

## **Samir Odeh-Tamimi**

At the beginning of the 21st century, the "new obscurity" has not yet cleared away. Today there is a multiplicity of concepts which, one suspects, have some kind of connection, as cause or effect, to the social situation conceded as early as in 1985 by Jürgen Habermas. People talk about a "parallel society", high level "specialisation", or a "comforts liberalism" resulting from collective overstrain. Such are the slogan-like inventions of the media (and not just them) in a world that is not only obscure, but infused by fear.

It would be legitimate to ask what the confusions of the present day have to do with the works of a young composer. It would be easy to reply in terms of the current view of art as a mirror of society. However, in the case of Samir Odeh-Tamimi, this wouldn't quite get to the heart of the matter. From a formal point of view, this composer, born in 1970 near Tel Aviv, may indeed have found his specialist path within the still obscure diversity of current musical production. Since 1999 he has produced mostly temporally compact compositions for soloists, ensemble and orchestra, mainly with traditional instrumentations (only *Ahínnu* for three recorders, from 2001, requires electronics: to amplify the sound, and in conjunction with this, to bring out the difference tones). But more important than such intersubjective criteria as instrumentation and the length of the works is their expressiveness, and their gestural impulse. And here one hears something astonishing: as witness the violent, toughly persistent sound-masses of the seven-minute *Hutáf Al-Arwáh* [The Cry of the Spirits] for large ensemble (2001). Such gripping impact, extrovert gestures, and downright aggressive resolve, are astonishing factors in a composer of his generation, as is the formulation of a perfectly clear aesthetic standpoint. Here there is no question of a retreat into apolitical privacy, enforced by uncertainty and excess strain. It's the same sort of story with *Li-Umm-Kámel* [For Mother Camel] for flute, percussion and piano (2004). Powerful, monotonous triple-forte strokes on the bass drum form the portal, with interjections from the piano - harshly dissonant, cluster-like layerings of minor seconds. Then comes an entirely typical incorporation of the flute: it declaims in the extreme high register, circling ferociously in quarter-tones, within a very narrow range. The change to the piccolo pushes this still further. The music's already biting insistence, pushed up an octave, becomes an authentic existential shriek.

It's not just the works themselves that are individual and idiosyncratic, but also their titles, which allude to a traditional Arab context, as well as to the difficult political situation in Odeh-Tamimi's homeland. *Hálatt-Hissár* [State of Siege] for wind orchestra, six double basses, percussion and speaker (2004) adapts the eponymous poem by the writer Mahmoud Darwish. Before a performance, Odeh-Tamimi has the poem read by the speaker in both Arabic and German, after which comes the forceful music, which formally seems to embody the violent siege of Ramallah in 2001. In *Námi* [Sleep] for soprano, baroque recorder, three violas and harpsichord (2004), commissioned by Deutschlandfunk and Ensemble Avantage, the Israeli-Palestinian composer takes a poem (In Praise of the High Shadow), likewise written by Darwish, that involves a shocking confrontation of the events of war, and childish innocence. And in the two works entitled *Ahínnu* [I yearn], Odeh-Tamimi engages once again

with the Palestinian author and his "illa ummi", a farewell poem to his own mother, and mother earth.

At the age of 22, having already played in notable Arabian ensembles in his earlier years as a percussionist and keyboard player (equipped with a microtonal Hammond organ), Odeh-Tamimi came to Germany. For four years, from 1992 to 1996, he studied musicology in Kiel, thereby preparing himself to study composition with Younghi Pagh-Paan at the Hochschule für Künste in Bremen. Here, for the first time, his own work was deeply affected by, above all, the music of Giacinto Scelsi, Iannis Xenakis and Witold Lutoslawski, as well as his teacher Younghi Pagh-Paan, and Klaus Huber, whom he was able to assist with questions concerning Arabic texts and their pronunciation (e.g. for the latter chamber concerto *Die Seele muss vom Reittier steigen*).

It was Younghi Pagh-Paan who, through her own experience as an émigré composer, helped Odeh-Tamimi to gain a more pronounced sense of his own cultural roots, thereby relativising his initially enormous enthusiasm for European music. Among other things, his works constantly exude the spirit of Sufi ritual; hence the often percussive approach, as well as the intensity and forcefulness of his works - after all, percussion instruments such as gourds, gongs and frame drums play a prominent role in these rituals. It's clear that Odeh-Tamimi's idiosyncratic incorporation of these heterogeneous influences has worked. In his works, one hears no "fear of influence" (Harold Bloom), nor the paratactic subordination of certain elements, but a successful synthesis of European instrumentation, the stylistic features of advanced New Music, the traditions of ritual music in his homeland, and the contours of Koranic recitation, which has had particular significance for him in recent years.

Thus Odeh-Tamimi is an exemplary embodiment of the kind of composer who, amidst all the contradictory confusions of the present day, has maintained a clear self-confidence, while being fully aware of the remorselessness of market forces. It is precisely the extrovert, abrasive character of his compositions that should inspire courage not to give in, or passively adapt, to the complex, but hopefully only ostensibly unalterable state of the world.

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