

SHULAMIT RAN (b. 1949)
80554-2

The intensely dramatic and deeply human music of Shulamit Ran occupies an important place in the music of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Ran's fierce musical individuality has sometimes been placed by critics and historians in a tradition with the Expressionists of the second Viennese school—Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg. The works from the 1970s and late 1980s in particular reveal a rich chromaticism that cycles quickly through all twelve pitches. Angular and sometimes pointillistic melodies with large intervals dramatically shift from one emotional gesture to another. *Verticals* for piano is an excellent example of this kind of writing, with its opening sonority, a dense hexachord that subsequently spins out in a horizontal motion, eventually cycling through all twelve pitches of the chromatic aggregate, creating an intense and complex aural palette.

It must be noted, however, that Ran, to date, has never written a piece that has remained strictly within serialist parameters. Rather, in describing her style she coined the phrase “freely atonal,” with an emphasis on the word “freely.”

On the whole I would say that I am a very intuitive composer. But, just as I said I am intuitive, I would also have to say that I place high demands on that inner ear of mine and at every step of my composing I always, very, very closely check everything, both in terms of the most immediate, the particular cell or complex of notes, or whatever I am working with right there, but always look how that functions within the context of the entire phrase, and always view how that phrase functions within the context of the section and the movement and the entire piece. I always really stay in touch with how a moment in time relates to the entire span of the composition. I work very carefully at the detail level and very carefully at making that detail a part of the larger context.¹

Not surprisingly then, Ran claims Beethoven (her “idol, in every way”) and the first Viennese school as a greater influence. Though Ran generally eschews compositional schemes, strict parameters, or definitive sets of rules, she holds particular reverence for the concept of compositional organicism.

I'm not one for imposing an idea from “without.” I like it all to grow from within the piece itself. For me, organicism is of crucial importance and is, as far as I'm concerned, the way in which the smallest detail and the largest aspect of the piece are all one and the same.

To make parallels with the second Viennese school, however, we might look more aptly to Alban Berg's lush, romantic, and dramatic compositional style. It is this sense of the dramatic that is often mentioned by reviewers, and Ran's own expression marks in scores often read more like stage directions than like musical terms, with examples such as “sneaking,” “scream,” “brooding,” “thoughtful,” “forceful,” “expansive,” “static,” “with breadth and passion,” “like a stuck record-needle,” and “get wilder.” Ran states:

¹ All direct quotes from Shulamit Ran, unless otherwise noted, are from a series of interviews with Anne M. Guzzo in *Shulamit Ran: Her Music and Life*, M.A. thesis: University of California, Santa Cruz, 1996.

There was a period of pieces where the thing that interested me was the potential of instruments to act like characters in a play—so that there were strong identifications between thematic materials and instruments and characters. The piece was, in a sense, like a theatrical, dramatic scenario for actors-slash-players to act out, always in purely musical ways.

Ran's more recent works, from the 1990s onward, tend to show influences from her upbringing in the Middle East. Within the music, Ran loosely employs cells of notes reminiscent of ancient modes or tropes, often briefly accompanied by a drone. Although still rich in harmonic complexity, the melodic emphasis involves closer intervals, minor and augmented seconds, rather than a reliance on the sometimes pointillistic, angular melodies Ran often used in the 1970s and 1980s. Ornamentation, a turn or trill, might function as an allusion to a 6,000-plus-year-old tradition of improvisatory Middle Eastern music. Considering the cantabile melodic emphasis in these later works, it is revealing that Ran has always believed Verdi to be a brilliant composer, and that he need not be categorized as merely the great opera composer.

These decade boundaries are fluid, and a composition by Shulamit Ran from any time period tends to feel like a journey or an adventure—there is always a sense of motion and progression, through many emotions and dramatic outbursts, through moments of calm and ethereal lucidity, always moving toward centers of harmonic gravity. She has mastered clarity and the vital essence of composition, the art of communication.

Fantasy Variations (1979/rev.1984) was commissioned by cellist André Emelianoff, to whom the work is dedicated. The memory of Ran's beloved uncle, Reuven Aviram, imbues the piece with emotional intensity. The virtuosic difficulty of a piece such as *Fantasy Variations* is mediated by Ran's impressive command of the idiomatic qualities of each instrument for which she writes.

I really get into the depth of the instrument's soul and try to tap it and find ways of making new music and the instrument come together in a manner that is meaningful and beautiful.

The *Fantasy Variations*, as the title implies, are in a free, stream-of-consciousness form. Yet its clarity is undeniable, for markers of returning material often serve as aural guideposts.

A repeated pitch, bowed with increasing intensity as it accelerates and crescendoes, introduces the piece. As this material spins itself out, double-stops progressively add depth, using wider and wider intervals. A snap pizzicato punctuates and leads to an arching minor ninth, followed by stretched-out portamenti, creating a gesturally and rhythmically free, improvisatory texture. It is interesting that Ran has used not only harmony and pitch as her thematic guideposts, but also timbre and texture—employing such sounds as pizzicato, portamenti, and double stops as thematic in and of themselves.

The opening statement, with clear melodic and harmonic definition, moves through high tessitura passages—the soaring and singing range of the cello—and leads back down into a Baroque-like dance, perhaps a gigue. Here, the regular rhythm (a rarity in the music of Ran) teases for a few measures. The ornamental turn at the end of the phrase becomes developmental

material, which is first sequenced, then manipulated, using traditional Baroque techniques such as augmentation and diminution throughout the progression of the composition.

A calmer, rhythmically augmented interpolation of the turn becomes peppered with individual pizzicati notes, and a series of repeated pitches that allude to the opening motive move higher and higher, building tension. At this point, nearly halfway through the piece, the first obvious return occurs, with the opening gesture of the repeated pitch, accelerating and getting louder.

The music moves through angular, ghostly *sul ponticello* variations, referencing the dance motives. It is here, just beyond two-thirds of the way through the piece, that the melodic line appears with timbral variation, in harmonics. The overtone series pours out in this ethereal range, and the piece comes quietly to this most important marker, a place of stasis and calm.

The final variation, now an accelerating repeated pitch with added double stops, works its way through the quirky dance motive. Questioning and angular motion lead dramatically to a long, sighing, and surprisingly traditional resolution.

Soliloquy (1997) is dedicated to the Peabody Trio, which premiered the work in February of 1998, at Buckley Recital Hall in Amherst, Massachusetts. The work is an adaptation of *Yearning* for violin and string orchestra, a piece composed for violinist Edna Michell and the late Yehudi Menuhin in 1995. Ran's compositional point of departure for both versions of this piece was a yearning musical line sung by the character, Khonnon, in her opera, *Between Two Worlds (The Dybbuk)*.

Soliloquy falls squarely into Ran's Middle Eastern-inspired compositions. The expansive introduction is crafted with a deep, repeated legato octave drone in the piano, and wide-open chordal intervals, upon which the strings add ethereal layers or minor seconds. Texture and timbre are paramount, with glassy *sul ponticello* bowing and a feeling of weightlessness.

The violin comes to the fore with the largely stepwise and whole-tone theme. The entire piece develops organically from this rising melody. Brief trills in the line allude to a free and improvisatory tradition, although they are completely notated in the score. The theme is passed and shared, developed and moved toward a climax. This important arrival is constructed from the extremes of range—piano at its lowest notes, violin in high harmonics, and the cello providing balance in the mid-range with a tremolo at the bridge.

The second half of the piece is rhythmically driven, with piano and cello setting a backdrop upon which the violin theme continues building. An *accelerando* doubles the rhythmic activity, moving the piece upward in range, arriving at a *cantabile* return of the violin theme. The cello in a plaintive reply sings an inverted version of the theme, moving downward, returning the melody to the violin, and eventually bringing the trio to the original open mood of the introduction, which is recapitulated here in quiet conclusion.

Verticals, for piano (1982), was commissioned by pianist Alan Feinberg, to whom the work is dedicated. He premiered it on March 2, 1983, in Merkin Hall, New York City. According to Ran, this composition is a piece about piano playing:

Though it quotes no past music and alludes to no “other styles” per se, parts of it are very much inspired by the pianistic style and textures, indeed by the sheer physical sensation experienced by the performer, of some of the music that has come to constitute the canon of the virtuoso piano literature.²

The formal structure of *Verticals* can be divided into four major sections that roughly suggest a ternary form. The exposition is marked by a widely spaced double grace note at the interval of a minor ninth, leading to the dense opening vertical hexachord. These eight notes, two grace notes and the hexachord, are repeated and quickly spun out in a demanding horizontal melodic line. The theme is developed through slight rhythmic alteration, and finally ascends into a brilliant flourish in the highest range of the piano. The composer instructs the pianist to hold the pedal through this flourish and its highest final pitch, and even through to the next phrase.

This open resonance, the ringing piano, will become in itself thematic, making appearances at important structural points in the composition. The new theme in the exposition, although harmonically related, is quite different in mood. It holds to the mid-range, is marked “like an echo,” and is soft and chorale-like in nature. From these three organically interrelated themes—the vertical chord, the resonance, and the softer variant of the theme—the rest of the piece develops. The exposition is quite lengthy and subjects the themes to virtuosic manipulations and a multitude of dramatic outbursts and moods. It feels symphonic in scale because of its length, but also because of Ran’s brilliant use of extreme registers and complex rhythmic formulations. Surprisingly, then, most of the exposition is not vertical at all, but rather two individual lines, contrapuntal and melodic, spinning forward, creating this mass of sound.

Contrasted with the wildly expressive exposition is a thoughtful and delicate mid-section, introduced quietly in the aftermath (and resonance) of a final explosive *fff* chord. Marked “clear, delicate” and then “inwardly, like a prayer,” this quiet, contemplative music moves forward. Eventually, a slow, even, quarter note-chorale, constructed with close voice-leading and contrary motion, builds toward the climax which is marked by a series of dense, repeated chords. These vertical sonorities are written with accelerating feathered beams, wide spacing, and *ff* dynamics. An emotional retreat from this climax and a relaxation of the tempo provides the preparation for the recapitulation, an unmistakable return to the dramatic opening gesture, and its mood. The recapitulation is not a literal one, but rather one with the same wild emotional content, and the same style.

The final phrase repeats the opening gesture’s pitches, but at an increasingly slow tempo, with the expressive mark “tender” and the pedal held throughout, the same material now holding dramatically different emotional meaning. It fades to a low and very quiet series of distant, tolling, vertical minor thirds.

Excursions (1980) is a work of great breadth and drama, set in three *attacca* movements: 1. *Broad and Extremely Passionate*; 2. *Very Lyrical, Gentle*; and 3. *With Breadth and Passion*. The composition received its premiere in 1983 at Brandeis University.

² From Ran’s program notes to the composition.

Excursions is a composition whose theatrical potential was realized by Ran through the use of an original and unusual structural device—the opening themes return in the third movement, but not as recapitulation. Rather, the return is a new beginning that moves onward into completely new territory, and undergoes its own development. With this device, the composer has allowed herself an alternate reality, a parallel universe in which to explore more than one train of musical thought. According to the composer, it was “akin to two diverging paths in life undertaken by the same characters.”

Ran’s First String Quartet also utilizes this structural device, and on one occasion, she even transfers a theme verbatim across pieces and genres; the second movement of the *Concerto da Camera I* is a dialogue between the contrabassoon and the bass clarinet. This is the same first page as appears in the second movement of her Concerto for Orchestra.

Excursions opens with a descending, rhapsodic, solo cello passage marked, “cadenza-like.” This important opening phrase serves as one embryonic cell from which the piece grows. The other phrase that marks the music is a static and legato chorale in the violin and cello parts, heard at first *senza vibrato*, just after the first two minutes of development of the opening phrase. This early style of Ran’s writing delves into violent emotional changes, virtuosic flourishes, and huge gestural washes of color. Yet a marvel of her writing is that through all of this intense and complex sound, there is clarity, direction, and purpose to her music. For example, in the first movement, a small device—the use of quickly repeated chords—allows the ear to recognize this rarity of repeated material. Its first arrival in the piano is marked “devilish!” This foreshadows a character change, one marked by its difference from the romantic-sounding violin and piano. By the end of the movement, the use of insistent repeated chords, this time in the left hand of the piano, has come to symbolize a rhythmic cadence, signaling finality.

The middle movement, *Very Lyrical, Gentle*, begins without pause and provides a soft contrast to the outer movements. The piano’s open intervals lead to tender, neo-romantic harmonies that employ traditional, contrary motion. The violin and cello intersperse two-note sighs between the piano’s romantic statements, and as the trio progresses toward an aching first climax, the violin emerges from the texture playing a high, trilled B-flat. The trill leads to an expressive and tumultuous climax, surprisingly (and temporarily) resolved with a major chord in the strings. The piece will not rest here, however, and the buildup starts anew, with rising string glissandi, and agitated, angular motion from the piano. Yet another buildup, this time the final one, utilizes the rising glissandi and consequent tension. (The repeated four-note piano motive here, extending the tension, foreshadows Ran’s later interest in Middle Eastern modes and an insistent, drone-like repetition with slight variation.) Moving higher and higher, the piano and violin arrive at the summit of the pitches heard thus far. This glassy, crystalline suspension connects the middle and last movements.

The final movement begins with the near-literal repetition of the descending, rhapsodic solo cello line from the opening of the first movement. Rather than standard recapitulation, however, many themes are revisited in this movement in new settings, and developed in different directions—these flashbacks are often bracketed, and the composer instructs the performers to “treat part freely, as a commentary or elaboration on earlier sections.”

Angular and pointillistic, this movement alternates tension with stasis. A return to the static secondary theme from the first movement makes an appearance, but eventually expository materials give way to a quasi-cadenza for piano. As the violin and cello eventually join the texture, the three players progress inexorably toward a densely written, wild, expressionistic climax.

A long dissolution, melting down to violin and cello double-stop tremolos, leads to a rubato violin cadenza. A final return to the opening cello motive is denser in this incarnation as the violin and piano join in the commentary. Suddenly (yet quietly) the secondary theme of stasis returns to the violin and cello parts, and the piano, slowly and lyrically, recalls the middle movement's romantic melody. This quiet mood permeates the last measures of the piece. One final outburst is subdued by a quiet chromatic cluster in the piano, held until it fades to nothingness. —*Anne M. Guzzo*

Anne M. Guzzo is a composer, musicologist, and professor of music at the University of Wyoming. Guzzo's interviews with Ran are included in *Shulamit Ran: Her Music and Life* (1996), available from the University of California, Santa Cruz, library.

Shulamit Ran was born in Tel Aviv, Israel, in October 1949. Her early compositional studies began with the Israeli composer, Alexander Uriah Boskovich, from whom she learned harmony, counterpoint, and instrumentation. She also studied with Paul Ben-Haim, Israel's most important composer at that time, before moving to the United States with her mother at the age of fourteen. Awarded a full scholarship at the Mannes College of Music in New York, and the American Israel Cultural Foundation, the young composer worked with Norman Dello Joio at Mannes while simultaneously completing her high school education by correspondence. Her principal piano teachers were Dorothy Taubman and Nadia Reisenberg.

Upon completion of degrees in piano performance and composition in 1967, Ran toured the United States, Europe, Canada, and Israel, and played her Concert Piece for piano and orchestra in 1971 with the Israel Philharmonic. It was shortly after this that Ran's music came to the attention of Ralph Shapey, composer and new-music advocate at the University of Chicago. The U.C. music department offered Ran a faculty position in 1973—before she had even been interviewed. She is still employed at the University of Chicago, teaching composition and chamber music, and currently serves as the William H. Colvin Professor of Music.

Ran was appointed composer-in-residence by Maestro Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1990, a position that she held for seven seasons. Her acclaimed opera, *Between Two Worlds (The Dybbuk)*, which received its premiere in June 1997 with the Chicago Lyric Opera, was written while she occupied the fifth Brena and Lee Freeman Sr. Composer-in-Residence position. *Between Two Worlds*, based on S. Ansky's classic Yiddish play, had its European premiere at the Bielefeld Opera in Germany in May 1999.

Ran has been awarded nearly every laurel a living composer can receive, including the 1991 Pulitzer, a recent Koussevitsky Foundation grant (1998), and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim, Ford, and Fromm Music Foundations. Her work has been performed by many of the world's finest musicians, including, among others, the Chicago and Baltimore Symphony Orchestras, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York and Israel Philharmonics, the Da Capo Chamber Players, the New York New Music Ensemble, Jan De Gaetani, and The Peabody Trio. Shulamit Ran currently holds dual citizenship in the United States and Israel.

Since winning the prestigious Naumburg Chamber Music Award in 1989, **The Peabody Trio** (Violaine Melançon, violin; Thomas Kraines, cello; Seth Knopp, piano) has established itself as one of the leading piano trios in the world. Equally committed to the performance of new music and the classics of the repertoire, the Trio has received acclaim for their interpretations of music ranging from the works of Haydn to those of Shulamit Ran. The Trio currently serves as the resident faculty ensemble of the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, a position they have held since 1989. They spend their summers as ensemble-in-residence at the Yellow Barn Music School and Festival in Putney, Vermont.

The Trio gave their New York debut in 1990 at Alice Tully Hall, and has since performed in many of the most important chamber music series in North America, including the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the 92nd St. Y and Frick Collection in New York, and in Chicago, Denver, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Vancouver, Montreal, San Francisco, La Jolla, Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Memphis. They have also appeared at London's Wigmore Hall, and in Japan. In 1996 they made their first appearance in Israel under the auspices of the first Biennale for contemporary music, *Tempus Fugit*, in Tel Aviv and returned two years later for an extensive tour. Summer festivals with which The Peabody Trio has performed include the Tanglewood Music Center, the Ravinia Festival, and the Skaneateles Festival. They have also been heard in numerous radio broadcasts, including *Saint Paul Sunday Morning*, *Morning Pro Musica*, NPR's *Performance Today*, CBC, Radio Canada, and the WQXR *Listening Room* in New York. The Peabody Trio is very active in performing new music, and has worked with Shulamit Ran, Zhou Long, Bright Sheng, Charles Wuorinen, and Leon Kirchner, among others.

Cellist **Natasha Brofsky** joined The Peabody Trio in April 2000. With the trio, Ms. Brofsky performs regularly throughout the United States, Canada, and England, and has recorded for CRI. In addition she appears frequently as a guest artist with the Takacs Quartet and has performed with them in Spain, Italy, and the United States. Previously she held principal positions in the Norwegian Radio and Chamber Orchestras, taught cello at Barratt-Due's Music Institute in Oslo and as guest faculty at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She has also performed as a member of the Colorado Chamber Players, the string trio Opus 3 and the Serapion Ensemble. Ms. Brofsky recorded Olav Anton Thommessen's cello concerto with the Oslo Sinfonietta for Aurora Records. With degrees from the Eastman School and Mannes College, her teachers have included Marion Feldman, Robert Sylvester, Paul Katz, and Timothy Eddy. As a Fulbright Award recipient she spent two years in London studying with William Pleeth.

Pianist **Seth Knopp** has established a reputation as a versatile artist active in solo and chamber repertoire. With the Peabody Trio he has performed in North America, Europe, the Far East, and the Middle East, with appearances at New York's Alice Tully Hall, London's Wigmore Hall, Israel's Jerusalem Music Center, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C. As a member of the Knopp-Melançon Duo with violinist Violaine Melançon, he was the 1986 winner of the USIA Artistic Ambassador competition, which resulted in extensive tours throughout Europe, the Far East, the Middle East, and Japan.

Seth Knopp is artistic director of the Yellow Barn Music School and Festival. At the Peabody Conservatory, Mr. Knopp is a member of the piano and chamber music faculties. He holds degrees from the Peabody Conservatory, San Francisco Conservatory, and New England Conservatory. His teachers have included Leonard Shure, Nathan Schwartz, and Leon Fleisher. He has been recorded on the CRI, Analekta, and New World Records labels.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Apprehensions. J. Nicosia, soprano; L. Flax, clarinet; A. Feinberg, piano. CRI 609.

Concerto da Camera II, East Wind, For an Actor: Monologue; Inscriptions, Mirage, Private Game. Da Capo Chamber Players. Bridge Records 9052.

Hatzvi Israel Eulogy; O, The Chimneys; Sonatina for Two Flutes. M. Stolper, flute; L. Shelton, soprano; ensemble conducted by C. Colnot. Erato Disques 0630-1278702.

Hyperbolae. A. Stokman, piano. CRI 609.

String Quartet No. 1, Three Fantasy Movements. Koch International Classics 3-7269-2.

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SHULAMIT RAN (b. 1949)

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1. *Fantasy Variations* (1979/rev. 1984) 14:36
Natasha Brofsky, cello

2. *Soliloquy* (1997) 8:36
The Peabody Trio: Violaine Melançon, violin; Thomas Kraines, cello; Seth Knopp, piano

3. *Verticals* (1982) 17:48
Seth Knopp, piano

Excursions (1980)

- 4. I. Broad and Extremely Passionate 5:45
- 5. II. Very Lyrical, Gentle 3:20
- 6. III. With Breadth and Passion 10:41

The Peabody Trio: Violaine Melançon, violin; Thomas Kraines, cello; Seth Knopp, piano

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