

Tsippi Fleischer at the Mirror

Interview by Andrea Angelini, ICB Managing Editor

Tsippi Fleischer was born in Haifa, Israel, of Polish-born parents, and grew up in a mixed Jewish-Arab environment. She teaches at Bar-Ilan University and the Levinsky Institute in Tel Aviv. Some of her students have become composers and well-known conductors. Fleischer's style has diversified greatly during her creative life; her many achievements are characterized by the dynamics of change. Her beginnings in the 1970s were typified by a search for a compositional style in which to incorporate her Oriental studies. The 1980s saw the formation and crystallization of this style, marked by a finely honed tonality and images of the Israeli landscape. At the end of the 1980s her work reached new heights with settings to music of literary Arabic texts. A spurt of creativity in the 1990s found expression in daring musical textures inspired by ancient, far-distant Semitic sources. It was a great honor for me, as ICB Editor, to meet her for this interview.

Andrea Angelini (AA): I read in your biography that you were born in Haifa, where you currently live, but your family comes from Poland. Israel is considered a bridge between Western and Eastern cultures. How is all this reflected in the music you compose, especially choral music?

Tsippi Fleischer (TF): Haifa is my birthplace and the place I consider home, although I have travelled all over the world. (My name, "Tsippi," is short for "Tsippora," which comes from the Hebrew word for "flying bird".) Those origins are

naturally reflected in my music, in the topics I choose for my works. Nevertheless, well-known scholars have described my whole *oeuvre* as typically creating a bridge between West and East, especially a link to the “Orient”[1]. My Polish Jewish parents are responsible for giving me a rigorous Western education, including training in Western music from a young age, yet I could not ignore the Oriental atmosphere that surrounded me. My “Oratorio 1492-1992” (1991, op. 25) provides a choral example: I furnished a Western Baroque medium with actual content from medieval epic sources. Sung in three languages – Hebrew, Spanish, and Arabic – the oratorio is based on the fate of the entire Jewish people, suffering on their way to Zion from the time of the expulsion from Spain until the establishment of the State of Israel.[2] I would like to mention two things here: My second profession is linguistics, so the “feel” of language is a strong element in me. (I studied several Semitic languages as an undergraduate and earned a Master’s degree in Semitic Linguistics.) Also, I’m a big devotee of the world of Western harmony at its best. This can be detected in the method I developed in my two-volume book, “The Harmonization of Songs” (Tel-Aviv, 2005.)[3] And maybe I’ll mention one more interesting point – in my twenties, I was named an innovative Israeli jazz pianist!

AA: Your generation has been particularly affected by the music of the “Darmstadt School”, a style that aimed to bring a “new wind”, a musical language that would break decisively with the past, establishing a fresh method of composition. Does your music follow this style?

TF: The “New Wind” is an integral part of me. In every one of my works there is an “adventure”; quite often that adventure is the combination of the old, even the very old, with the new, even the very new. The Cantata “Like Two Branches” (1989,

op.24) is an excellent illustration. There you have quite extreme *avant-guard* compositional techniques, both in the voices and instruments. The lyrics – set in Arabic of the 6th century (before Islam's invasion of the Arab Peninsula) – feature throaty, guttural consonants that require excellent *solfeggio* technique by the singers. At the time, I was reading the important Ph.D thesis of Enayat Wasfi-Shaalan, a colleague from Cairo who studied in Bari, Italy, that deals with composing art music set to Arabic texts.[4] In the later "Saga Portrait" (2002, op.53) the mixture of pointillism and expressionism are somewhat reminiscent of both Anton von Webern and Alban Berg. I must admit that I never miss an opportunity to attend a live concert of their music, or of Stockhausen's, which is characterized by clear pitches, rhythms and dynamics that I always find acoustically purifying: I am attracted to these isolated musical elements, taken separately from the lyrics. "New Wind" equals freshness, and that is the strong appeal the act of composing holds for me. There is no sense repeating what has already been said; a composer's place is assured by having an innovative message, without forgetting the treasures of the past.

AA: Your career as a musician is very interesting. You're a composer, a conductor, a teacher. Why are you so interested in composing for choirs? What does a choir mean for you?

TF: Composing for choirs means a great deal to me. The process starts when I absorb in my inner ear the sounds created in the composition, with all the textures it involves; then it continues in the exciting process of preparing for the world-premiere performance. Usually the climax comes during rehearsals. At the performance, the audience may be lucky enough to experience something of what has already passed more privately between me and the performers in rehearsal.



*Tsippi Fleischer with
Shofar players during
rehearsals of Symphony No.
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AA: How important are your political and religious ideas to the music you compose?

TF: I hate politics in all its dimensions and directions. I belong to the world of pure art, where human beings' cultural goals, qualities and ideas will always conquer boring political manipulations, which sometimes lead to cruelty and humiliation. For me, it is much more interesting to live in the world of creativity than in that of manipulation. I'm aware of the place of managers and politicians in society, but it's art that feeds eternity, art that puts aside passing issues. If a composer really has something to say, and he succeeds in expressing it while he is still alive, his message will continue to feed mankind. Take Beethoven's powerful message about freedom: Does anything else come close? As for religion – I was born a Jew, and Jewish tradition has influenced me since childhood. My father maintained some traditional habits while my mother kept her extreme left-leaning opinions hidden. The dramatic aspects of some of the well-known biblical figures and the universal symbols conveyed in their images all appeal to my imagination much more than any ceremonial religious activities. (I shall try to trace

the rise of monotheism in my next choral piece.) It is so sad that the three religions that point their believers to the same monotheistic revolution engage in continuous struggles. This is an absurd reality.

AA: Ninety percent of choirs are amateurs, comprised of non-musicians, who may not even read music well. Do you keep this in mind when you compose or do you think that a composer should not be constrained by these limits?

TF: This question actually refers to a broader one: As a composer, how much are you willing to compromise on the level of performance? There are two aspects to think about: first, the composition itself, and second, the way it is actually performed. There is a conceptual difference between these. When I compose, I usually know who will perform the world premiere, and that has a huge influence on me (consciously and unconsciously). Composers should know likely level of performers and be strictly forbidden to ignore these limitations. They, as for the actual performance, should take full responsibility for everything that is written in the score. More specifically, my personal view is that amateur choruses have wonderful voices; they are happily singing together and preparing for a performance; they have a lot of openness, a crystallized choral sound... At times they reach an excellent level of performance, and it does not disturb me at all that preparing a new piece can take quite a long time. In my career, I have dreamed of working as much as possible with professional performance groups, but as long as I live, it will always be my duty to collaborate on preparing the world premiere. Impressions, influence, even inspiration, always result from one's relationships with the performers. It is really nice to get ideas and remarks from them; and conductors have told me about the cardinal impact my participation in a rehearsal made on the singers.



*Tsippi Fleischer with
Bedouin Children during
recording "The Gown of
Night"*

AA: A choral piece is a text dressed by music. Tell me something about the poetic power of the word.

TF: The poetic power of the word has utmost value for me when composing vocal music. I totally identify with the person who wrote the lyrics, with the "soul of the text". A factor of huge importance is to base the music on the phonetic and phonologic value of the text. Take "Lamentation" (1985, op.16): Else Lasker-Schueler's lyrics are treated at both levels yet in an integrated way: the painful, suffering soul of the Jewish-German poetess influences the whole mood. In composing I broke the words down into syllables, into sounds, even into repeated consonants without vowels. This thorough treatment of the words resulted in an especially lyrical piece: each word became a whole world, each sentence became a whole globe. A text that can be read in less than one minute lasts around 20 minutes in music.[5]

AA: We live in a fully globalized system where all kinds of

music information is easily accessible to everyone. Is it still important, in your opinion, to maintain the concept of a “national school” or should music also reflect the internationalism of society?

TF: Neither side can be neglected. We can no longer ignore increasing global communication – “The world has become smaller.” But it is also impossible to deny our personal origins. This comes out naturally in our compositions. For example, I still consider Berio an Italian and Stravinsky a Russian, in spite of these two being so universally accepted. To clarify my point: If a composition does not include a stylistic innovation, using the constructs that have been developed in Western classical music (harmony, counterpoint, etc.) the music will more closely resemble a replica of ethnic materials. In my opinion, this should not be considered “composition”.

AA: Choral folk music is very popular in Europe. In many countries, especially in Hungary, in the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, in northern Italy, in Russia and elsewhere, people feel that traditions can be maintained and spread through music. How is it possible to attract young people to songs that tell of “a world of the past” that has almost disappeared?

TF: I’m a big devotee of Israeli folk music. How interesting: there, we have no difficulty attracting people, even young ones, to such repertoires. I detect here some longing for the past, for the Zionist dream. We have a lot of “Arvey Zemer” (evenings of singing the folkloric repertoire). It is really absurd: people will eagerly buy a ticket to sit there and perform as part of the audience; the singing at these events is full of enthusiasm. Let us remember that the relatively old songs were passed along by word-of-mouth during the many years before Israeli Radio was established in the Fifties. My task

is to concentrate on handling the musical and professional aspects of this repertoire in Israeli society, along with the nostalgic aspect. In my book "The Harmonization of Songs", I lay out a method to teach musicians how to harmonize and accompany these songs. I give musicians the keys to using harmonization as a tool for arranging choral and instrumental works and to improving their conducting skills, among other goals. Young musicians of diverse origins and generations have already grown up with this method. I hope to publish the book in English someday.

AA: "Donne in Musica" (Women in Music) is an international movement promoting and presenting music composed by women worldwide. Are there still fewer opportunities for women to have a good career in music?

TF: I think the message of Donne in Musica is very important. I have not kept up with all their activities: I knew the President Patricia Adkins-Chiti personally long ago; we met in the summer of 1993 at the huge Women in Music Festival and Conference held in Alaska. Patricia expressed a willingness to perform some of my music. A nice result came from this – I prepared a special version of my song-cycle "Girl-Butterfly-Girl" for her.[6] You can hear her shining *bel canto* performing the cycle at www.tsippi-fleischer.com / Discography / 1998-9 / Israel at 50. There is still a need, in my opinion, to promote opportunities to perform women composers' music. There are still institutes and conductors who ignore the feminine presence in the field of music composition. But the goal is not simply the presence of female conductors and composers – it is the attainment of a high level of musical creativity and excellence. The highest level should be maintained despite the existence of a "feminine ghetto." That level of excellence has already been evident for many years in both institutes with which I collaborate in Germany – the "Frau und Musik Archiv" in Frankfurt and "Furore Verlag" in

Kassel. Nowadays, taking part in feminine movements involves politics, and I have already mentioned my antagonism towards politics of all stripes. Feminine power depends first of all, I believe, on positive feminine psychological strength, and influences women's creativity whenever and wherever that exists.

AA: What about your projects for the future?

TF: I am flattered to be asked this question. I hope to carry out a number of plans in the coming years that will enable me to broaden the already-wide spectrum of work I've already done.

In the field of composition:

- Opuses 72, 73 and 74 are in progress.
- I want to recommend additional performances of my Children's Opera "Oasis" (op. 71) which had its very successful world premiere in Germany last November.[7] The genre of children's opera is itself magical, for both its educational and musical aspects.
- In "Oratorio – Avraham" (72), I deal with the mystical, attractive image of Avraham/Abraham in the three religions, though I treat the birth of monotheism from my own perspective. The ensemble will consist of a choir with an orchestra of harps and violins.
- Symphony No. 6 "The Eyes, Mirror of the Soul"[8] (op. 73) is a "symphony-installation" that stages groups of four "spectrums" resembling the diapason/timbre of soprano, alto, tenor and bass, both instrumentally and vocally. Each spectrum will contain instruments and voices as a coherent nucleus. There will also be scenery.
- Adapa, the grand-opera in Old Babylonian (op. 74), will involve an especially large ensemble, choral and

orchestral.

In the field of research and education, my desire is to complete three books:

- An analysis of the stylistic development of Hebrew song, continuing on an earlier one (1964/2009) that can be downloaded from my website.[9]
- A musical monograph of Matti Caspi (1949-) will provide insights into the rich harmonic language of Israel's most talented song-composer in the field of harmony. Caspi dresses up all the modal achievements of the past in modern strategies.
- I would love to put out a short book in English dealing with the historical-musical development of Hebrew song as well as its methodological applications (harmonization, etc.). Highlights from the Matti Caspi book will be included.

AA: *Tell me, in one short sentence, what is the composer's role in the 21st century?*

TF: Overcome commercialism's increasing destructiveness by your constructive spiritual morals!

NOTES

[1] See www.tsippi-fleischer.com / Publications / About Tsippi Fleischer / Articles: Hirsberg, Yehoash. Tsippi Fleischer: Musician between East and West. In "Ariel" no. 76, Jerusalem, 1989. See also Amnon Shiloah's 1990 article in French, which appears on the composer's website both in its original and in its translation into Hebrew.

[2] See the short videos at www.tsippi-fleischer.com / Video / Compositions / "Oratorio 1492-1992".

[3] See www.tsippi-fleischer.com / Publications – by Tsippi Fleischer / Books. Sample pages of each chapter are available in PDF form by clicking on the link attached to the synopsis of the book.

[4] See my own article at www.tsippi-fleischer.com / Publications – by Tsippi Fleischer – Articles in the Field of Musical Creativity – The Cantata "**Like Two Branches**", enlarged, 1997. See also three samples at www.tsippi-fleischer.com / Compositions – Choral – **Like Two Branches** – Video, Audio, Selected Notations.

[5] Video and audio samples of "**Lamentation**" can be heard at www.tsippi-fleischer.com / Compositions / Choral / **Lamentation**; and / Discography / 1992 – CD Tsippi Fleischer – Vocal Music.

[6] See www.tsippi-fleischer.com / World Activity / Rome.

[7] Two videos are available at www.tsippi-fleischer.com / World Activity / Karlsruhe and in Video – Oasis, 2010.

[8] Each of my symphonies has a poetical subtitle.

[9] See www.tsippi-fleischer.com / in Publication – by Tsippi Fleischer – Books.

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