

"SONG OF ASCENTS" BY A. U. BOSCOVICH

by Dr. HERZL SHMUELI

Alexander Urias Boscovich's "Song of Ascents" was performed for the first time — together with the other works commissioned by the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra — on 26th June, 1960, in the Mann Auditorium, Tel-Aviv. The rehearsal took place behind closed doors, in the presence of Maestro Giulini. The conductor was Gary Bertini.

What I initially felt, after only a few minutes of listening to this work, became a certainty on its completion: this is a work of truth, the work of a man speaking with complete sincerity, without a trace of affectation.

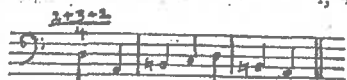
Suddenly I realised why Boscovich had been silent for so long. It had been a period of "purification of the soul": these had been years of "catharsis", years during which the creator was searching for himself, whether consciously or not.

There are times when a man breaks under the strain of a period such as this — when he cannot answer the demands which his environment makes for another and yet another work.

Great strength and deep faith are needed to survive being crushed by the burden of demands and expectation — and it appears that Boscovich is blessed with this strength and faith.

"Song of Ascents" illustrates the fact that not every silence can be interpreted as a period of creative sterility.

The composition opens with the idea — on bassoon and cello — the beginning of which is formed by the descending fourth, D — A. This beginning and the continuation of the idea are spread over the first three bars of the work, which are marked: 2 3 2 4, 4, 4.



This scheme, $\frac{2+3+2}{4}$, with its melodic

content, forms the basic pattern of many parts in the composition — with expansions, additions and changes in the constituent order etc.

During the Middle Ages, a fixed scheme of time-values, forming a basis for musical composition, was known as a *talea*. Boscovich chose this idea in order to "attire" his work in a more "ancient" garb, nearer to the period of the Cabala, of the Zohar and the Abulafia.

The metric pattern of the *talea* and the fact that it commences with the descending fourth, D — A, constitute two most important points of completely contrasting nature which cannot go unmentioned. These are the extremes of the known and the unknown; of the conscious and the unconscious. Boscovich had intended using 4+6+4, the numbers which signify the letters of his son's name in Hebrew: Daleth, Vav, Daleth or D-V-D (David). However, he found the first form too long and so used the above numbers halved (2+3+2).

This is the known, the conscious side.

The descending fourth, D — A, forms the second, unconscious factor; these notes form the first two letters of the name "David", transcribed in Roman script.

The composer did not make the second selection consciously. This is what I referred to above as the known and the unknown extremes.

Moreover, after going through the score together, the composer and I discovered many additional details of which he had been unaware, and which throw more light on the work's great unity and its full use of the basic subject matter.

One more remark in this connection: in spite of the sectional performance of this first hearing — it was only a rehearsal — I was convinced that the music had a mystic quality — "mystic" in the most positive and uplifted sense of "secret" soil (mustikos = secret) in which the greatest ideas and achievements germinate.

After studying the score and after many discussions with the composer, this theory was confirmed beyond all doubt.

Even though it would be most instructive to go over the composition, bar by bar, this article's scope allows me to indicate a few points only which will help clarify the work's general nature and the composer's approach to it.

"Song of Ascents"! Already the name makes you stop and think. And when you get to know the work, you realise that it is not merely a title added as an afterthought. A poetic conception is linked to the name, a reality transcending reality, a type of spiritual vision which inspired the composer and dictated that he write as he did.

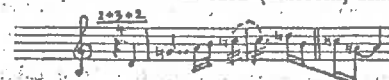
The composer recalled one of Martin Buber's Chassidic stories which tells of two righteous men on their way to the ritual bath. The one asks his friend what he feels: and the other answers: "the fragrance of Israel's fields".

This was Boscovich's feeling. In his mind's eye he saw travellers ascending to Zion, and in the symbolism of their rising, the ascent of the soul to God.

And once he saw this — he wrote: of the longing for Zion, of the ascent to Zion. These are the feelings which pervade the work. They anticipate it and lead it towards its climax.

Boscovich believes that there can be no musical composition of artistic and human value without a poetic conception previous to it — "poetic" in the widest sense of the word.

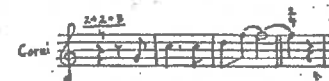
And the longing-theme soon appears; already at bar 10 in the flute and violas, accompanied by variations on itself (as in the violins) and the *talea* idea (bassoons, cello).



The ascending movement in this theme is symbolic; and the symbolism is intensified with the appearance of the theme's immediate continuation in a higher compass, with its climax on D, two octaves above the theme's first note.

The longing-theme is also built round the basic idea of a fourth, but ascending, in this case.

Further in this section, the longing-theme appears, very festively presented. Its form here is:



In this dress, the theme plays a very important part in the closing section of the work, the *Finale*, forming the basis for a reverberating upward surge.

The composition, which takes 16 minutes in performance, is played without a break, yet three sections are clearly distinguishable. These form the rising steps — these are the "ascents".

The first section, *Andante moderato*, is the work's embryonic nucleus, including as it does the *talea* idea and the longing-theme.

From here, the second section is approached by means of a cadenza, first on three clarinets, passing to celesta and mysterious-sounding vibraphone; then to flutes, continuing on the bassoons and reaching an outburst on the horns. Then comes the *Allegro con brio*, the second section.

The feeling here is of Psalm 122: "I rejoiced when they said unto me: 'Let us go unto the house of the Lord'".

This section is symphonic in character and form: everything appearing in it is based on previously-heard material. It is a section of development through variations.

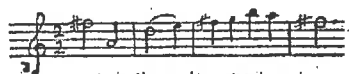
It begins with a variation of none other than the first section's *talea*; there it opens with a fourth, descending from D to A, and here the interval is augmented to a sixth — F sharp to A:



A theme, taken from the composer's "Song of the Negev", appears on the horns; it is a type of subsidiary theme throughout the work and plays an important part later. Its first entry is very rhythmical.



The re-appearance of the *talea* theme in the violins and the wind instruments marks one of the climaxes of the section — but this time it is *melodioso*, in contrast with its very rhythmical form at the beginning of the section:



At this point, the theme, in diminution, serves as a counterpoint:

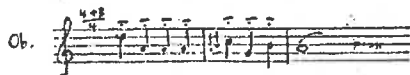


The longing-theme now returns and leads to a section of a pastoral nature.

The excitement becomes progressively stronger and culminates in a last outburst before being replaced by a dreamy section of great beauty, which is given mainly to the viola, vibraphone and alto flute:



At the end of this section the longing-theme appears backwards (in the percussion) accompanied by a fresh, transparent melodic invention, pure "Boscovich", first on the clarinets and continuing on the oboe.



This melodic invention is presented in a wonderful variation form by the harp, during the continuation of this section:



This second section ends with the above theme in the flutes and violins.

Now the third section, *piu mosso*, begins — the third and last of the "Ascents".

After extremely interesting variations on the *talea* — inversion, rhythmic counterposition of 6 against 3 and a grandiose use of the chord, a mystic chord of which more to follow — the section takes on an ecstatic sweep which engulfs and overwhelms the listener.



The atmosphere is strengthened and concentrated until an almost "violent" part is reached — This is a type of oriental toccata — an "Asiatic" *simfonica*. While it continues, and when a feeling of *decrecendo* is under way, the great ascent begins. As an introduction to this ascent, there are seven consecutive repetitions of the *talea*, with a motif taken from the second section.

The percussion instruments at this point are particularly conspicuous: they are interwoven and embroidered into the general tracery of sound most effectively.

The surge itself commences — a turbulent ascent — the symbol of the "Song of Ascents"; the percussion instruments continue to reverberate. A motif, sounding like a joyous children's cry, appears (flute, oboe, piccolo) after which the "Song of the Negev" idea is given a second time.



The instrumental ascent continues; the voices become stronger and stronger in a long *crescendo* which carries all before it. The marking is *ff*: and now the climax of the section and of the whole composition is crowned with the mystic chord, played by the full orchestra, *fff*.

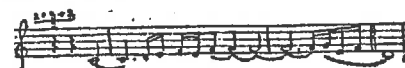
And suddenly — *decrecendo*, *pp*: a peaceful atmosphere prevails — the calm

after the great storm in which the long-awaited desire was achieved — Zion.

Into this restful atmosphere the oboe, playing a melody of quiet happiness, interpolates:



and the violins add:



The work ends very quietly — with the quiet of someone close to God, someone who has reached the stage of "release from the material world".

Boscovich is one of the most important amongst those composers responsible for the crystallisation of Israeli art music and its clearly "Israeli" flavour.

I have no desire to raise the question of the "naturalness" or "artificiality" of this flavour/once more; of its "sincerity" or "insincerity", or of its "dispensability" or "indispensability".

Questions of this nature do arise in connection with certain works and can lead to long and often fruitless discussions.

But these problems have no place in Boscovich's works. His music speaks for itself with a natural, inevitable flow in a style which seems always to have been in existence.

Occasionally one is taken aback by some "glaring" stroke or other on the written score; over and over one realises that in the live, continuous work, these are not felt to be "glaring" or conspicuous at all. They are convincing, organic units of the work as a whole.

Here I should like to discuss in short a number of details relevant to Boscovich's "Israeli" approach in this work.

The "orientalism" or "Israeli-ism" finds expression in the very structure: sharp, clear, transparent contours characterise it — an oriental principle this. The texture is uncomplicated. Before the composer was the ideal of simple, fine threads of sound, with practically no thickness at all.

The work is almost exclusively melodically conceived. If a chord does appear, it serves no harmonic function, but is only a "concentration" of melodic ideas.

Boscovich is a melodic artist. This is one of the most important characteristics of his compositions, making them intelligible to the listener at first hearing; it is this that creates a feeling of immediate "recognition" — melody, together with rhythm, being the basic, indispensable requirements in music. And in Boscovich's works, the function of rhythm is no less important than that of melody.

In "Song of Ascents", the composer does not hesitate to use "clashes" of minor seconds. But if one expects to be shocked by the dissonance, one is disappointed. The resultant sound arouses associations of the singing voice produced by an oriental throat.

Already at the beginning of the longing-theme in the first section, these clashes appear, played by the two flutes:



The composer often uses clashes of minor ninths or of augmented and diminished octaves.

Another resource employed is a chord including a tritone and a major seventh — the "mystic" chord. I should like to emphasise: this chord is self-sufficient, non-functional, non-harmonic.

The composer sees clear signs of Yeminite influence in a chord so constructed: Yemenites use tritones and major sevenths in much of their song:

Boscovich also likes to use the different voices so that they interweave in a kind of heterophony — that is, the voices appear separately, quoting the same basic melodic subject but with certain alterations in each individual voice. This is also a plainly oriental principle.

Doubling is often at the second octave, (while the classical doubling is at the distance of one octave only) — another very oriental sound:

