpretation and dissemination of Israeli music. Tsippi Fleischer – whom I had already met nine years earlier, at one of my courses on Arab music – delivered a paper titled “[Concerning our identity between East and West](#)”. Her words expressed and marked the path she would later follow. She wrote:

Even though we were born - we: the young or slightly older generation of the Composers' League – into the period in which the Darmstadt music festivals on one hand, and Imanuel Zamir's flute on the other, have become part of history, and we are familiar with Mordecai Seter's synthesis as classicism, I feel that each one of us as a creator persists in a struggle to establish his identity somewhere between east and west. For we live here, even our early forefathers are from here, yet our history has endowed us (and continues to endow us until this very day) with a basic familiarity with western culture and its integration.

Moreover: our dispersed people are from both east and west. When I say "each one of us" I wish to include the group of young composers in the general group, and from here on will speak as one of the general community (all the members of the Composers' League). The struggle is not raging between members of the League but within each of us, whether at a more or less conscious level. At times, arriving at a definition of one's position (between east and west) is easy and happens naturally, and at times one evades it, being torn between the extremes (of east and west). There are those who proclaim their status: "This is where I exist in the expanse (between east and west)" or "this is my point of departure". And there is another situation: the definition comes into being with time.

In another context, she added:

I can never turn my back on the aesthetic and acoustic ambience which accompanied me since childhood. It is a part of me – but only a part; the other part consists of the influences of the environment where I live now. I was born here and I live here, so for me it is completely natural to breathe in other smells, and they enter the same body, the same soul.

Among the flavours which comprise these delicacies, Arab culture and music are particularly prominent. This attraction of Fleischer's also has a humanistic dimension, the quest to bring the Arab and Jewish neighbours closer together. For this purpose, she doesn't settle for familiarity with the Arab sound-world; she also studies Arab language and culture, as well as Middle-Eastern history. These studies allow her to penetrate more deeply into the spirit of the texts she sets to music. Her love for musical vocal timbres is rewarded by the exploitation of the Arab language's acoustic values, which inspire her to use appropriate techniques. The idea of exploiting Arabic as a characteristic marker is somewhat reminiscent of the initial evolution of a major musical tradition, when Islam arrived in the seventh century. Fleischer's music, however, vocal techniques and modern compositional means are paramount, and this partly reduces the role of Arabic in her music. On the other hand, the Eastern influence is not limited to Arabic texts; Tsippi Fleischer also resorts to modal techniques and to an instrumental backdrop which frequently includes instruments used in Arab music.

In the song cycle *Girl Butterfly Girl* for soprano and instruments, Fleischer sets poems by Syrian and Lebanese poets. These poems are written in a modern style, and combine scenes of daily village life with surrealistic images. Fleischer created two versions for her song cycle: one in the original Arabic, accompanied by *nei* (Arab flute) and *oud*; the other, in Hebrew or English, is supported by a Western ensemble of flute and piano.

In another work with an Arabic text – *The Gown of Night* (1988) – Fleischer turned to the Bedouin tradition. This work emerged from her work with Bedouin children, who declaimed a short text for her in different forms. The diverse tones created by the children's voices formed the basis of a collage, which was realised on magnetic tape. This work celebrates the Arab text's tonal qualities.

In 1987, Tsippi Fleischer visited Cairo and made contact with local musicians. During this trip, she encountered a text by the Egyptian poet Sallah Abd El-Sabur (1931-1981), which moved her and inspired her imagination. El-Sabur's "Ballad of Expected Death in Cairo" was included in the poet's anthology *Dreams of an Old Rider* (1964), which revealed the clear influence of T. S. Eliot and Eugene Eunesco. His poetry from this period often dealt with sickness, loneliness and death. Tsippi Fleischer utilised the poetic techniques of his text, with its gentle lyricism and darkened timbre, and created a sophisticated musical analogue for them. The instrumental accompaniment – two violins, viola and piano – is characterised by its modesty, as it supports the

voice through chords, gentle patterns and evocative transitional passages. Against this background, the vocal part is notable sometimes for its melodic jumps – characteristic of European rhetorical Expressionism – and sometimes for its *parlando* style, which reflects the textual meaning. The Ballad was premiered at IRCAM in Paris in December 1989, in two versions: one for mezzo-soprano, and the other for an Arab tenor who travelled from Cairo specially to perform the work. This was, without doubt, an unprecedented integration.

At the time of writing, Tsippi Fleischer is completing a cantata, setting texts by the sixth century poetess Al-Khansa.

* * * * *

In Israel in the 1990s, which have just begun, there is a remarkable profusion of co-existing schools of compositions. The types of music created here is scattered all along the existing East to West spectrum. The description of the aforementioned works by Fleischer allows us to appreciate her distinctive place within this spectrum.