

The (musical) ladder which brought me to Israel (Sulam – ha-tzlilim – she-he'ela oti le-Israel)

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I would like to begin with a piece dedicated to my mother, which I wrote a few days after her death, back in 1995, because the fact that I decided recently to come to Israel has very much to do with her.

Mus. Ex.: Addii, 1. ... a Iole

My mother, Iole Tagliacozzo, who was a Jew, would be very surprised to learn that I became an Israeli citizen! Both my parents were born in Naples. As many girls of the Bourgeoisie, my mother had studied piano, but I don't recall her playing. My father, who was a philosopher, had composed in his youth some Neapolitan songs, of which he was very proud. One day, I was already 9 years old, I discovered, behind a curtain in our house, a piano. I began playing on it. Probably the first tunes I played were some Neapolitan songs, like "Scalinatella" – which means "little ladder".

Mus. Ex.: "Scalinatella" – Neapolitan Scale, Neapolitan Sixth...

In 1955 my parents sent me to the German School in Rome, which had moved close to our house, in the neighbourhood of Rome Monteverde. This was a peculiar decision, more so only 10 years after World War 2. When the Germans were in Rome, in 1943, my mother had to hide, not to be arrested and deported to a concentration camp. But apparently the love to German culture was stronger – especially for my father, who, as a philosopher, had strong ties to German philosophy and culture; moreover, my parents were confident that new Germany and new Europe, which at that time was doing its first steps, would be completely different from the old one.

My teacher at German grammar school was a musician and from him I got my first piano lessons. On the day of my 10th birthday, on December 24, 1955, I composed my first piece, a Waltz in c minor.

So, I grew up with German culture and did the final secondary school examinations – the “Abitur” – at the German School in Rome. After that I studied music in Vienna, in Köln/Germany (where I went to study with Stockhausen in 1968 and where I also was a student of Bernd-Alois Zimmermann) and in Berlin. There I went for researching in order to prepare my doctoral dissertation on the communist composer Hanns Eisler and I was there also a student of Paul Dessau. Eisler and Dessau were two of the three great musicians with whom playwright Bertolt Brecht worked together, the third one was Kurt Weill. Strange enough – or maybe not – all of them were Jews. Incidentally, Kurt Weill is in my opinion one of the musical geniuses of 20th century’s music. He had a strong connection to Judaism and also to Israel, where his parents fled and where they are buried. At the end of 1947, an arrangement of “haTikva” of his was performed in New York.

When I worked on Eisler, in the Seventies of the past century, I was a Marxist and had no interest at all for Judaism or for the State of Israel. More so, the word “Zionist” sounded to me – as generally for leftish people – almost like a swearword.

In the Eighties, however, for reasons that I couldn’t really explain, I wrote my first “Judaism-related” piece, “Ai piedi del faro”.

I took the title (at the foot of the lighthouse) from a statement by the philosopher Ernst Bloch: “There is no light at the foot of the lighthouse.” He means that we are unable to understand the present at the present time, we can only illuminate the past from the present, as the future will send light on the present time. But what we do now must, by a large, remain dark for us. In this piece I use, as I had already at other times, a scale that leads to peculiarly oriental melodic figures. Why? What is my connection with the Orient? While working on the piece I heard old Jewish songs from Spain, I liked one in particular with the words “mamita mia, salvadera de mi vida” (mother mine, saviour of my life), performed in a lamenting tone and with closely intertwined intervals. One day I saw how I entered fragments of the song into my score, and I noticed that the intervals of the song were very similar to the ones I had used so far, not only the closely intertwined “oriental” intervals, but also the interval of a fifth that played an important role in both piece and song. I decided to integrate the song into the piece; yes, the song even ends the piece: The musicians leave the stage, one after the other, playing their instruments and regroup at the end of the hall or in another room. Only the double bass player remains on stage. At their new location, the other instruments intone the Jewish song, the double bass player tries to join them,

but he does not succeed, that is, the other players do not follow him or do not respond, he falls silent. I had no particular motivation for the scene of transformation, which has the character of a processional, of a funeral cortège. I simply liked the fact that the piece breaks up in terms of sound. Only much later, while reading a book by Primo Levi, did I understand that the conclusion had something to do with the Jewish character of the piece. In the book by Levi, I read about a Jewish Libyan family which, on the journey to the German concentration camp, organized each night a memorial service, a Kaddish; they played and sang songs of lament with which they gave expression to the pain of an over and over repeated exodus. All of a sudden I realized: What I had composed was, without my planning it, a symbol for the exodus...

The scale I was using eventually developed to the following model:

Mus. Ex.: c, c sharp, d sharp, e, f, g, g sharp, a sharp, b, d – d flat, c flat, b flat, g, g flat, e, e flat, c.

This scale contains virtually all intervals, but it allows also some “oriental” sounding figures. If you recall the Neapolitan songs I quoted before, you have exactly the same intervals, with the very peculiar minor second at the beginning.

There is a “Neapolitan Scale”, which is similar to the “Harmonic Scale” (c, d, e flat, f, g, a flat, b, c), with the minor second at the beginning (c, d flat, e flat, f, g, a flat, b, c).

There is also the well known chord called “Neapolitan Sixth”, built on the flattened second degree of the Neapolitan Scale, but which you might use also in the “normal” major scale (from below: f – f – a flat, d flat / g – d – g – b / c – e (or e flat) – g – c).

There is also an “Arabic Scale”: c, d flat, e, f, g, a flat, b, c.

And there are other scales, like the “Minor Gypsy Scale”: c, d, e flat, f sharp, g, a flat, b flat, c, or the “Spanish Gypsy Scale”: c, d flat, e, f, g, a flat, b flat, c – all of them present in the Mediterranean basin.

After this first piece of 1986, I wrote up to now several pieces somehow related to Judaism. In 2006, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Schumann’s death, I was commissioned by a German String Quartet a composition which had to be related to Schumann. I decided to write a piece, in which I would face the two sides of Germany, the great – not only musical – culture and the barbarism, which explodes in all its

criminal power in the Thirties and Forties of the last century. I started – another procedure I have been using quite often – from pitches contained in names, first of all that of Robert Schumann. So, in the first movement I use the pitches b (= b flat) – e – s (= e flat) – c – h (= b) – a. The second movement is entitled SHoA and I use there only the notes s (= e flat) – b (= b flat) – a. There follow: “Wilder Reiter” (wild rider) – a famous piece by Schumann – Shir – Scherzo (SHoA 2) – Warum? (“Why”, a paraphrase of another beautiful piano piece by Schumann, and on the same time a really unanswered, yet unanswerable question), and as 7th and last movement “SHAlom (with the notes s (= e flat), h (= b), a).

The 5th movement, Scherzo (SHoA 2), is meant to be also a tribute to Arnold Schoenberg, who went back to Judaism when it was not “healthy” at all to do so – which is a further sign of his moral stature. In 2001, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his death, I wrote an essay on him.¹ Researching on Schoenberg, I discovered a letter he addressed to the philosopher Jakob Klatzkin (probably written from Paris on May 26, 1933, two months after Hitler's rise to power), where he writes, “We are oriental and nothing keeps us tied to the West. We have a different destiny [...] our essence is not Western, that is only our outward appearance. We must return to our origins.”² Schoenberg's statement is surprising also because he often emphasized his own identity as a German composer, going so far as to say that his “discovery”, the twelve-tone-technique, would assure German music's pre-eminence for the next hundred years.

There is another statement by Schoenberg, concerning Israel, which I would like to quote. In a letter April 26, 1951 he writes: “Both to your friends who recently visited me in Los Angeles, and to yourself, Herr Direktor Partosh, I have already declared that for more than four decades my dearest wish has been to see the establishment of a separate, independent State of Israel. And indeed more than that: to become a citizen of that State and to reside there.”³

Unfortunately a few weeks later Schoenberg died.

Mus. Ex.: Warum?, 5

¹ “Desire and Fear of Freedom”, now in: L. Lombardi, “Construction of Freedom and Other Writings”, Ed. by Jürgen Thym, Verlag Valentin Koerner, Baden-Baden, 2006, 293

² see: Enrico Fubini, *La musica nella tradizione ebraica*, Torino, Einaudi, 1994, 103. Strange enough – or perhaps not – this passage is lacking in the selection of Schoenberg's letters edited by Erwin Stein, first published 1964, than again in 1987 (London, Faber and Faber, 181-2).

³ Arnold Schoenberg, *Letters*, ed. by E. Stein, 286.

Coming back to my scale, its particularity is that, consisting of two segments of a fifth, it doesn't end with the octave, but with a ninth. So, it is an open scale. Moreover, although it has an undoubtedly oriental flavour, it is possible to use it also in a "neutral" way; as a matter of fact, I used it also in pieces in which there is no reference at all to my Mediterranean roots, which origin both from Naples and from this country, from where the family of my mother supposedly came centuries ago, after the destruction of the second Temple of Jerusalem, in the year 70 of our era.

Another particularity of the scale is that, by keeping the same intervals, the descending modus is different from the ascending one.

Mus. Ex.: c, c sharp, d sharp, e, f, g, g sharp, a sharp, b, d – d flat, c flat, b flat, g, g flat, e, e flat, c.

I used the scale in a "neutral" way e.g. in "Infra", a piece for 11 instruments, which I wrote in 1997.

Mus. Ex. Infra (beginning)

This very basic material allows me a great deal of freedom. I build actually everything out of it, both the horizontal and the vertical structure of a composition.

My first visit to Israel was in 2003, only 7 years ago. I came with my wife Miriam Meghnagi, a singer and scholar of Jewish music.

On the occasion of our marriage, I wrote a little piece (which belongs to the piano cycle "8 Saluti"). Besides the scale, I use the pitches obtained from her name, a, e, g, h (b), a, g. There is also a quotation of a song of mine I had written some years before on a text of her, "Kolcha".⁴

Mus. Ex.: Saluto a Miriam

This first visit was a surprise to me: I found a completely different country from that usually described by European media, which, as you know, give generally a very negative image of Israel. I liked the country; I liked the many different faces you see

⁴ It belongs to the cycle „Yedid Nefesh“ (1995), which exists in two version, for voice and guitar and for voice and 7 instruments. Some songs of this cycle are contained also in "Unterwegs" for two female voices and ensemble (1997). All three pieces are published by Ricordi, Milan.

here, the many different languages you hear, the energy you perceive in people and nature. Moreover, the country was somehow familiar to me: in spite of all differences, there are indeed some similarities with Italy.

So, in the following years I visited again. During one of these journeys, I brought with me an orchestral piece, I was just composing and I wrote part of it in Israel. I called it "Terra" (which means earth, in the different meanings of the word), and I quoted fragments of two Israeli melodies, "HaTikva" and a song I had found in an anthology of Jewish songs, "Gur baAretz hazot" – I chose this song, mainly because I liked the tune, not because of the text – but you know, if you name things, they might become real...

Mus. Ex.: Terra

Coming back to Italy from my visits to Israel, I had occasion to speak with friends about it, expressing them my enthusiasm about this precious, yet vituperate country, but very often I encountered scepticism and a more or less unconscious prejudicial attitude against it. Nowadays, cultivated people in Europe can't allow themselves to be openly anti-Semitic, but it is somehow a must of political correctness to be critical of Israel or of Zionism. As if Israel would be, so to speak, the Jew amongst other countries. Probably a discussion with some Neapolitan friends of mine was a further stimulus for taking an important decision I was already pondering. I recall how, after a long and painful discussion about Israel, one of these friends, a nice and intelligent woman, said: "well, things would be for sure easier, if Israel wouldn't exist". At this point, I was speechless, but I decided to take a stand and to become an Israeli citizen. So, two years ago I made my Aliah. While still keeping, with the Italian passport, my fatherland, I decided to choose also my "motherland".

In my first year in Israel, besides accomplishing the orchestration of my fourth opera, "Il re nudo" (the naked king), I composed basically two pieces, "Storia di Giona" (hasipur Jonah) and "E, Concerto for flute and orchestra". Also in these compositions I made use of my scale. In "E" I used also the other procedure I already mentioned, deriving pitches from names, in this case the name of flutist Emmanuel Pahud, for whom I wrote the Concerto, mainly the three notes contained in his first name, e, a, e, as you'll hear in the first movement of the piece.

Mus. Ex.: E, 1

As you might recall, in the story of Jonah there is a continuous series of descents and ascents. Trying not to exaggerate, I made of course use of my scale.

It took quite a while, actually a whole life, to come to this very simple, essential material, which give me, while composing, a feeling of great freedom. In my youth, I was – not always, but often – constructing a lot: chords, structures, rhythmical or other patterns etc. Now, I rely only on my scale and on the challenge to invent something musically valid out of it. This scale, with its peculiar intervallic structure, is almost an acoustical DNA of mine, synthesizing both my Neapolitan and Jewish roots. That for that I can say that this scale (from the Italian word “scala”, which means “ladder”, “sulam”), brought me, step after step, to Israel.

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