

GALLERY

The outsider

Conductor Diego Masson talks about the political activity that landed him in jail, and being a long-time defender of the musical avant-garde

By Noam Ben-Zeev

Looking at Diego Masson it is hard to guess his age. He was born in 1935 and looks at least 15 years younger, and the music he will conduct at a concert on Saturday at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art is mostly contemporary. But behind every movement of his hands are the great works of Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage and Iannis Xenakis, Mauricio Kagel, Bruno Maderna and Luigi Nono. They were the fathers of the musical avant-garde, the formulators of a new aesthetic of music in our time, and for decades Masson has been very close to their music – and to them as individuals.

Today Masson is a free conductor, a guest on important stages in the world of new music but also of romantic opera. He has formed his own modern music ensemble and also conducts in opera houses, primarily the Marseilles Opera House. "Music is music," he says when asked if there is a difference between Italian opera and the avant-garde.

Saturday's concert, with the Israel Contemporary Players, will feature works by Betty Olivero ("Bashrav") and Erel Paz ("In the Neighborhood") from Israel, British composer Harrison Birtwistle ("Secret Theater") and young Spanish composer Elena Mendoza ("Diptico").

"I had my own ensemble, Music Vivante, until 1990 but it folded because of a lack of funds," Masson says with a flash of mischief in his eyes, "and I was never a good enough politician to ensure its survival. The Ministry of Culture in France at the time was manned by clerks who had once been composers and I never performed any of them, so the fate of the ensemble was sealed."

And if there is one thing that Masson avoids like the plague, it emerges throughout our meeting, it is "the establishment" – any establishment in any incarnation.

Describing a backlash against the avant-garde in recent years, Masson says: "This approach of 'the new simplicity' is on the rise. I despise this. Talented composers start writing silly music, supposedly simple. The reactionary approach is not reflected only in the music but also in politics – the neo-liberalism, ideology of privatization. People obey the market forces so it seems, in order to sell. But what are those forces, and in the end, who cares if music sells?"

Tough crowds across France

Masson was born in Spain to an artist father who was half-Gypsy and half French, and a Jewish mother from Romania. When civil war broke out in 1936 and Franco came to

power, the family fled to Paris. "First it was Franco's fascists and then, a few years later, the Nazis invaded Paris – and so we continued fleeing, this time to the U.S.," he says.

The small family wandered and left its Jewish grandmother in Paris, "but she was saved, despite her thick Yiddish accent," Masson explains. "Not because the French are less anti-Semitic than the others, but because there is a tradition of not informing. People are put off by the police – to this day. No one will report to the police even about a wanted criminal living with the neighbors, and a child will never tell his friends that his father is a policeman, otherwise they will boycott him, and so 70 percent of France's Jews were saved simply because they were not reported on, this is the highest rate of survivors in Europe."

At the end of the war, the family returned to France and settled in Marseilles, "but at the age of 16 I left home to study at the conservatorium in Paris, even though my mother, of course, wanted me to be a doctor," Masson says. Boredom in his classes led him to private lessons with Rene Leibowitz, a student of composer Maurice Ravel – who sparked a revolution in France when he presented the innovative composition techniques of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern to the musical world there.

"He was in love with Italian opera and took me to Paris jazz

clubs," Masson says of Leibowitz, who is perceived in music history books as a gloomy and serious person. "Yes, there are many people whose image is very different from what they are," he laughs. "Pierre Boulez, for example – do you know how he earned a living in his youth? He played at the Follies Bergere club and, together with his giant white piano, he would break through the stage straight into the crowd of nude women prancing around him, playing the 'Warsaw Concerto,' engulfed in kitsch and lit by a pinkish light – and that was while he was writing his second sonata."

In the 1950s Masson, a close friend of Boulez, joined his ensemble, Domaine Musical, as a percussionist. There too he was exposed to innovative works by the young composers of the time who later became renowned – the Italian Luciano Berio, along with his wife, Cathy Berberian, France's Vinko Globokar, and the Greek exile in Paris, Xenakis. "We would travel to concerts all over France and often be booed and have things thrown at us by the audience. In Paris, it was better, but Kagel, for example, in Paris he was also booed and the audience had a hard time accepting him," says Masson.

"Those were terrific years, until the late 1960s – young composers and musicians, unknowns, who were performing their music and the music of their time. Working with peo-



David Bachar

Diego Masson: "I grew up opposing Franco's fascism and then the Nazis. Opposition is not an abstract expression, but an action."

ple like that was just terrific, another world. It's hard to say that you could earn a good living from that, and to support myself I worked as a drummer at nightclubs and afterward doing recordings for pop bands and music for films. There was a lot of money in that."

Were you always a fan of innovative music?

Masson: "No, I had a classical education and as a boy I wasn't even familiar with modern music. And I started to like it after hearing the [Rudolf] Watzke opera in Paris when I was 16 – and also because I was attracted to things that were different, to what most people didn't like. I always liked doing what was forbidden and, by the age of 12, a teacher at school told my mother I'd end up under the guillotine."

And you found that the daring composers you worked with were also outsiders?

"In music, yes, but not in their private lives. The avant-garde composers were not like the surrealist artists in the 1920s, for example, who sparked upheavals and scandals. Musicians are usually conservative."

Among his close friends, whose works he has also conducted, Masson includes Cage, who asked him to gather together some musicians every time he performed in Paris, and Xenakis, with whom he shares a leftist worldview. "Stockhausen was very close to me for a while, from 1968 to 1973," Masson says, "until he became a guru. At one concert he told me that he doesn't need to write the notes because he immediately connects with the players' consciousness, but somehow it didn't work with my consciousness."

Apologies for asking you to talk about others.

"No, what do you mean? It's a given. After all, they're much more interesting than I am – they compose and I just wave my hands."

'I liked jail'

In the late 1950s Masson found himself in a new situation with the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence. "There were 300,000 Algeri-

ans in France, and their underground revolutionary organization, the FLN [the National Liberation Front], was very active. I became aware of the underground through my aunt and decided to join. I started as a driver and smuggled people from France to Germany, where the main headquarters were, and I transported letters and packages. One day after a concert, policemen surrounded me, handcuffed me and arrested me."

The arrest and trial of one of France's best-known musicians made the headlines; "Diego Masson caught with a machine gun in his violin case," they blared and he laughs: "I never had a violin, I'm a percussionist." Masson's detention made waves because he was one of the few Frenchmen who was a member of the FLN.

And the trial's outcome?

"I was sentenced to jail and spent two years there. I liked jail. I was with some very interesting people. I moved through five different prisons – in some I was with criminals, in one I was alone and in the last one I was together with other Algerian prisoners. There were 2,000 prisoners there and being with them was great."

"After I was released, my parents told me that Pierre Boulez had offered to put me up in his home in Baden-Baden, Germany, if I had escaped from prison, and he

would find me a job."

Did you think of trying to break out of jail?

"No, basically I got two years, and I really liked prison. I wandered to five different prisons and met some fascinating people – at first criminals but afterward I was in a special prison for Algerian prisoners whom I taught math and geography to. Part of teaching them geography meant explaining to them about natural phenomena and showing that God is not the one who causes them. I never was a believing person and neither were my parents or grandmother."

Did prison influence your life?

"Not at all. When I got out, the war was almost over and I found work right away – I went back to Boulez's ensemble and to recording. In spring 1962, at the end of the war, people already realized that it had been totally unnecessary and, in a referendum, 80 percent of the French said 'yes' to an independent Algeria."

"For me, joining the underground was a natural thing to do," Masson says. "That's how I grew up – first by opposing Franco's fascism and then the Nazis and, for me, opposition is not just an abstract expression of ideology, in conversations and in writing, for example, but with action. But to tell the truth, I did it for the fun, and it was a lot of fun."

Be Merry / Limor Laniado Tiroche

Lifting the lid on shakshuka

A handful of top tips – and some interesting variations – on everyone's favorite egg-and-tomato-based dish

Green garlic arrived in the markets earlier than usual this year, apparently thanks to the plentiful rainfall. The garlic bulb is slender, pinkish-white in color, and its stalks are long and pale green. Green garlic, or baby garlic, is pulled from the damp soil before it matures and separates into cloves. Its taste is more delicate than that of mature garlic, and its fragrance is intoxicating.

When fresh garlic shows up in the markets I am reminded of *goti* – that was the name of a shakshuka dish I ate years ago in a little village in eastern Turkey. It was a thick shakshuka of sweet tomatoes, seasoned generously with green garlic. Browsing through Levantine culinary books, I came across an ancient recipe by the same name, probably from the days of the Ottoman Empire. The original shakshuka was a dish of vegetables seasoned with fresh garlic, goat meat and hard-boiled eggs. Over the

years the meat gave way to tomatoes and peppers. Possibly because of its beauty, a good shakshuka causes diners to purr with pleasure. Or perhaps the secret of its charm lies in wiping up the thick sauce with challah, pita or a good baguette.

Below are two shakshuka recipes that are suitable for a proper breakfast, Shabbat brunch, or a light and nourishing family supper. But, before getting down to it, there are a few rules that should be followed:

Vegetables: Use ripe tomatoes that are rich in lycopene (the pigment that gives tomatoes their color – look for ones that are deep red), which taste sweet even when eaten raw. If it's not prime tomato season, it is preferable to use high-quality canned tomatoes from Italy. A good tomato sauce will be seasoned with aromatic olive oil, green garlic and fresh spices. The name of the game is minimalism – no onions, peppers, celery or

carrots. Red peppers may be added to shakshuka alongside the eggs, but not as part of the sauce. If green garlic season is over, substitute regular garlic at a ratio of half a clove per stalk of fresh garlic.

Spices: Add all of the spices at the beginning of cooking, except for salt, which gets added at the end. It is important that the spices be as fresh as possible. Fry them in olive oil before adding the liquids to release their flavor and fragrance. The perfect seasoning for red shakshuka is cumin, caraway, paprika, black pepper and a little salt.

Liquids: If the sauce exudes a lot of liquid, cook it until most of the liquid has evaporated. By the time you add the eggs there should be no more than two tablespoons of liquid left in the pan. When adding the eggs, raise the heat slightly to maintain the temperature of the sauce and to sear it slightly, which upgrades it.

Eggs: Use fresh eggs. Take

them out of the fridge ahead of time and add them to the dish at room temperature. A cold egg lowers the temperature of the sauce and cooks unevenly. Cooking the eggs is a stressful and problematic task because the whites take longer to cook than the yolks. Covering the pan so that heat from above speeds up the egg whites' cooking is only a partial solution – the yolks might get overcooked and become covered by a white membrane.

Precise cooking can be achieved by separating the eggs. First add the whites, cover the pan for three minutes or until the whites have set, and then add the yolks. Cook uncovered for 30 seconds and serve immediately. Another solution is to use only the yolks, in which case the cooking time will be very short, with no need to cover the pan. If you are short on time and separating eggs is out of the question, after adding the eggs to the dish use

the back of a spoon to gently flatten and spread the whites collected around the yolks toward the edges of each egg. Cover the pan for a minute or two, while keeping a close eye on it to make sure the yolks don't set.

Extras: It is best to use only extras that enrich the texture and array of flavors. Add them when the tomato sauce is almost done, before adding the eggs or at the same time. Options include a merguez sausage that has been lightly fried and sliced into rings; cubes of roasted or fried eggplant; white cheeses like feta, mozzarella, ricotta, soft or hard goat cheese, Iraqi buffalo or thick labneh; chopped herbs such as basil, fresh za'atar (hyssop), parsley and cilantro.

Serving: Shakshuka should be served in the pan it was cooked in, along with lemony tahina, scallions and radishes, and fresh bread, challah or baguette.

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Roast cherry-tomato shakshuka with Iraqi buffalo cheese and nigella

In my book, this dish beats most other red shakshukas. It requires some effort, but it pays off.

Ingredients (6 servings):

For the roast tomatoes:

1 kg cherry tomatoes (the smaller the better), washed
2 tbsp olive oil
1/2 tsp coarse salt
1/2 tsp sugar
1/2 tsp black pepper

For the sauce:

3 tbsp olive oil
4 green garlic stalks (the white and pale green parts, 15 cm long), chopped; or 2 garlic cloves, sliced
1.5 tsp sweet paprika
1/2 tsp hot paprika
1/2 tsp sugar
1/2 tsp black pepper



Limor Laniado Tiroche

1/2 tsp cumin
1/2 tsp ground caraway seeds
6-8 ripe and blanched tomatoes (without peel), diced small; or 600 ml canned tomatoes
hot green pepper, sliced; or chili flakes (to taste)

1/2 tsp salt
8 eggs, separated
100 gr Iraqi buffalo cheese, grated; or a good feta
1/4 tsp nigella
1 tbsp basil or parsley, chopped

Preparation:

Heat the oven to 200 degrees Celsius.

Place the cherry tomatoes in an oven dish, sprinkle with the olive oil and spices, and roast until the liquids are reduced and the peels are browned. It takes 1.5 to two hours, depending on the variety and size of the tomatoes.

In a pan with olive oil, fry the garlic for one minute together with all the dry spices (except salt). The spices will give off a powerful and pleasant aroma. Add the blanched tomatoes, roasted cherry tomatoes and hot pepper or chili flakes. Cover and cook on a medium fire for 20 minutes. Season with salt, stir a little and add the egg whites. Cover and cook until the whites set (about three minutes). Add the yolks, crumble the cheese around, sprinkle a little salt, nigella and basil or parsley, and cook uncovered for 30 seconds.

Serve immediately with fresh challah and lemony tahini.

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