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Traditional Elements and Dodecaphonic Technique in the Music of Oedoen Partos

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Oedoen Partos was one of those eminent pioneers who established in the 1940's what is now called Israeli music. Educated by Kodaly and Bartok, he was always sympathetic towards traditional music and integrated folkloristic elements into his works as part of both his musical and human ideology. The only work of his European years that has remained and lives in the repertoire – others he abandoned or destroyed – is the *Concertino for Strings*, written in 1932, and which was under the strong influence of Hungarian rhythm and mode. During his first years in Israel (then Palestine), 1938-1945, Partos dedicated himself to a thorough study of Jewish and Oriental music, a period, which he describes in his own words as follows¹:

When I came to Palestine, my first desire was to get to know the folklore of the East. Sometimes I used to ask myself why it was that I turned to the folklore of the East and not to that of Europe. Possibly it was on account of the Zionist upbringing I had had that I turned towards the East rather than towards any other direction. Perhaps it was the European weariness, which had affected me. In any case, I spent several years of hard work getting to know Sephardic and Iraqi folk music and indeed any other oriental folk music I could lay my hands on.

During these years, Partos arranged many traditional songs for solo voice and instrumental accompaniment (mainly for Bracha Zefira) and wrote various choral compositions on traditional themes. The first instrumental piece he wrote in Israel was the famous *Yiskor* of 1946, based on a Cantillation of East-European Jews he had heard from the actor Yehoshua Bertonov. This is the only work of Partos, which bears the imprint of the East-European melos, there being a very specific reason for it: the work was dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The year 1946 was the starting point for a continuous flow of compositions, and hence began an uninterrupted outpouring of Partos' creative genius. In all of his works through the thirty years that follow, the imprint of the Orient is somehow expressed with one well-identified personal style, the style of Partos' albeit in many and very different ways and revealing various techniques.

The composer himself divided his creative works into four main periods:

1. Until 1956, the first period, which we may describe as "extended tonal" or as "Jewish" or "Israeli", as Partos himself later called it²;
2. From 1957 to 1960, the second period, which Partos entitled the "modal-chromatic" (the most characteristic works of this period are, according to Partos himself, the *Visions*, the *Viola Concerto No.2* and the *Maqamat*);
3. The years 1960 to 1962, the third or "dodecaphonic" period, which will be treated in detail further along in this paper.
4. To the three above-mentioned periods, a fourth may be added, which comprises the last fifteen years of Partos' work and life, the years Partos himself characterized as those of "free serialism".

Before examining Partos' dodecaphonic works and their relationship to traditional music, let us examine Partos' attitude towards both of these areas. Partos never treated folk material in the superficial way of borrowing or quoting raw melodic material. Resembling in this his renowned model, Bela Bartok³, he did not believe in straight quoting. On this matter, he wrote:

Naturally, folk music should not be used as a substitute for genuine originality. It is my opinion that the composer who uses folk-motifs (or entire themes which are not his own) must say so clearly; otherwise he risks harm to his own reputation and to the reputation of the group to which he belongs.⁴

On another occasion, he said:⁵ "Quoting restrains searching." He preferred the term of "processing" folk material, as he remarked:

Something much more thorough and profound happens; the native element acts like a chemical substance upon the personality, transforms it, and enters into a mysterious combination with the imported material; a new, higher unity is born, in other words the Israeli music of our day.⁶

As for the technique of composition, until 1960, Partos was contented with the *extended tonal* system and with *chromatic modality*. To cite his own words⁷:

The extended tonal system offers such a wealth of material that we can go on using it for composition for many years to come without fear of repetition. We feel that the technique of composition should center around chromatic modality, and that it should be based upon the foundations of Oriental folklore. This we are trying to accomplish not through direct quotation but by using the thematic material of the East and organically incorporating it in musical art forms.

The twelve-tone system was very much *a la mode* in *avant garde* music in the fifties, but Partos was hesitant towards it, as he noted in an interview in 1967⁸:

Many composers of today deserve the title of "inventors" rather than that of "composers", because they write far more for the sake of inventing something new than for the primary impetus for musical expression. I reject anything that narrows the horizon or restricts possibilities. It seems to me that if music progresses, it should become richer and not more limited. This danger we first encounter in the works of Anton Webern. On one hand, their purity and clarity cause a particular aesthetic experience, but on the other hand, the possibilities of music as an expressive means are thereby limited. For example: I see no justification for the strict interdiction of the octave in dodecaphonic music. It only causes loss and serves no target. Maybe it was necessary in the days of Schoenberg, but today it is obsolete.

His personal attitude towards dodecaphonic technique he expressed in these words⁹: "I myself have refrained from composing in a twelve-note system, as I am convinced that my ear does not genuinely register its sound". Here we must pay tribute to Partos' sincerity and search for musical truth. His hearing was extraordinarily sensitive and refined, and he had a perceptive ear one rarely meets. Inasmuch as he never wrote even a single note without mentally hearing it, we can be sure that when Partos finally adopted the dodecaphonic technique, it was only after having exhausted former systems and was the result of a real need. Furthermore, he adopted the technique only after having exercised it for a period of time, as he noted in his article "My course in music"¹⁰: "...I have written several works in this system for myself".

As for the combination of traditional music with dodecaphonic technique, Bartok, for instance, though having been receptive to the idea of twelve-tone music, regarded this combination as impossible, and expressed his opinion on the subject in an article as follows¹¹:

Let us consider how it is possible to reconcile music based on folk-music with the modern movement into atonality or music on twelve tones. Let us say frankly that this is not possible. Why not? Because folk-tunes are always tonal. Folk music of atonality is completely inconceivable. Consequently, music in twelve tones cannot be based on folk-music.

If Partos arrived at this "impossible" combination, it was not through the tonality of borrowed material, but through the resolution into factors of traditional idioms, working directly with these elements. He did not base his music on traditional melodies, and yet created a sound suggesting the character of traditional music, either by his use of elements other than melodic ones or, in developing a melodic line, by building his twelve-tone row out of characteristic melodic fragments. The interest evinced by such a fusion of a highly formalized method with

material derived from living sources lies not in the strict application of the rules or the method and how these rules are imposed upon the source material, but in the manner in which the composer develops and elaborates his ideas as they emanate from these two contradictory starting points.

The dodecaphonic period in Partos' compositional career was the shortest period of all (1960-1962), yet it was one of the most fruitful. The year 1960 was certainly the busiest and the most active one in his career both as a composer and a performer¹². In this most prolific single year he completed the following works (listed more or less in chronological order): *Iltur* (Improvisation) for twelve harps; Cantata for soprano (or tenor), mixed choir and orchestra; *Demuyot* (Images) for orchestra; Prelude for piano; *Agada* (A Legend) for viola, piano and percussions; *Tehilim* (Psalms) for string quartet – String Quartet No.2.

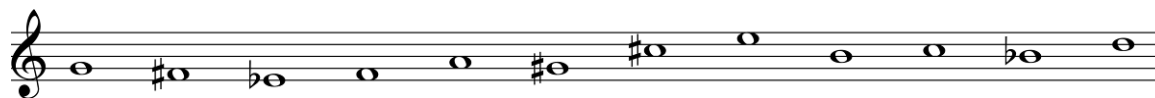
Partos considered *Tehilim* as his best work. In a long conversation¹³ with the present author, he thoroughly analysed *Tehilim*, concluding: "This is undoubtedly my best work. Considering form, it is perfectly all right, and every time I hear it I feel that it says something. More than any other of my works, it comes closer to my ideals"¹⁴. He defined *Tehilim* as a key work for his third period, the dodecaphonic one. Therefore it seems to us that a concise analysis of the work will best demonstrate how the integration of traditional elements in a dodecaphonic work is possible when undertaken by a great musician.

This work, commissioned by the Targ family in Chicago for the Fine Arts Quartet, was composed at the end of December, 1960, in one continuous flow of creative mood, very fast and easily, as the composer himself related, but, as he also noted, after many months of "inner preparation" and deep thought. It was given its first public performance in 1961, by the New Israeli Quartet¹⁵ at the Israeli Festival.

Being avowedly opposed to the principles of the Viennese School, in writing *Tehilim* Partos sought to preserve his former, pre-dodecaphonic style. Yet eventually, he resorted to the twelvetone technique simply because for him it was non-European. He stated unreservedly that this technique enriched his music and helped him find the style he was searching for.

In *Tehilim* Partos follows all but two of the rules of classical dodecaphony, and these two exceptions are vitally important. The first is his conscious, deliberate and profuse use of octave doubling, thereby violating one of the fundamental principles of strict dodecaphony, namely the absolute equality of all twelve tones. By the use of octaves, certain tones are given more weight than others. The second is his repetition of tones before the row has been completed; he does this, however, in a particular way, which gives clarity to the melodic patterns that characterize his style. Partially because of these deviations from the accepted

rules, one finds the dodecaphonic character of the work not at first apparent, or at least not an outstanding trait. If one regarded *Tehilim* as nothing more than an exercise in twelve-tone writing, one would find that the work breaks no new ground. Partos uses his twelve-tone row melodically and harmonically, availing himself of all the derivatives of the row. His work derives its special character from the way the rules are flouted, as well as from the composer's non-melodic elements: rhythm, accent, agogics and phrasing. The row Partos uses is as follows:



It is simple, written almost to be sung. No interval exceeds a fourth and the whole is contained within the compass of an augmented octave. The eleven intervals are five seconds, four thirds and two fourths. Rarely does Partos use the row uninterruptedly, in a manner identifiable by the ear; rather, he prefers to divide it into fragments of six, or more often, three tones, thus:



Asked about his choice of tones for the row, the composer gave the following explanation¹⁶:

I chose this row because I found in it rich melodic possibilities. I had made myself search out the melodies, motifs and results that I would be able to extract from it. I felt that this row contained within it the material I had been seeking.

The form of the work is that of the classical three-movement concerto: the first movement is fast with a slow introduction; the second, entitled "Psalms", from which the work takes its name, is slow and tranquil; the third is Allegro molto, and Vivace. All three movements are built on the rondo principle, each movement having a recurring central theme which is never repeated literally but which always appears in a variant. One can discern, moreover, several elements of sonata form in the three movements, especially in the intensive development of motifs in the middle section of each movement.

The *Adagio*, which serves as an introduction to the first movement, presents the row of twelve tones in four of its possible forms. From the very beginning of the work, the composer's two deviations from the twelve-tone rules may be noted, i.e., octave doubling and repetition within the row of melodic fragments. This section, which was added after the rest of

the work had been completed, was mapped out in the composer's mind clearly and in its entirety before he put pen to paper and wrote it down from beginning to end in its final version. To use the composer's own words, the Adagio is "an expanded exposition of the row and its derivatives". Its opening bars are reproduced below:

PSALMS

STRING QUARTET No. 2 (1960)

תהלים

רביעיית מיתרים מס' 2 (1977 - 1907)

עדן פרטוש
OEDOEN PARTOS
(1977 - 1907)

I

Adagio (♩ = 80)

The row appears twice on the first page of the composition¹⁷: in its original form, starting on G, and in its inversion, starting on F in the viola part (bar 5). The appearance of the row is interesting not because of the way the row is contrived as an arrangement of tones, but rather because of the way in which the continuity of the row is broken as a result of the composer's need to impose his personal characteristics of style. Partos' originality manifests itself in these interpolations, i.e., the opening G of the cello is immediately taken up an octave higher by the viola, thus establishing it as the first of the three tones in the fragment G-F#-E. The A, around which the second fragment F-A-G# revolves, appears simultaneously in three octaves and is insistently reiterated. Repetition in *sforzando* of the minor second A-G# points from the outset to the importance accorded to this interval throughout the work. (This interval is of considerable significance in Partos' style as a whole.)

Examination of the rhythmic aspect of the work is no less revealing. Concerning rhythm, there is in the work neither formula nor symmetry; the rhythm is free, suggesting instrumental recitative. Further, several features typical of oriental musical gesticulation, of the kind Partos has so successfully "tamed" and harnessed within his style, are clearly to be perceived, listed as follows: 1. Ornaments, i.e., the *raison d'être* of the repetitions in the row; 2. The occurrence of very short notes in proximity to very long ones (pointing up the contrast between them); 3. The occurrences of short notes, as a rule, before long ones; this technique is characteristic of Partos and probably stems from the iambic rhythm of his mother tongue, Hungarian, as opposed to his adopted tongue, Hebrew. In this, he may also have been influenced indirectly by his former teachers, Bartok and Kodaly.

Repetition of part of the row may not always be confined to fragmentary two or three tones (whose repetition suggests ornamentation). A more considerable part of the row may be repeated, sometimes as much as half the row, as is illustrated in the example below, taken from bars 27-32 of the first violin part. The example contains the retrograde of the row transposed a fifth up. Tones 4-9 are repeated before the appearance of tones 10-12.



The first movement proper marked *allegro molto vivace, vigoroso*, opens with a statement of the original row by the first violin, and the inversion distributed among the other three instruments. Before the end of the first page has been reached (at bar 20), a development of small motifs of two to four notes begins. These motifs, mainly by virtue of their accented, recitative-like rhythm are suggestive of the Biblical *te'amîm*, the latter, as will be seen below, being intimately bound up with the composer's earliest experiences. The rhythmic structure of the opening is built of stretto entries, which are accentuated by forceful attacks, alternating with quieter, homophonic entries. This alteration gives the entire movement its sense of dash and surging energy:

Allegro molto vivace, vigoroso (♩ = 126)

The musical score is presented in two systems, each with four staves. The first system (top) shows the initial statement of the original row by the first violin and its inversion distributed among the other three instruments. The second system (bottom) shows a development of small motifs of two to four notes, with dynamic markings like 'f' (forte) and 'p' (piano) indicating forceful attacks and quieter entries. A circled '20' marks the end of the first page. The score ends with a 'Fin. p' marking.

The antithesis of the first theme is somewhat unexpectedly heard (bar 58, p. 9) after the second theme has made its appearance. Here, half the original row is used: in retrograde inversion for the first violin, in retrograde for the other three instruments together, and then in inversion by all four instruments, beginning with the bass:



Most significant here is the same unflagging, energetic rhythm which, by means of short-long note patterns in stretto entries, creates the simultaneous impressions of continuous movement and stratified sound.

The second theme (bar 40, p. 7, *meno mosso*, see example below) is also built up from a number of three-note fragments, reminiscent of Biblical *te'amîm* (a trait confirmed by the composer) and subjected to considerable development before the reappearance of the first theme.

The three-note fragments are further treated in the development section of the movement, as shown by the following examples (taken from p. 13):



The pattern of a short, rapid shake leading into a sustained long note is here given very clear expression.

With regard to the entire first movement, Partos states: "It was composed with great ease. I knew exactly what I wanted to write – nothing short of a miracle for any composer."

The second movement, Psalms, is unquestionably the centerpiece of the work. It is inspired by two sources: 1) the slow movement of Schonberg's Fourth Quartet, which evinced in Partos a mood of "homage to Schoenberg"; and 2) a vision of "a multitude of people singing together pianissimo", to quote Partos himself. The core of this movement, which comes at its mid-point (bar 265), is also the core of the entire work. The movement begins with what is, in effect, a variation on the central bar, carried out here by all four players in unison (more precisely, in octaves). More important than the notes themselves as they occur here are the indications for expression: *lento calmo*, *misterioso*, *pianissimo* and *con sordino*.

LENTO CALMO (♩=58)

9 8 9 8 9 10 11 12 10 11 12 10 11 12

The tones of the retrograde row are numbered in the above example to demonstrate once again how Partos sweeps aside a basic rule of serialism by repeating notes and melodic fragments in the course of presenting the row. Such repetitions constitute a form of improvisation within a given framework.

In contrast to the congregational spirit that pervades the movement, at this point there follows what the composer himself calls "a personal song", rhythmically free and with juxtaposed fast-moving and sustained notes (bar 242, p. 30):

The second theme of the movement (bar 250, p. 32) is presented with a number of counter-motifs which, by their recitative-like rhythm and fragmentary melodies so typical of biblical cantillation, clearly resume the reference to *te'amîm*. This is amply illustrated by the second violin and viola parts in the following example:

The image shows a musical score for Violin II (V. II) and Viola (Vla(s)). The score is written for measures 250 to 254. The Violin II part is in the upper staff, and the Viola part is in the lower staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The music features recitative-like rhythms and fragmentary melodies. The Violin II part starts with a rest in measure 250, then enters in measure 251 with a melody marked *mp*. The Viola part enters in measure 250 with a melody marked *mp*. In measure 252, the Viola part has a *cresc.* marking. In measure 253, the Violin II part has a *mf espr.* marking. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and rests.

As was pointed out earlier, the core of the work is located at its exact center, i.e., at the midpoint of the second movement. An example of the serial technique, the core consists of half of the original row (first violin), its retrograde (second violin and viola playing, in parallel, a minor sixth apart) and its retrograde inversion (cello), superimposed one upon the other homophonically:

The image shows a musical score for measures 265 to 268, marked "Impo I. (♩=58)". The score is written for four staves, likely representing the first violin, second violin, viola, and cello. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The music features a serial technique, with the core consisting of half of the original row, its retrograde, and its retrograde inversion. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and rests. The first staff is marked *pp misterioso*. The second staff is marked *pp*. The third staff is marked *pp*. The fourth staff is marked *pp*.

The composer refers to the above as "false heterophony". It may be recalled that this theme was used at the beginning of the movement, played by all four instruments in unison. While at the beginning, however, Partos presents a variation of the retrograde, here he calls into play the other three forms of the row. Thus he transforms the unified ensemble into one in which each voice finds its own and individual expression.

The musical excerpt quoted below, which is played by the viola immediately after the "false heterophony" of the core, once again points to the composer's individualism. (Partos refers to this as "a most important motif".) The section contains the tones of the second half of the row, the first half having been just stated by the first violin. The Biblical *ta'am merkha*, which constitutes the third melodic fragment in the row, appears most clearly here:



Partos mentions that he had only vague memories of the synagogue he attended as a child with his grandfather; however, one impression, which he retained vividly, even in his later years, was that of "everyone talking and singing at once". That this synagogue atmosphere should permeate the music, beginning at bar 283 (p. 36) is indicated by the composer's straightforward directive, *parlando*:



The rest of the second movement is a development of elements hitherto described, the whole being cemented into rondo form by the periodic recurrence of the first motif.

The third movement is, in the composer's own words, an "utterly asymmetrical dance". Apart from a number of startling silences, it moves along in an unceasing stream of quavers and semi quavers, with a kind of mechanically driven motion.

The overall plan of the work is thus an alternation of slow and fast movements; the slow and fast movements; the slow ones (the introductory Adagio and the second movement) are presented in free rhythm, the faster ones (the first and third movements) being more strictly rhythmic. More than calling to mind a Baroque sonata, this basic form resembles that of several types of Yemenite songs (i.e., the *nashid* and the *tawshih*) and is found in oriental music generally (i.e., as in the Arab *taqsim*, described by Ringer¹⁸ as having "a rhythmically free initial solo improvisation and a strictly metrical ensemble section").

Thus Partos has made a happy match between a formalized, inflexible system of composition and the most flexible oral-music tradition – partners that can hardly be said to have anything obviously in common. He is able to do this because of his capacity to separate the essential from the superfluous. By resorting to the twelve-tone system he has freed himself from what he felt were to him the cumbersome restraints of European traditional harmony. Moreover, he has escaped from the rigidity of serialism by ignoring two of its fundamental principles: 1) the non-repetition of tones within the row, and 2) the use of the octave.

As for traditional music, Partos has avoided in this work any kind of direct quotation of melodies or folk motifs and has aimed, instead, to recreate the essential spirit of traditional Jewish song, that which he called its "gesticulation" and "phrasing".

To this end he adopted a free rhythm, a kind of continuous recitative, accented to recall the Jewish liturgy; melodic fragments were confined within a narrow ambitus that would suggest Biblical cantillation. Finally, he maintained a form of organized heterophony that would conjure up the vision of Jews praying in their synagogues.

Notes:

¹ Cf. "My Road in Music", **Israel Life and Letters**, 7, no. 1 (Spring, 1957): 27.

² In a conversation in January, 1971.

³ Cf. Bartok's article "The influence of peasant music on modern music", **Tempo**, 14 (Winter, 1949/50): 1924, originally in **Uj Idol**, 1931.

⁴ Cf. "Creating music", **Israel Life and Letters**, 7, no. 3 (March 1951): 18.

⁵ In a conversation in 1970.

⁶ "My road in music", see note 1.

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ B. Perl, [An interview with Partos], **Guitite**; Journal des Jeunesses Musicales d'Israel, 38 (September-October, 1968). (Hebrew).

⁹ "My road in music", see note 1.

¹⁰ In Hebrew, see **Bat-Kol**, 3 (April, 1956): 7. 11. See note 3.

¹¹ . See note 3.

¹² He was conscious of the importance of this particular year and used to speak about it with great nostalgia. In this year he went on a concert tour to Europe – Warsaw, Köln, Paris, Switzerland – with his friend the composer and pianist Josef Tal. Also in this year, some world premieres of his new works took place, and he appeared in recitals and solo concerts with several orchestras.

¹³ . See note 2.

¹⁴ About the difficulties it presented to him, Partos said on that occasion: "It is difficult to be a composer and it is difficult to be a Jew and it is really difficult to be a Jewish composer..."

¹⁵ It was recorded by the New Israeli Quartet on RCA (Israel) TD-1001.

¹⁶ All the citing of Partos henceforth are taken from the interview of January 1971 (see note 2).

¹⁷ We refer to the study score, published by the Israel Music Institute, Tel Aviv, 1962.

¹⁸ In his article "Musical composition in modern Israel", **Musical Quarterly**, 51 (January 1965): 285.

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