



## With Josef Tal on Kurfürstendamm

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Josef Tal feels fine when strolling along the streets where he grew up in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin. When giving a tip to the waitress in Cafe Möhring, he always adds some charming pleasantries in Berlin dialect that reveals his sense of belonging. Almost. His language is more cultivated than the German spoken today, and he is a living monument to the Berlin culture that once was.

He invited me to meet him there in Cafe Möhring in 1985. I don't remember what we discussed, but, certainly, I gave him no concrete evidence of how I played piano. I asked him to write a piece for me, and he replied, he would see if he had the time to do so. Nine months later, the composition arrived in the mail. Josef is an acute judge of human nature, and, in recollection, I don't believe he had any doubt that I was the person for whom he wanted to write piano music. It was really just a question of time.

I premiered *Essay No. 1* in a quasi-political environment. The Berlin Congress Center, built in impressive modernistic style but with inadequate materials shortly after World War II, had collapsed and was reconstructed. At the inauguration several politicians gave speeches, the last of whom was Mayor Diepgen, whose script writer apparently had forgotten to include an announcement of our music at the end of his talk. So when he was finished, the audience dispersed into various exhibition rooms, and Tal and I sat there, both too proud and too modest to complain. At that point Prof. Eckhard Maronn, who had collaborated with Tal on several operas, came to our help by recalling the audience to the musical program over the microphone. Finally, I played before a few rows of standing listeners while the others were still pursuing the exhibit, unaware of the premiere. In view of this somewhat unworthy circumstance, we were invited to repeat the performance in the newly built Berlin State Instrument Museum, an event that was handled much more appropriately, this time, with Tal speaking himself. He gave one of those captivating recollections of his own life, experiences and teachings, in which he typically answered one question with a half-hour discussion that kept the audience joyously spellbound with humor stemming from an era of German-Jewish culture that many listeners would long to have experienced themselves.

At that concert I also played his *Concerto No. 6 for Piano and Electronics*, which he had given me to learn only two weeks before, saying it would be 'peanuts' for me. This was his wonderful way of encouraging performers and students to do their best by trusting their own creativity. I remember, in one of the rehearsals for this concert we discovered that I had misread a note in the score. Tal said that I should feel free to play either the note in the score or the other one, if I liked it better. I have sometimes worked with composers who were incapable of recognizing whether I played what they had written or not, but still went into a frenzy if I respectfully indicated that what they had written was somewhat

unpianistic and that I was actually playing my own arrangement of their text. I think those composers would do good to take an example from Tal as a composer and human being.

The *Essay No. 1* was completed in 1986. Two more Essays followed in 1988 and 1989, and I recorded all three on a CD that also included a performance of his cantata *Else* (based on the last period in the life of Else Lasker-Schüler) that he had conducted himself. I had also recorded the *Concerto No. 6* in several radio productions, but was never happy with the results, until I thought out a special technique of recording works for piano and tape, which I used for the CD of that work. I had noticed that playing piano with two loudspeakers on stage allows a spatial differentiation between the three sources by the audience. When the performance is reduced to two sources, as in a stereo recording, it lacks a certain amount of color and detail, and therefore a four-track recording mixed down to two tracks with special studio processing is necessary to simulate the original ambience.

After *Essay No. 3*, Tal underwent an unsuccessful eye operation, which made it impossible for him to compose any more. Not less than the physical disability, the prospect of no productivity distressed him, as the meaning of his life lay in his work. After several years of training and consultation with medical specialists, he had finally regained enough eyesight to be able to write down shorter musical works as well as to write articles and a book. Among these most recent works is *Essay No. 4*, written in 1997, which I premiered in Düsseldorf in 1998, and also *Essay No. 5*, which he gave me the honor of presenting to me on my 50th birthday, in August 2000, shortly before his own ninetieth.

As a prelude to celebrations of his ninetieth birthday, the European premiere of Tal's *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra*, composed in 1980, was given in the Berlin Philharmonic Hall with Jens Lühr and myself as soloists and the Berlin Symphonic Orchestra conducted by Lior Shambadal.

### *Concerto No. 6 for Piano and Electronics* (1970)

Tal is the father of electroacoustic music in Israel, having founded the Israel Center for Electronic Music and having brought the first Moog Synthesizer to the country. Internationally, he may also be considered a pioneer, as there are very few precedents in combining a live instrument with a studio-generated tape recording, as is done in his series of concertos for various instruments and electronics. The exceptionality of this kind of music-making was demonstrated provocatively by Tal himself, when he programmed a performance within the course of a symphony concert, letting the orchestra wait outside while he played together with the two loudspeakers and all the orchestra players' seats remained empty.

Tal has always been eager to incite his fellow humans to individual reflection by creating unaccustomed situations. In the case of the concertos with electronics, the provocation was intended to point out an allegory. The combination of live instrument and synthesized sound for Tal was symbolic of the interaction between Man and Machine. He philosophized, asking would it be possible for man and machine to successfully communicate with each other? Or would the two develop in different directions, between which no affinity was possible. Tal had enthusiastically experienced the first experiments in electronic music in his youth in Berlin. But, by his emigration to Palestine and experience of the war-ridden emergence of the Israeli State, he had been plunged into a world in which 'l'art pour l'art' was of no relevance. It was a reflection of the path his own life to set such divergent media as abstract electronics and personal performance together in a search — in musical terms — for common ground.

The *Concerto No. 6* begins with an electronically produced glissando lasting almost three minutes. The effect is very simple, although musical variety is provided by changing timbre of the slowly rising pitch. Allegorically speaking, the glissando is an affront to the piano, in that its uninterrupted pitch rise is not answerable by an instrument divided into twelve keys per octave. The piano boldly breaks into the glissando with a dodecaphonic motive. (The dodecaphonic principle is applied in style, not numerical strictness.) Then, the piano continues with a solo passage of thematic nature, just like the first solo after the long orchestral introduction

of a Mozart concerto. And just as the orchestra joins in to continue the piano's theme in a classical concerto, so do the electronics enter in a complimentary manner to the piano, completely different from the absolute contrast before. Thus, adding to a double trill in the piano, the tape offers a sound that approximates the piano's trill, so that a virtual triple trill is the result. This represents a closing of the gap between the two media and, symbolically, an instance of communication.

In the further course of the work a contrasting theme appears, consisting of long chords played alternately by piano and tape. Here the two media come closest to 'speaking' with each other on an equal basis. Later comes a virtuosic passage in the piano culminating in another double trill, during which the tape further builds up the volume. This is followed by a recurrence of both the first and the chordal themes. The similarity to sonata form is quite apparent. Tal, however, never agreed with this conclusion, preferring to regard the form solely as a result of his individual compositional process.

Either way, it is typical of Tal's style that larger passages are repeated. The repeats always have some variation in comparison to the original and eventually take some different musical course from the former appearance of the material. This practice is a deliberate consequence of Tal's conviction that music is a representation of a dialectical process, in which experiences and concepts are voiced on the musical stage and developed and set in juxtaposition with one another. The dialectical element is omnipresent in Tal's musical thought. When the Concerto, after a flurry of fast effects in both media, ends on a mystical, prolonged piano chord, the Talmudic principle of the importance of the question over that of the answer unmistakably hovers over the audience.

### Essay No. 1 (1986)

The musical material in all the Essays is strikingly similar, creating the impression that Tal had a very specific intention in writing these pieces, which he strove to perfect to an ever greater degree. In fact, the first four Essays are progressively shorter, being respectively 13, 8, 5 and 4 1/2 minutes in length. Each one is more concise than the last and seems to make the same statement — or pose the question — with less effort, so that a sort of logical progression can be achieved by playing all together. As Tal has left the choice of combination in performance to the performer, I have continued to play the first three together, as I did before the fourth and fifth were written.

Tal's aim is disclosed by the title *Essay*, which infers the analogy to logical discourse with supportive development. This is a reaffirmation — or even a reinforcement — of the dialectical principle. Everything has its reason. A musical idea can be developed sometimes in one way, sometimes in another, just as in real discourse. Some paths lead to greater consequences than others.

Another characteristic of Tal's work that plays an important role in the *Essays* is the influence of electroacoustical sounds on his entire sound palette. Just as Bach brought the instrumental idioms of the violin concerto, Beethoven the string quartet and Liszt the romantic orchestra into the piano repertoire, Tal writes piano music that suggests sounds typical of electronic sound generators. In the course of his studio work, he spoke of 'composing' single tones of electronic music, that is, adjusting their spectral components by electronic means, in order to elevate the single tone to a creatively styled building block in the compositional structure. This has ramifications in piano compositions that let us ponder for long periods on the sound of one chord or sound complex.

Both the dialectical element and the influence of electronic music are present from the onset of the *Essay No. 1*. The three beginning notes fuse to one sound that is in itself a compositional element:

Ex. 1 shows a piano introduction with a triple trill. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 52. The piece begins with a double trill in the piano, which is then joined by the tape to create a virtual triple trill. The dynamic markings include *sfz* and *sub.fff*. The notation is marked with an asterisk (\*) and a circled 'A'.

### Ex. 1

This sound reappears at other points in the piece and always signals the dialectical point of departure, from which a flight of thoughts can proceed. So here, we have a demonstration of Tal's musical practice in the most

compact form — both the electronically influenced, 'composed' sound and the dialectically conceived concept of form.

After some reiterations of the initial motive, an unrelenting series of quintuplet 16ths sets in and grows in crescendo over a minute's time from the lowest piano register to the highest, with interspersed syncopated chords that reveal a light influence of jazz. Is this a piano version of the electronic glissando of the *Concerto No. 6*. Quite clearly, Tal loves clear gestures — upwards, downwards, soft, loud, high, low, slow, fast — the basic, uniting elements of all the Essays. The use of the quintuplet as a standard tool for quick running passages is also Tal's musical signature

No rounding of corners. The running figure abruptly falls from the clamorous treble climax into a gong-like bass chord.

Ex. 2 shows a piano introduction with a quintuplet 16th note figure. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 52. The piece begins with a double trill in the piano, which is then joined by the tape to create a virtual triple trill. The dynamic markings include *sfz* and *fff fade away*. The notation is marked with an asterisk (\*) and a circled 'A'.

### Ex. 2

And then, the beginning motive returns — as expected, in a varied form. This time, however, it doesn't mark the beginning of a long continued process, but rather it serves as punctuation for a more lyrical musical gesture that follows, which it repeatedly interrupts in fortissimo.

Ex. 3 shows a piano introduction with a quintuplet 16th note figure. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The piece begins with a double trill in the piano, which is then joined by the tape to create a virtual triple trill. The dynamic markings include *sfz*, *mf espr.*, and *p*. The notation is marked with an asterisk (\*) and a circled 'A'.

Ex. 2

Was Tal thinking of the dance experiments of Rudolf Laban, which he experienced in his youth in Berlin, in which different limbs were moved independently of each other? Certainly, pianists must achieve a similar disengagement of their two arms to execute such contrasting musical statements simultaneously.

The original theme reemerges, alternating with previously presented lyrical material. Here, the variation within the individual elements is supplemented by a change in the order by which they occur and by changes of the points at which one motive cuts into another. Tal thus depicts a special process of memory, by which familiar thoughts are recalled in a new relationship to each other. Compare this example with ex. 3.

**Ex. 3**

Eventually, one of the fortissimo interruptions introduces a high percussive section, also in quintuplets, that eventually disappears in a decrescendo. Now, loud and soft variations of the beginning motive itself are contrasted with each other.

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

**Ex. 4**

These announce an elaborate version of the original theme that is much longer than the original and includes arpeggiated harmonies and rhapsodic melodic material. This passage seems to mock its own somewhat romantic flavor by means of its very abrupt disappearance, again by a strong diminuendo. (If fact, this version of the theme is so unusual that it itself becomes the subject of musical "memory", being later recalled.)

A soft, long interlude (marked 'dreamy') ensues. The original motive is still heard distantly, but without any dynamic contrasts, in a harmonic vagueness created by the polytonal combination of a drone accompaniment in C to the melody on black keys. Suddenly, sforzando chords brutally bolt the listener out of the daze. Clamorous octaves follow.

Another sudden dynamic change, this time to pianissimo, introduces a passage that is remarkable from a pianistic standpoint, as it combines a hushed line of soft notes in the high treble with a loud lyrical line in the middle register and bass. The two elements do not blend at all.

Ex. 5

Ex. 6

Ex. 7

Ex. 8

**Ex. 6**

To conclude the piece, the gesture of a grand upwards crescendo is repeated, this time somewhat abridged and followed by several other previously stated passages — all loud and climactic ones — so that the piece moves to a powerful close.

**Essay No. 2 (1988)**

When the *Essays* are played in series, *Essay No. 2* creates the impression of the 'slow movement' within the group. This is not because of any fewer passages in quintuplet of 32nd notes in this Essay, but rather because the slow parts are so immensely prolonged that they seem almost completely stationary. This Essay is carved in granite monoliths. Certainly, the immovability is the predominant aspect of this work, and when I included the composition in my multimedia project, "The Piano of Light", the artist Susanne Kirchner choreographed and performed one of her unbelievably slow dance-sculptures to it.

The contrasts are more compressed than in *Essay No. 1*. Within the first page: pianissimo and very quick in the low bass, long sforzando notes in the low bass, monophonic cantabile in the high treble, long piano chords in the middle registers, three-voice cantabile in piano. The diversity is not randomly chosen. Each element returns, varied and in varying combinations with other elements — all part of a tightly-woven logic. By virtue of the many prolonged effects — chords, trills, slow melodies — there is little time in this Essay for sweeping developments, as in *Essay*

**No. 1.** Each gesture is presented, and then simply interrupted by the next. The one exception is in the middle section of the Essay, which recalls the technique of that part of **Essay No. 1**, where the two hands played in independent styles from each other. This time, the pianissimo quintuplets in the high treble are two-voiced, so that the contrasting melody must be performed by quick jumps of the left hand. The passage ends in a typical bass-to-treble crescendo that is much more concise than those of **Essay No. 1**, leaving time for the return of motives found at the beginning of the piece. \*

### **Essay No. 3** (1989)

Like the first Etude of Ligeti, this is one of those pieces that most pianists would regard as impossible to play. But when one person has already done it, others find the courage to follow. As with the case of Ligeti, the trick lies in the art of fingering and of the occasional redistribution of the notes between the pianist's two hands, differing from the notation of the score.

The form is of the utmost simplicity: A fast hammering passage, then a slow dreamy one that is sometimes interrupted by 'wake-up' signals and, finally, the return of the fast hammering passage. In a sense, the composition is a demonstration of the principle of compactness. For within

the initial perpetuum mobile are contained numerous repeats of thematic material and changes of register — all without any need to vary the fundamental timbre. More amazingly, the slow section, by virtue of its extremely delicate motives, cushioned in faint double-trills, invokes the impression of reminiscence in a dialectical sense, even without any earlier similar material having been previously heard.

### **Essay No. 4** (1997)

If the **Essay No. 3** makes the impression of a racing finale of the group of the first three Essays, **Essay No. 4**, played alone, leaves the listeners with such an intense concentration of musical ideas that they wish to hear it again. (In fact, the audience demanded me to repeat it at its premiere.) The building blocks are those of the other Essays: contrasting registers, sweeping crescendi, prolonged melodies. The provocateur Tal has matured his individual style so finely over the decades that, with a ruffle of his pen, a concise, perfectly-formed musical work is conceived. And the audience is no longer abashed by its modernism, which the decades have rendered more acceptable. Maybe the provocateur was a prophet.

(The musical examples in this article can be heard on internet at: <http://www.piano-of-light.com/Tal.html>)