

Interview with Joshua Horowitz on the orchestration of Bas-Sheve

Background of the Score

In February of 2019, Josh Horowitz was sent the manuscript of Henekh Kon's piano and vocal score of the only known pre-Holocaust Yiddish opera, Bas-Sheve. The scholar, Professor Diana Matut, had obtained the score via a Yale University auction and was invested in having the opera performed as Kon would have wanted it - with full orchestra, choir and soloists. Andreas Schmitges organized a program through the Yiddish Summer Weimar, resulting in the commission for Josh to orchestrate the work and compose the missing scenes. Poet Jake Marmer [JM] and composer and guitarist John Schott [JS] interview Josh Horowitz [H].

JM: Let me start by asking what your very first thought was when you received the manuscript of Kon's opera to orchestrate.

H: Terror. But that's not specific to this project. Every project starts with a cold sweat and a feeling that I can't possibly follow through with this to the end and not bring shame upon myself and my family. But I guess each new thing brings its own set of reasons to be terrified.

JM: But you've created two other operas, right?

H: Yes, a children's opera, *Der Wilder Mann*, and a choral chamber opera, *Lilith The Night Demon in One Lewd Act*.

JM: So, what was different about this one?

H: Nothing at all, really! I just felt like one of those dachshunds dressed up in people clothes. The first problem started with the manuscript itself.

JS: What in the manuscript did you find difficult?

H: Well first of all, it wasn't complete. 16 pages were missing, about 10 percent of the whole length.

JS: Was your feeling of dread based on the idea of having to compose the missing part in the style of Kon?

H: Yeah, that was the original thought, but when I spoke to Diana Matut about this, she made the liberating comment that there was no directive other than to make it work, so the commission would be for a "Horowitz-Kon" production, whereby I had free reign. Of course, that was equally terrifying, but in a different way.

JS: How so?

H: You'd have to be kinda crazy to actually want total free reign. Its like putting a hound-dog in a room full of collies and a bathtub full of raw beef. If it doesn't die of exhaustion, it will from over-consumption - too many chances to make wrong choices.

JS: So, how did you get over the hump?

H: Well, my first instinct was to research the story and to devise a new work that would weave Talmudic commentaries throughout the work wherever I could, using the choir to do this, with spoken and sung texts, very much like a Greek choir, but having it function as if it were a kind of trial of Dovid's guilt or innocence, ending in the clear guilty verdict, because when you read the commentaries, the ones that posit a verdict of Dovid's innocence sound silly by today's judicial standards. The whole thing starts to look like a liberal vs. conservative debate with the conservatives using improbable peripheral evidence rather than the obvious facts of the case, kinda like Fox News and... well, the whole Republican party today. Just imagine Kelly-Ann

Conway as one of the Talmudic commentators and you'll have an idea of some of the arguments for Dovid's innocence. But that was way too ambitious.

JM: So, in the end, you didn't use the commentaries?

H: No, although the text I created for that version was almost finished. But because I was only given 16 working weeks to orchestrate and compose the whole project, by the second week or so, I realized that I wouldn't meet the deadline of orchestrating, composing AND working from a libretto insert of my own creation. But there was another reason too; the Broderzon libretto was a strange hybrid of narrative storytelling and dialogue. It seemed that it broke the first rule of theater right out of the gate.

JM: What rule?

H: The rule of "show," don't "tell." It reminded me of some quote by Hitchcock I think, where he said something like, bad script-writing is when you have the characters telling you what time and place it is rather than having it be obvious through visuals. In Broderzon's libretto, the whole first scenes are taken up by Nosn (the Prophet Nathan) and Sheliekh (the messenger) talking about the sins Dovid has committed and how difficult it is for him to find sleep. It seemed to me that they wasted the precious drama of Dovid's sins of rape and murder, and more importantly, of Bas-Sheve's response.

JM: Can you explain why that made it difficult for you?

H: From a personal perspective, I would have wished for the drama to be from the point of view of Bas-Sheve. I mean, she suffers the most in this story, and, you know, inner and outer conflict is what makes good theater. Just look at it - Bas-Sheve is raped, her husband is killed, and her first child dies, all as a result of Dovid's actions. Her perspective is the most relevant really, and dramatic. Even in the 1920's, the *idea* of women's independence was well established. Kon and Broderzon are both kind of entrenched in an archaic perspective. That bothered me through the whole process and still does. But, on the other hand, you could view this as a psychological drama, with some caveats.

JM: Such as?

H: Well to start, Broderzon doesn't stick to his own model. Thankfully, actually, but the result is a hybrid, because Dovid and Bas-Sheve *do* interact with each other half way through the drama. But not in any way contentiously like they "should" - another missed opportunity. Rather than having a conflict, when we first hear Bas-Sheve, she's calling to Dovid, following which he asks her to sing a lullaby to help him to sleep. I mean, really?! So she sings the tritest song of the whole opera. You would only find a scene like that in a modern thriller with a psycho murderer forcing his victim to soothe him. That's basically the gist of it. But there was another interpretation that Diana offered, that kind of freed me up a bit from my own agony with the libretto, namely, that Dovid could be seen as a kind of child king, like, narcissistic in a very Trumpian way, and Bas-Sheve was really psychologically strong-willed enough to be able to function in this role, gently controlling him.

JM: Do you buy that?

H: No, but I liked it as a possibility, and it was enough to fool me into believing there were more levels to the drama [laughs].

JS: Did the music itself bear that interpretation?

H: That's a great question! It could, because this is the first moment in the opera where Kon switches to a Yiddish-theater-infused style, with all its kitch and lightness. At first I thought that this was simply Kon's attempt to embed a future hit in the opera - you know, like so many composers have done for mercenary reasons. But later in the opera she sings yet another "hit" in a light style when her firstborn baby dies! Was Kon poking fun of the whole story? I mean,

beyond this, the figure of Sheliekh is often presented humorously here, with little puns and jokes in the script accompanied by silly musical gestures. So there's definitely a "something-for-everybody" quality to the work. But to be so light at that point? Confusing! On the other hand, I personally love the idea of mixing humor and tragedy, and used the technique in my Lilith opera in order to open the audience up emotionally with humor for the whole first half of the opera, till it descends into some seriously deep stuff like child mortality. When you laugh, you relax and open up, which is the perfect time to slay the audience with something deeper. The opposite is true too - if you can bring an audience to tears, you can also kill them with humor.

JM: Wait, Yiddish *puns*?

H: Yeah, Diana pointed that out to me. Sheliekh, the messenger, announces the arrival of Nosn, the prophet, and sings, "But here he is, the prophet, Nosn!" So, because this drama takes place in Poland, the Yiddish pronunciation of Nosn is "Nisn" which is also the word for sneezing. And indeed, in the next sentence, Sheliekh sneezes, and proclaims, "He may enter, after all!" Its all very corny, but probably the Warsaw Jewish audience cracked up at that point. Then right after that we get this kind of Abbott and Costello "Who's on First" moment, where Nosn asks, "Is the King awake?" and Sheliekh says, "No, Nathan, he's awake!" and Nosn asks, "Is the king asleep?" and Sheliekh says, "No, Nathan, he's asleep." then says, " I don't understand the question you're asking?! You know, as well as I, what the king's doing!"

JM: Does that humor continue throughout the opera?

H: Not really, and I guess beyond that we also don't really know whether the missing part of the opera contained more direct drama at that point, with Bas-Sheve emerging forth as the strong, wise matriarch she might have ultimately been. That's the big mystery for me.

JM: So how did you fill that gap?

H: Well, we asked Michael Wex to write text for the missing part, and he made quick work of it. It was really late in the game, because the funding was uncertain, so Andreas Schmitges, the fundraiser and amazing administrator of the project, took the chance to contract Wex at this late date. Wex sent it to me within a week, and I set it for orchestra in the next 2 weeks. It was a frenzy, and Wex did a great job, but I didn't have enough time to request any adjustments in the text he sent.

JM: Can you talk about what he did and what you may have wanted to do differently?

H: Okay, well, first, the text was brilliant as it always is with anything Wex touches. The opera breaks off where Nosn finishes admonishing Dovid who, by having Uryeh killed, is like the rich man who steals the poor shepherd's sheep. He tells Dovid that Dovid has brought God's judgement upon himself. So we're at the point where Dovid realizes his guilt, but doesn't know what the exact punishment will be. So Wex decided to do a Yiddish version of the biblical portion of the prophet's pronouncement to Dovid of what God's punishment will actually entail. Then this morphs into a soliloquy of Dovid seeing the ghost of Uryeh, whom he's just sent to his death on the front lines of war. It's very Shakespearean. Like Hamlet, Dovid goes insane. So Wex really stepped it up two levels higher with the interpretation of this being primarily a psychological drama.

JM: Were you in agreement with that?

H: Totally. I loved what Wex did with it, but after I finished scoring it I thought of another completely alternate version, which was to have the whole scene catapulted into Bas-Sheve's voice - like, you know, what she really felt. I mean, the opera was titled Bas-Sheve after all! The wierd thing is, it was formerly also titled "Dovid un Bas-Sheve." If we wanted to give a quasi-Talmudic interpretation of why the final title on the manuscript cuts Dovid out of it, we might infer that Bas-Sheve did in fact have the main role in the original version. Yet in the version we have with the missing pages, she has the smallest role. Its possible that the missing pages were indeed at least an expansion of her role, and also, the fact that the missing parts

really seem to be right at the heart of where a second act climax should be, we could easily have turned this into a feminist perspective at that point, shifting the perspective entirely. If I ever did another version, I would really want to do this.

JM: Did you talk about that possibility with Wex?

H: To date, no! But I plan to, at least just to hear what he thinks would be the strengths and weaknesses of that idea. It would make for an interesting panel discussion for dramaturgs.

JM: So, you got the text from Wex, and you mentioned not having enough time to make adjustments in it. Did you talk about what you wanted or needed before he wrote the text?

H: Nope, not a bit!

JM: Really? Why not?

H: I guess first of all, because I didn't want to burden him with a mediocre idea. I mean, creativity is a delicate thing sometimes. So, if I told him what I was thinking, it might pigeon-hole him into a strategy that would influence his own interpretation. I have such respect for Wex, that I just wanted to open the gates and let 'er buck. Our whole conversation was, basically, "Send me somethin' quick and I'll deal with whatever you come up with."

JM: Did that work out?

H: Ha! Oh, man! Well at first glance, I was smitten (and still am), but the practical side of it proved to be more difficult than I had thought.

JM: You mean his interpretation?

H: No, the speech rhythm. I hadn't yet thought of having the missing text be from Bas-Sheve's perspective yet at that point in the game. That thought came later on. So I was thrilled that Wex came up with something that was dramatically more dense than the other parts of the opera. I loved it. But the main problem I had was that, whereas Wex wrote some of it in verse, most of it was actually in prose, unmetred, so there were wildly different line lengths.

JS: How does that work when you're composing the score?

H: Okay, so if you have a definite defined meter you have the freedom of choice of either composing very rhythmically, OR stretching out words to fit other rhythms of your choosing. Let me give you an example, super simple, but this gets to the point: Say you have a poem, like,

"Roses are red,
violets are blue
tulips are fine
and so are you"

Well, I can keep that meter easily with music that matches its own rhythm, OR I can impose another rhythmic structure onto it that would stretch out the words wherever I want, thereby emphasizing them through musical means. So, with the roses are red poem, if we draw out the word "fine" for a long length musically, and keep the last line "and so are you," short and terse, then we've just made tulips the finest thing, and "you" are now an afterthought. Fun, right? That's what we can do with music. That's the essence of why 19th century song composers like Schubert sometime chose "mediocre" texts, because they could interpret and deepen their meaning through the setting. But when we have a long poetic line that's not in a strict meter and is ITSELF asymmetric, then we're robbed of the possibility of a strict musically rhythmic interpretation, PLUS, we have to now squish all of those words into a musically intelligible whole.

JS: How did you solve that problem?

H: In two ways: The first was to escape the problem of singing altogether, and to set the first part, Nosl's pronouncement, as *spoken* text against an orchestral background that illustrated the mood. That had the advantage of setting my own composition apart from the rest of the opera - kind of like a marker that we're now in different aesthetic territory. Remember what I said about Diana Matut suggesting that we treat the missing portions as a museum restorer would, by making it obvious that this is not the work of the original artist? This simple solution brought that about right away. But I also loved the texture of spoken voice and have used it several times before in other compositions. And the prophet speaking can be very dramatic in its own way. But speaking wouldn't work at all for the dramatic portion of Dovid's guilty soliloquy. So I thought, what type of singing needs to squish a ton of words into a short space? Wait. Hold on...oh yeah, I know... DAVENING! It was kind of a no-brainer in hindsight. So I treated these long sentences as if they were almost High Holiday melodies with tons of prayer text. That makes the delivery familiar to an educated audience, but creates a kind of cognitive dissonance. I mean, here's Dovid tormented by guilt supplicating not to God, but to Uryeh's ghost. It kind of reminded me of Paul Celan's poem, *Tenebrae* (which I set any years ago for mezzo-soprano and orchestra by the way), where he rails against the "Christian" God by saying "Pray to us, Lord." He kind of turns the tables and basically says, we're the one's doing the suffering, Lord, so if you think humans should be praying to you or Jesus by virtue of the fact that he suffered, think twice. The whole human race suffers at your hand, so you should be praying to US. So I was thinking a bit along those lines, like, yeah, Dovid is praying, but he's doing it to the guy he just murdered.

JS: But you also used the choir in your composition.

H: Yeah, not only there but in several places. I interspersed some choral segments even in Kon's score at two points, but yes, all except one of the 6 parts I composed here had choral parts, each time functioning in a different way. Kon's choral parts were very simple - easily written and easily sung. He obviously knew that choirs require the most rehearsal time, and wrote very practically for the first performance.

JS: Can you explain how your composed parts differed from Kon's and how they functioned?

H: Sure. Wex had suggested first that I reprise one of Broderzon's texts in the opera, right after Nosl's pronouncement that God will punish Dovid. So I used the "victory" text at this point according to Wex's suggestion, as an ironic interpolation. I mean, so, he's just been told that his first child will die shortly after birth, and the choir sings:

"Hail to the victories of the King! King Dovid lives and endures!"

But they don't sing it with the same victorious harmonies, but rather as a motet, whereby the words overlay each other at first, then culminate in the line "King David lives and endures" as if to say, yeah right, HE gets to live, but his child gets to die? OR, we could also think of it in another way, the way that any normal father would rather give his own life than have his child die. So, actually the greatest punishment to be levied upon Dovid would be to outlive his firstborn. Either way, the choir's comment is ironic.

JS: Then after that there is a rhythmic kind of war scene. Can you talk about that?

H: Yes. I used some Candomblé drum rhythms that I set in the strings, pizzicato, then col legno (hitting the strings with the wood of the bow), with the choir using rocks and aspirating rhythmically, then eventually shouting.

JS: The instrumental soundscape there changes dramatically from everything that had come before it.

H: Right, it does. The generating idea was the war that Dovid's army were engaged in, But Kon had already composed an earlier scene with a bit of war stuff in it depicting that. So I wanted this to be the war inside Dovid's head, but not only. Okay, so, you know, going back to the

Talmudic commentaries, one of the Rabbi's tries to make the point that because Uryeh was a Hittite and not a Jew, his marriage to Bas-Sheve wasn't legal by Jewish law, therefore no adultery was committed when Dovid takes Bas-Sheve. Forgetting the chauvenism of that logic, the first thing I wanted to do was use something culturally outside of the Jewish sphere. Candomblé is a Christian religion in Brazil, and the drumming patterns are very specific. It seemed as good a choice as any to morph that into the orchestra for the feeling of "otherness" but also rhythmically "warlike" I guess. And the sound of stones is not only "earthy," it also has the added symbol of the Jewish graveyard. So all those things were combined into that movement, ending with the last death blow.

JS: In that movement and the davening one as well, the orchestra kind of gradually disappears.

H: Yeah, I know. They're both kinda like Haydn's Farewell Symphony. A cliché of orchestral writing if ever there was one. My friend, Stefan Puchalski was visiting our house in Berkeley as I was writing that, and I reluctantly showed him that movement as I was struggling to give it a heartbeat, and he encouraged me to follow through with that disappearing-instruments-idea, so I'm gonna blame him partly for that [laughs]. Now I'm stuck with it and all the royalties will have to go to him, and I can give up hopes of starting payments on that Porsche I've had my eye on for so long.

JS: Back to the movement after the psychological war scene: then we *do* hear Bas-Sheve, singing a lullaby, with Dovid singing another melody, and it seems like they're in two separate rooms.

H: That's exactly what I intended, as Dovid is pleading to God at that point to "Strike me, torment me, blind me, but... spare Bathsheba's child."

JS: Then the choir enters in a lush, impressionistic style.

H: Yes, you know how in those old movies how the choir enters as a kind of voice from the otherworld? Gee, another cliché - imagine that! Talking to you, I'm really starting to feel pretty hackneyed here! Um, well, okay, I was aware that I was doing that here, and truth be told, I wanted an excuse to compose in a quasi-impressionistic style - which is one of my favorite periods in music. What's more celestial than a choir singing a 13th century Moroccan *Yedid Nefesh* melody set with lush impressionistic harmonies? So although the harmonies and text lull you into believing that Dovid's plea will be rewarded by a reprieve, it's really an ironic henchman's last meal offered to the condemned. I didn't mind the style cliché, because, well, the whole opera is ridden with clichés, so why should I resist? And I end the *Yedid Nefesh* prayer text with the words from that prayer that say, "Please, oh God, heal her now...", which I use almost literally to direct our attention back to Bas-Sheve, who is singing her lullaby to a child about to be murdered by God's hand.

JS: Can you talk about Kon's clichés that you mentioned?

H: Kon's music in this opera leans on three styles: Baroque, High Romantic, and Yiddish Theater-slash-Romantic exoticism, in the vein of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade*, or Saint-Saëns' *Samson and Delilah*. In fact, there's even a paraphrase of the Bachannale of Samson and Delilah in one of the Yiddish theater-like pieces. The Baroque sections use a lot of gestures found in early opera, such as the *sospira* (sighing) motives for sad passages, the cascading harmonies for moments dealing with dying like in Purcell's *Dido's Lament*, and a technique of composition called *fauxbourdon*, which involves a parallel series of first inversion triads - a technique that Kon uses ad infinitum.

JS: Did you take on any of Kon's techniques?

H: Pretty much all of them. In the impressionistic choral thing we were just talking about, the fauxbourdon forms the end of the first section, and the rest is there too. But even more than that, I used two of Kon's melodies from other works - his popular song, *Yosl Ber*, and the *Dybbuk Nign* from his *Dybbuk* film score.

JM: Was there a reason why you used those?

H: You know, composers often recycle their own works all the time, so to me it added another dimension to the work to connect it directly to Kon's other known music, and also added a variation to Kon's work that might not have been thought of by him. Also, it might bring enjoyment to the educated listener to recognize those melodies in this new context. But I also specifically chose those melodies for their intrinsic meanings. Yosl Baer is about a soldier, so at least thematically it connects to Uryeh, who is also a soldier. Rather than having the choir sing the text of Yosl Ber, though, I simply had them sing the melody, with the text being only the name "Uryeh" as a kind of invocation. If you sing that name, you'll notice it has a very dark, veiled sound, kind of eerie and ghostlike. The other thing that I used - the nign heard in his 1937 film score for the Dybbuk, you hear a group of Hasidim sing it there, without words. So when Dovid is hallucinating that he sees Uryeh, and the strings are glissing all over the place, the choir is singing the skeletal outline of that melody.

JM: Can you explain what you mean by a skeletal outline?

H: Well, its basically singing the main notes of the melody without all the passing notes. And it gets even more bare toward the end of the movement. You know how when you're having a nightmare, and you can't quite speak full sentences, as if you're paralyzed? It a bit like that, except its the choir doing it. Its like the aural equivalent of the figure of a ghost, whereby the details are not fully formed.

JS: The melody that the strings play glissandi seem familiar somehow. Where did it come form?

H: In the overture at the very beginning, Kon introduces a short augmented triad motive, and its the only place in the opera where he uses that particular type of harmony. Otherwise his harmonic palette is more conventional. Its not a wildly new harmony. You hear it all the time in dream sequences in mid-century films, and the impressionists used it with abandon. But in the context of this opera it sticks out and isn't developed anywhere else. I mean, usually when a unique idea is introduced in a work, it portends a later development, very much like when a writer foreshadows an event in a novel. But here it ended up as a kind of musical "dangling participle." That was the cue for me that he may have wanted to use it at some point later, or maybe not, but it just isn't something a skilled composer with a mind toward artistic economy would introduce without development, especially because it occurs prior to the first sung act. So I not only reintroduce it, but also had it repeat over and over, like again in a nightmare where you're trying to climb up a hill but your feet don't propel you forward. Or like a fever dream, when you can't get out of a thought.

JS: Were there other themes you developed from Kon?

H: Well, sometimes I addended parts toward the ends of some acts. I think that Kon's only performances were at the Kaminsky Theater in Warsaw in 1924, where he had to sing the bass part himself and play piano. There was a large choir there, the Schneur choir, but I think he dealt with the scene changes in the simplest of ways - to have a long held tremolo chord at the end of the scene. In our performance, where all the performers remained on stage, I felt free to add melodic elements to these stagnant moments. In all honesty, Kon could have done more too, but I'm still not sure why he made that choice - it happens too often and I felt that it just kind of let the scene die out at those points.

JM: Do orchestrators often take the freedom to add parts to the composer's works?

H: All the time. In fact, if you look at the credits after most blockbuster films, you'll see a whole team of orchestrators listed. They're the unsung heros of the film music world, because often their skills are what make the music work. The basic sketches given to them often are pretty bare, with pallid musical ideas, but when you add all the bells and whistles, it becomes music.

JS: There's also a surprising use of silence in your score. Can you talk about that?

H: I think you're referring to that movement with the disappearing orchestra, right?

JS: Yes, but Dovid stops singing midstream.

H: Yes, he does. He imagines that the ghost of Uryeh turns his bloody back to Dovid and gradually disappears like "smoke." I felt that the despair that Dovid felt could be enhanced by long moments of no music at all - complete silence. I asked Vincent Berger, one of the Dovid's (there were two in the premiere, the other being Jungchan Ham - both wonderful) to really take time there, twice as much as he thought he should. This is because, with the adrenaline you get while performing, psychological stage time moves more rapidly, so things tend to go faster, and you have to counteract this with exaggerated slowness. So he sings and then stops for a long time, then does the same thing a few times. There is a real tension in the air when there is no music whatsoever.

JS: Then there is the lullaby, where there are woodwinds behind the voice, rather than the expected strings.

H: Yeah, the lullaby uses a simple 3/4 rocking pattern against the 2/4 melody, but the dissonances should give the idea that something terrible is going to happen.

JM: And does.

H: Yes, God kills the child. Not his finest moment.

JS: There's a piercing piccolo motive that accompanies that scene.

H: Two piccolos set a minor-second apart. They sound a bit like a screeching baby wail, but when the death occurs, they flatline, very much like an EKG flatline. To me it's the most dramatic moment in the opera, and I would have loved to have it followed by a Bas-Sheve tirade against the almighty, but I was powerless to the time limitations.

JM: Do you expect the opera to have more performances?

H: You know, I would love that, but it's always a question of the will of the institutions that be and the sad fact that it takes lots of funds to make it work. Spread the word!

JM and JS: Thanks so much for this interview.

H: Thank you for giving me the chance to talk so much!