Josef Tal's "Essay II"

Between 1986 and 1998 Tal composed a total of five *Essays* for piano. Their title is at once an understatement and a reference. Only on superficial hearing do they sound sketchy and loose-limbed, for in fact they are as thoroughly and rigorously constructed as all of Tal's music. They gather together a world of experience while trying out models of musical design.

Essay II was composed in 1988. At that time Tal was 78 years old and had written works in every traditional genre, from pieces for unaccompanied instrument, to chamber and vocal music for a very wide range of forces, to symphonies and stage works. The world premiere of his then most recent opera, *Der Turm*, had just taken place a year earlier at the 37th Berlin Festival. Having founded Israel's first electronic music studio (a pioneer achievement in this field), he wrote purely electronic works as well as others for standard instruments and electronics, including three concertos for piano and electronic music.

In a series of articles, lectures, seminars and compositions, he worked through the possibilities that the electronic medium opened up for new sounds, processes and forms. His discoveries also had repercussions on his music for standard instruments.

In *Essay II* Tal explores the behaviour and development of antitheses on various levels of musical composition. The pitches of the opening figure in the low register are precisely notated (they form an 11-note row), but the manner in which they are to be played ("soft, very fast and distinct") is left to the pianist. The low-register figure is answered in the high register by an expressive melody ("cantabile") comprising the same pitches, apart from the final one. Both antitheses are subjected to various forms of manipulation. The fast low-register gesture is expanded with interpolations and shortened by omissions – a procedure reminiscent of the handling of modules in electronic music. The "cantabile" is expanded from monophony to a texture of two or more voices. These two components are not kept separate: fast high-register passages take on the character of the first theme and the register of the second, gathering them together to create the semblance of a *perpetuum mobile* preceded by a passage of short, hesitant, complementary motifs.

The principle of antithesis also extends to the overall formal design. *Essay II* might be called a reinterpretation of the tripartite A-B-A' form. Its middle section forms a high-register *perpetuum mobile* with interpolated melodic fragments and chords. In contrast, its first section is divided into several usually antithetical subsections. Several of them return in the final section, creating an "essay" on reference and difference.