Structural aspects of my music as illustrated in the tape work *The Gown of Night* and the cantata *Like Two Branches*

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This article deals with two of my works, both of which were composed to literary texts in Arabic. The first is one of my shortest compositions and the second is one of the longest. *The Gown of Night*[1] (1988), for magnetic tape, is based on the voices of Bedouin children articulating a text by Muhammad Ghana'im (Israel) and lasts 2 minutes and 42 seconds. *Like Two Branches*[2] (1989), a cantata for chamber choir, two oboes, *kanun* (or piano), violoncello and a set of supplemented *tar* drums, is based on text by Al-Khansa – who lived in the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth century AD – and lasts 42 minutes. The ongoing process involving the composition of these two works in the late 1980s resulted in their successive appearance in 1988 and 1990.

1. INTRODUCTION

An important aspect of my musical creativity is the appropriation of acoustic elements scattered naturally in my environment, their elaboration as atoms in the formation of each musical-aesthetic form, and their organisation – at the same time adhering to the rules of shaping which I accept willingly. This does not involve the implantation of elements of crude raw material – exotic as they may be – but rather their implementation as clay in the hand of the potter. Furthermore, the minimalist units in the pronunciation of the Arabic language are central to my work as is the vast potential afforded by the *maqamat* (Arabic scales). It would appear that, in my subjective musical cognition, much emphasis is laid on the beauty inherent in laryngeal consonants and the emphatic articulation of the organs of speech.

In my works, much prominence is given to the human voice, both as the basic natural inborn right to full expression and as the spiritual and artistic right to portray yearning in the face of political reality, allowing them unlimited acoustic space. This acoustic spectrum which I endeavour to express and to expand, is reflected at all levels of the microstructure and macrostructure of my works.

2. COMPOSITIONAL PROCESSES

2.1. Inspirational sources

In the late 1980s I became increasingly interested in microtonal music. In October 1988 I made a special trip to Graz to attend its innovative festival, *Musikprotokoll*, *Steirischen Herbst*, devoted in its entirety to microtonal music. At that time I was already deeply involved in the composition of the cantata *Like Two Branches*. The live performances of works by Ivan Wyschnegradsky,[3] Alois Haba and Giacinto Scelsi made a great impression on me, and served as inspiration for further work in *Like Two Branches*.

This is what I noted down while listening to the premiere of Ivan Wyschnegradsky's work *Two Choruses*, Op. 14, for choir, four pianos tuned in quarter-tones and percussion:

> The four pianos sound almost bell-like, the percussion like a prepared piano. His music sounds very oriental and exotic, he is not afraid of very brash, bright fortissimo chords. He created an amazing effect while harmonising a revolutionary Bolshevik song with all those quarter-tones arranged in his language and very interesting chords – clusters and non-clusters; the idea of layering of instruments like a chorus parallel to the vocal chorus is fascinating.

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[1] *The Gown of Night* represented the State of Israel at the international ROSTRUM of composers, UNESCO – Paris 1989 – and won the prize of the Canadian Electroacoustic Community, Montreal, 1993. It is available on CD No. 158 of OPUS ONE.

[2] *Like Two Branches* won the Israeli ACUM award, 1994. It is available on CD No. 3-1420-2 of SCHWANN-KOCH-AULOS.

[3] Ivan Wyschnegradsky (St. Petersburg 1893 – Paris 1979) was one of the earliest pioneers of the quarter-tone compositional trend in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In Paris in the early 1920s he secretly designed a quarter-tone piano, while creating within himself a rich, critical, uncompromising and isolated internal world. He saw himself as following in the footsteps of Scriabin in whom the ultrachromatic tendency was first revealed; Scriabin himself has defined Wyschnegradsky (before he left for Paris) as 'a pioneer of the new music' in Russia and as his natural successor. Indeed, Wyschnegradsky made a quarter-tone transcription of a passage from Scriabin's piano music. The philosophical idea common to both was that human consciousness needed to expand into the cosmic to reveal its secrets.

Two hours later, I wrote about his work entitled *Integrations*, Op. 49, that these two pieces for two pianos in quarter-tones are etudes of density. When I heard *Composition*, Op. 43, for quartet, a day later, I could already note the materialisation of a classical idiom of quarter-tones.

The music of Giacinto Scelsi I heard live during the same festival also made a strong impression. I wrote the following comments in response to listening to his *Chukrum* for String Orchestra:

> Things proceed without time limits – this is what distinguishes Scelsi. The composer is searching for nirvana. One seems to awaken from sleep after listening to his compositions. The systemic progression of long bow strokes combines with momentary interruptions and quarter-tones. Scelsi is an amazing colour artist – the wonderful high tessitura sounds, the tonal intensity and the sudden knocks on the body of the instruments which assail your ears . . . the stunning glissandi. All these reflect the true musicality of an inspired, uninhibited genius. There is no melody (melody is prohibited, the static feeling is thus regulated). I estimate that there are 120 string instruments on the stage.

2.2. The preparation of *The Gown of Night*

The unusual process of composition which this work underwent included much experimentation.

I commissioned a text from the Arab-Israeli poet Muhammad Ghana'im of Baka-al-Gharbiyya requesting that he writes text which deals with sounds made by animals at night. When the text was completed, I visited the Bedouin children at Rahat in the Negev (southern part of Israel) a number of times and recorded with them the raw material – a poem declaimed in various ways. Then I heard the recordings and chose seventy sounds out of a total of 120 – taking into account their richness in colour and the technical quality of the recording. I decided upon a table of sounds ranging from the rough-whispering to the clear-bright. These were the 'instruments' used to form the work's complex sonorities. After a further thirty hours of mixing, cutting and editing in the studio, the work was ready.

Initially, I assumed that it would take from five to seven minutes, but when the magnetic tape was completed, its duration was found to be only 2′42″.

2.3. Work on the cantata *Like Two Branches*

Like Two Branches was written for the Israeli group *Cameran Singers*, the foremost choral ensemble in Israel during the 1980s.

I was keen to work with an Arabic text again, but this time with old, pre-Islamic Arabic, and to create a well-designed musical setting for it. I suggested to Avner Itai, the *Cameran Singers*' conductor and musical director, that my text should consist of a selection of verses by the extraordinary sixth century Bedouin woman poet, Al-Khansa. A chamber ensemble would support the singers – two oboes, violoncello, *kanun* and a set of oriental *tar* drums supplemented with additional percussion. My immediate response to the rich language and daring philosophical ideas of the poet consisted of a tonal image focusing on the *Hijaz* – an Arabic *maqam* well known throughout the Middle East – with voices and instruments evoking together the strong entity inspired by the lines of the text. Preparations for the actual composition involved intimate familiarisation with this idea during the years 1986–8.

I read the poet's divan and decided upon the selection according to which I would plan the musical structure. It is important to stress: this poetry has been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, and the collections published lend themselves to many different interpretations within which I needed to find orientation. In addition, in order to clarify the possibilities of setting Al-Khansa's text, I had no option but to refer to the section of the thesis by Anayat Wasfi Shaalan[4] of Cairo, where she instructs contemporary composers on the usage of vowels and consonants for setting Arabic texts. In parallel, I was also becoming familiar with the vocal potential and technique of the *Cameran Singers*.

I worked a great deal with the vocalists on their pronunciation of the text. A standard diagram (a pronunciation table for Arabic) which I designed for my vocal works – a type of compromise between the table of the International Phonetic Association (IPA), and the requirements of vocalists for the correct pronunciation of a text set to music in Arabic – is shown in figure 1. I am also indebted to the guidance and aid on extended techniques for the oboe and violoncello provided respectively by master artists Heinz Holliger and Siegfrid Palm, and to the insight into performance techniques on the concert *kanun* provided by the Armenian virtuoso Wartuhi Lepejian.

3. ANALYTICAL ASPECTS

3.1. *The Gown of Night* – a short description

The originality and primal quality embodied in the timbre of the children's pronunciation of 'desert-Arabic' tantalised my ear. I decided to preserve this

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[4] Shaalan is an expert on vocal music and holds a doctorate in this field from the Academy of Music of Bari, Italy.

Arabic consonant letters	Transcription	Arabic consonant letters	Transcription
آ (ﺍ), ﺄ, ﺀ	ʾ (glottal stop)	ﻁ	ṭ (emphatic [1] t)
ﺏ (ﺑ)	b	ﻅ	ḍh (emphatic [1] dh)
ﺕ (ﺗ)	t	ﻉ (ﻌ, ﻋ, ﻊ)	ʿ (voiced pharyngeal consonant) [2]
ﺙ (ﺛ)	th (as *th* in *thick*)	ﻍ (ﻐ, ﻏ, ﻎ)	gh (as *r* in French *mère*)
ﺝ (ﺟ)	j (as *j* in *Jack*)	ﻑ (ﻓ)	f
ﺡ (ﺣ)	ḥ (voiceless pharyngeal fricative consonant) [2]	ﻕ (ﻗ)	ḳ (emphatic [1] k)
ﺥ (ﺧ)	kh (as *ch* in German *Buch* or *j* in Spanish *José*)	ﻙ (ﻛ)	k
ﺩ	d	ﻝ (ﻟ)	l
ﺫ	dh (as *th* in *this*)	ﻡ (ﻣ)	m
ﺭ	r (rolling *r* as in Italian)	ﻥ (ﻧ)	n
ﺱ (ﺳ)	s	ﻭ	w
ﺵ (ﺷ)	š (as *sh* in *ship*)	ﻩ (ﻫ, ﻬ)	h
ﺹ (ﺻ)	ṣ (emphatic [1] s)	ﻱ (ﻳ)	y
ﺽ (ﺿ)	ḍ (emphatic [1] d)	ﺓ (ﺔ)	t or nothing

Arabic vowel letters and optional diacritical marks (over and under the letters)	Transcription	Vowel letters & optional diacritical marks	Transcription
´ (over the letter)	a	، (over the letter)	u
آ´, ﻟ´ (under the letter)	ā (long a)	و ،	ū (long u)
،	ī	ٌ	un
ﻯ ،	ī (long ī)	ّ (over the letter)	symbolizes the length of the consonant (e.g., ﺩ = dd)

Notes: [1] Emphatic consonants are pronounced with retraction of the back part of the tongue.

[2] ḥ and ʿ are pronounced with the pharynx almost closed by the epiglottis.

Figure 1. Phonetic transcription of Arabic.

human dimension during the editing process. Thus, the language of the composition became clarified as polyphony and pointillism in a particularly high concentration. The impression made upon the ears of the listener is a result of many (short) entries of many voices at a very fast tempo – sometimes with only fractions of a second between entries. Nevertheless, and in spite of the tremendous density, freshness is preserved throughout because of the variety of colour in the children's voices.

The structure of the work follows the meaning of the words which describe the transition from night to morning. The composition begins with a chorale of whispers which builds up after a number of energetic whispering-entries (symbolising night) until the first sound is born; later, after many 'happenings', the texture is enriched and the volume increases. The clear, echoing voice of a single girl (symbolising morning), completes the work. Figure 2 is a schematic representation of the beginning of the work.

3.2. Text–music relationship in *Like Two Branches*

The tendency in this work is that of being as faithful as possible to the rhythm of the Arabic language with its many repetitions and rich texture, while avoiding constrain by the metre of Arabic poetry. To my mind, to preserve the recurring accentuation would be too mechanical, would ignore the descriptive and dramatic potential of the words, and would even weaken their impact unnecessarily.

For example, the perception of the eternal in the sentence *fa-saw-fa 'ab-ki-ka ma na-hat mu-ta-wwa-ka-tun* is given a static expression by means of musical devices (figure 3): above the tonal effects scattered about in the instrumental ensemble, made up of varied ostinato lines, a spoken cluster with fixed dynamics (*mp*) appears, each of the twelve vocalists declaiming the text at his/her natural pitch and in a fixed rhythm dictated by the natural rhythm of the spoken chorus with the poetic metre.

3.3. The melodic aspect in *Like Two Branches*

Throughout the whole work, motives of my own are interwoven with borrowed motives – quoted in various ways and at various levels of elaboration.

An example of the borrowed motivic group is presented in figure 4, which consists of material taken from the book of *Hijaz* melodies by El Hitami (El Hitami 1983). It is worth noting that the sections in square brackets are used as separate units. The melody is developed in the instrumental introduction of *Like Two Branches*, with two oboes in unison and the *kanun* doubling at the octave, as follows (figure 5):

- The tempo is altered from   = 144 to   = 120.
- The metre is altered from $\frac{3+4+3}{8}$ to $\frac{2}{4}$.
- In the third bar there is a change which sharpens the rhythm.
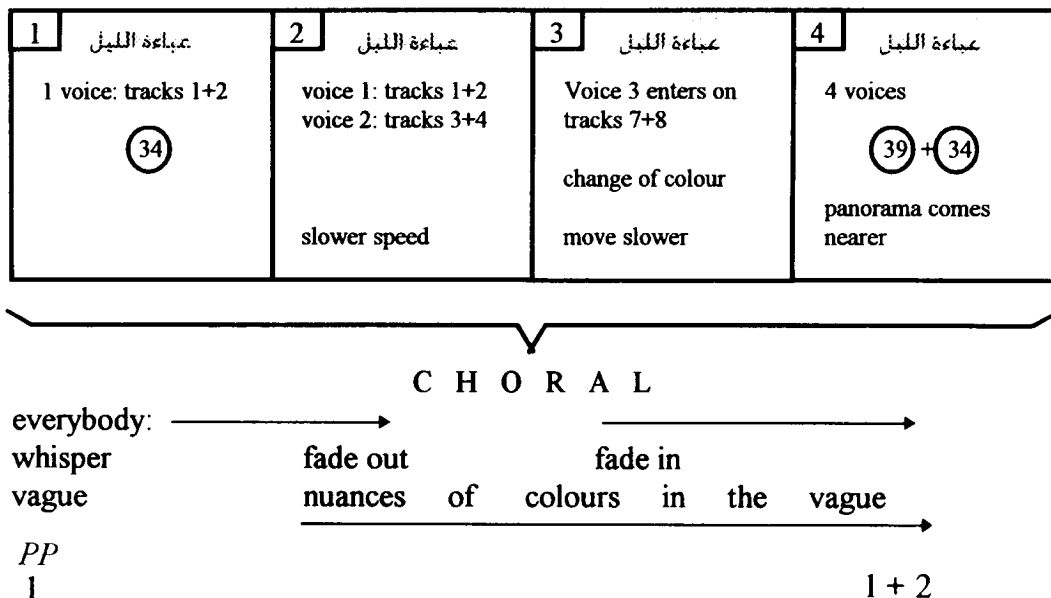- There is no indication of accidentals next to the clef sign.

Figure 2. *The Gown of Night*. First four sectional units of the work indicating whispering-entries of the Bedouin children. The large numbers in the bottom represent the process from more (1) to less (1 + 2) vagueness. The numbers in circles (34 and 39) indicate the specific vocal sounds (out of a total of seventy selected recordings) used in a particular passage.

Figure 3. Treatment of the sentence *fa-saw-fa 'ab-ki-ka ma na-hat mu-ta-wwa-ka-tun* (a = anacrusis, m = metacrusis, c = crusis).

Figure 4. Yusef Pasha's melody.

Figure 5. Comparison between Yusef Pasha's melody and the beginning of *Like Two Branches*.

- The original embellishments are omitted; others are used instead, not necessarily in the same places – in the third measure there is a melodic alteration (G instead of B).
- Glissandi are added in order to achieve an oriental microtonal effect.

Figure 6 illustrates one of the 'strangest' melodies in the work, which is heard in the fourth section, to the words *kamirjali tabbatchatin hina fara* (like a cook's cauldron when it boils over) - referring to the hero's outburst of anger (bars 327–43). The interval characteristic of the melody, sung by a bass solo, is

Figure 6. Setting of the words *kamirjali tabbatchatin hina fara* (like a cook's cauldron when it boils over).

the tritone. This interval is well suited to the dramatic nature of the text. However, between the well-defined 'tritone areas', 'Hijaz areas' are inserted.

3.4. Sonic and textural aspects in *Like Two Branches*

3.4.1. The chorus

The vocal ensemble employed is a mixed chamber choir. Choral timbre, as regards the division of voices, is extremely varied: basically it consists of six voices (soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor, baritone and bass). As such, it appears in the cantata in fugal and polyphonic segments which create a dense vocal fabric (e.g. bars 53–63). But in addition, there is a maximal division into twelve voices, either as six pairs, in unison or at a fixed interval, or into partial groups of high or low voices only. The most conspicuous example of the great polarity in effect created by the differences in texture may be encountered in the seventh section, where the men's chorus with soloists appears, followed by the women's chorus in the eighth section. In many places the choir is clearly treated as an ensemble of soloists with many *virtuoso* functions, such as complex melismatic writing, the use of very high registers and large intervals, complicated polyrhythmic passages, etc.

Another aspect of sound as applied to the chorus is the approach to the voice: the pronunciation of the Arabic language – its resonance and intonation – dictated the registers, the design of the melodic line and the choice of the performing ensemble. For example, one of the vocal effects resulting from this approach consists of a spoken *glissando*, which may be found in the beginning of the build-up towards the work's

Figure 7. *wastawsaka ththamaru* (fruit that has ripened).

climax – in the final *ritornello* – when the chorus performs the song *wastawsaka ththamaru* (fruit that has ripened) in twelve-voiced parallel clusters beginning with an ascending and descending glissando within an interval of a ninth with *subito piano* dynamics (bars 685–6). This is illustrated in figure 7.

3.4.2. *The instrumental ensemble*

This consists of two oboes, violoncello, *kanun* (or piano) and percussion instruments – a set of *tar* drums with the following supplements, such as: *darbuka*, bongo, cymbals, bells, triangle, glockenspiel, timpani, congas, *kashishi* and sticks.

The ensemble has a number of functions:

- It serves as the main medium for the tonal portrayal of images in Khansa's poetry, either by colourful illustration to accompany the sung text, or by means of instrumental prologues and interludes.
- It adds colour to the voices by exact doubling in sections of an overall unison or in polyphonic segments.
- Instrumental sections serve as areas or points of articulation from the formal point of view. Extended techniques for violoncello and oboe were thoroughly investigated and then integrated and organised so as to exploit the instrumental potential fully, and in particular, to enable the instruments to produce oriental effects. The *kanun* – popularly acknowledged as an oriental folk instrument with an improvisational function or as accompaniment to folk singing – is given a solo function here, similar to that in a concerto in Western art music.

For example, the violoncello part includes graphic notation which allows for a certain amount of freedom in interpretation. In addition to accepted effects such as flageolets, vibrato, glissando, pizzicato and col legno, use is also made of percussive effects and a type of low pitch scratching which also has an important formal significance: it is used to mark cadential cut-off points and its duration also indicates the hierarchical level of the formal division. The percussive element is strongly interwoven with the violoncello timbre as shown in figure 8 (bars 104–9).

4. CONCLUSION

The semitone is no longer the smallest standard distance between pitches in Western art music, even less so in computerised music. As a result, the overabundance of potential distances between pitches has become the source of painstaking investigation. The increasing recognition of this micro-element has sparked the analytical mind of musicians (creative artists and theoreticians alike) to deal with micro- and macro-elements simultaneously. This dual terminology has come into use quite recently.

The acoustic effect of works such as *The Gown of Night* and *Like Two Branches* illustrates my predilection for extended voice techniques, also for extended voice techniques in interaction with technology, as part of a general sensitivity to timbre in shaping of sound. This sensitivity applies equally to instrumental and to vocal sound. I have been increasingly drawn in this direction since the mid 1980s. I cannot remain indifferent to the revelations of untapped wonders of sound existing in the universe, just as I feel compelled to delve more and more into the acoustic marvels which make computerised music possible. This dichotomy of enigmatic nature and constructive compositional thought also embraces: the attitude to melody, which encompasses mobility as opposed to stability, nuances of texture, varied rhythmic resources and the measurement of time. During my creative work in the 1990s, microtonal intervals are

Figure 8. Example of percussive violoncello passage.

increasingly present as part of structural thought in miniature rather than as an element for evoking an emotional or dramatic affect. This is in evidence in a series of tape works entitled *Ethnic Silhouettes*,[5] in which, for example, *Souls Consumed* is based on a duet between two old Eskimo women, or *Bird in the Forest*, where a young Croatian girl is accompanied by two recorders and three horns.

I have become extremely strict in the approach to structure in my compositional work as regards to the macro which develops from the micro. For example, in *Salt Crystals* (*Symphony No. 1*),[6] the interwoven textural components are in accordance with the pastoral philosophical approach of the work, which consists of rhythmic rows of obvious minimalistic mobility and with ever-increasing orchestral additions which are set against strong outbursts of sound. This may be described as structuralism with a profile of clear, somewhat cautious, growth, from microstructure to macrostructure. To my mind, an increasing attention to this type of compositional approach is associated with the creation of clearly

[5] *Ethnic Silhouettes* will be released on a CD in the course of 1999 by OPUS ONE, USA.
[6] *Salt Crystals* appeared on two CDs of Vianna Modern Masters (VMM), Cat. No. 2023 and 3038. The score is published by IMC/MALI, Israel Composers League.

defined meanings which are more obvious to the listener.

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