ADP: Maestro, the initial question is almost a ritual: how, when and where does the passion for music and the piano arise in you?

MT: I come from a musical family. My grandfather, Pinchas Hollander was a lyrical tenor whose career was interrupted by the invasion of the Low Countries by Nazi Germany. In 1940 he, his wife Frida and their infant daughter (my mother) escaped from Holland to the United States. Later on they all immigrated to Israel. My mother, Aviva, is an avid and imaginative flute player and teacher who placed a small recorder in my hands as soon as I turned four. Group piano lessons commenced the following year. I remember these early musical experiences not as boring or indifferent pastimes, but as profoundly engaging events.

As a child, I used to practice at the house of my grandmother Frida, almost daily. I did not get to know my grandfather Pinchas, but I certainly became familiar with his Steingraeber grand piano from the 1920s, a highly lyrical and soulful instrument, built in Bayreuth, with marked differences in the timbre of each of its registers. It was always a grand adventure to practice on it and I believe, in retrospect, that much of my current interest in historical keyboards is rooted in my experience with this beautiful instrument, so different from some of the mass-produced pianos I later encountered at the High School for the Arts and the Rubin Academy of Music in Tel-Aviv.

I grew up in Tel-Aviv, which at the time was a vibrant and artistically stimulating city, an enclave for intellectuals and novel ideas. My father, Dan Tsalka, was a well-known writer who published more than twenty-five books, among them novels and collections of essays and stories. Dan was passionate about music, particularly the compositions of Mozart and J. S. Bach, which we very often heard and discussed at home. It was not uncommon for painters, philosophers, sculptors, architects and writers to visit Dan. The dialogues I overheard at home were fascinating and stimulated my curiosity. By the time I was fourteen, I was a somewhat extravagant and romantic adolescent. I began practicing at five in the morning and carried a pendant everywhere with the picture of my favorite pianist, Dinu Lipatti. I spent magical hours with my parents' collection of old LPs and music scores. I dressed wildly, skipped school to go to the beach to read Nietzsche and Tolstoy, and spent the nights roaming Tel-Aviv with friends, sustaining vehement and improbable conversations.

At the Rubin Academy of Music, I was not known for my docility. I had my strong concepts, which on several occasions provoked conflicts with my professors. Later on, as I pursued *virtuosité* studies in Germany and Italy, I ran into all sorts of trouble. I found out it was

not as simple as I imagined to be a foreign student, a free-lancer and completely independent at the same time. There were times that I went to bed quite hungry. Still, I was determined to become an artist and a professional pianist, and any sacrifice to achieve that dream was reasonable.

ADP: Lei suona praticamente tutte le tastiere: pianoforte, clavicembalo, fortepiano, clavicordo e organo. Passando da una all'altra quali varianti esecutivo/tecniche mette in atto?
(You play practically all keyboards: piano, harpsichord, fortepiano, clavichord and organ. Passing from one to the other, which executive/technical variants does it implement?)

MT: Having played on such a wide variety of historical keyboards and their reproductions, I have learned that one should not approach these instruments with any preconceptions. I believe on sustaining a concentrated, intense dialogue with each new instrument I approach. Listening to the technical and expressive possibilities of each individual instrument, and adjusting one's own interpretative capabilities to these parameters yields the best results.
This is especially the case with original instruments, which are immensely beautiful and individual in many ways. For example, if you consider Vienna in 1790, there were circa 50 shops of fortepiano builders; each builder had his/her own sound concept. As you research the history of early keyboards, we find various marvelous inventions that were meant to advance the expressive range of the instruments, for example, the Venetian swells of the Kirkman harpsichord – a large pieces of wood inside the instrument, opening when you push a pedal, meaning one can create a kind of crescendo effect, something not available in regular harpsichords prior to 1780. We have many brilliant and charming inventions, and such a marvelous, rich variety. There is also the question of defining the character of each historical keyboard, a somewhat artificial exercise, if you ask me. In the case of the clavichord, for example, there have been instruments from 1500 to those still built in Scandinavia around 1840. The variety is absolutely mind baffling!
I attempt to discover the beauty and possibilities in each individual instrument, whether historical piano or modern piano. After having studied both the modern piano and early keyboards for many years, I have found that acquaintance with both worlds promotes openness—and leads one in a path of discovery and constant renovation—This is for me preferable then to say "I specialize on harpsichord or modern piano". Naturally, when you read about the 18th century, musicians did not only play the harpsichord: composers were improvisers and most

could play string instruments and all keyboard instruments. At the same time, many of them were fine *Kapellmeisterer*, chamber musicians and conductors. I believe that I may have discovered one possible pathway to bring back to life traditions that have been somewhat neglected by an over-specialized, scientific approach to music making in many of our schools and conservatories. I try to teach this pathway to my students. As a pedagogue, I am currently proud to be the head of the keyboard Department at the Vanke Meisha Arts Academy (VMAA) in Shenzhen, Mainland China.
I am convinced that early keyboards add many facets to my modern piano playing and vice versa.

ADP: Ho apprezzato molto la sua performance il 18 ottobre al Festival Musica a Villa Durio, per il suo rigore e la sua trasparenza. Nello studio di un brano, oltre ad affrontare i problemi di tecnica e meccanica, come concepisce l'esecuzione nella sua globalità? In buona sostanza, cosa vuol dire per Michael Tsalka intrepretare un brano?
(I really appreciated your performance on October 18th at the Music Festival at Villa Durio, for its rigor and transparency. In the study of a piece, in addition to addressing the problems of technique and mechanics, how do you conceive the performance in its entirety? Basically, what does it mean for Michael Tsalka to interpret a work?)

MT: Interpretation is an exercise full of contradictions. It demands, on the one hand a rigorous methodology in the mastery of the musical program's technical, expressive and stylistic details; and on the other hand, the expressive generosity and communicative gregariousness of the interpreter's free, artistic spirit. In other words, seriousness in the preparation of the music and the necessary flexibility to react, on the spot, to the subtleties of each individual performance taking into account (among other factors) the acoustic characteristics of the space, the peculiarities of the instrument and the disposition of your audience. Not to mention, often the weather if you are playing on historical keyboards (!). To achieve a fine balance among these aspects is somewhat impossible. And yet, the true interpreter must convince himself/herself that all this forms part of his/her own nature if s/he is not to be inhibited during the performance.

ADP: Lei s'interessa a un repertorio di notevole ampiezza, ci sono degli autori che predilige su altri?
(You are interested in a repertoire of considerable breadth, are there some authors you prefer over others?)

MT: I have always been attracted to uncommon, unique repertoire; believing one should explore and present it. For example, when I was a young free-lancer in the 1990s, I presented a few recitals of Mendelssohn's piano music, performing many of his less known pieces (and not the few works that we commonly hear). There are two volumes with Mendelssohn's music, which are almost never performed or studied.

I relish the idea of finding fascinating repertoire unknown to the general public, than trying to enchant our audiences, present a new perspective to these beautiful works and unknown composers.

As musical scholar and interpreter, I have made a contribution to our understanding of the diversity of keyboard repertoire during the Classical and Early Romantic Eras by locating, editing, publishing articles and/or recording CDs with unknown compositions by Daniel Gottlob Türk, Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, Ferdinand Ries, Joseph Anton Steffan, Eucharius Florschütz, Ignaz Moscheles and Johann Baptist Wanhal.

At the same time, I also take pleasure in modern and contemporary music. I have collaborated with circa 45 composers worldwide. Many have dedicated their works to me. I find working with contemporary composers to be a moving, fascinating experience and a great responsibility.

A cherished project of mine was the recording of Viktor Ullmann's seven piano sonatas, released by the Paladino Label in 2014. When I first played these works, I was struck by how immediate and contemporary Ullmann's musical language felt under my fingers. Here was a composer who in the 1930s and 40s had already found a convincing, personal balance between the innovations brought by the atonal and dodecaphonic systems of the Second Viennese School and the rich heritage of Western Art music since the time of J. S. Bach. The compelling narratives and abundant rhetorical gestures of Ullmann's music speak to me of an artistic world enriched by compromise, imagination and diversity; a world, which unfortunately for the composer and thousands of other European artists of the period, was far away from the political and social agenda of the Nazi regime. Ullmann's sonatas are thus rare surviving representatives of a rich and open course of development for Europe's music, which was regretfully obliterated by the savage violence of World War II and its aftermath. If the sonatas of Viktor Ullmann feel contemporary to me, it is because it has taken more than half a century for European art music to recover from the impoverishment brought by the "cleansing" cultural and ethnic practices of those times.

Nevertheless, I remain profoundly faithful to my favorite composers,

and in the list of names there are no real surprises: J. S. Bach reigns supreme in my heart, followed closely by W. A. Mozart, F. Schubert, and J. Brahms. Alas, these days it is almost impossible to find a record company that wishes to risk bringing out yet another interpretation of Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28 or Mozart's 27 surviving piano concertos. My latest CD, *Mozartiana*, which was recently released worldwide by Naxos is my attempt to find a balance between the competitive market's avid need of novelty and surprise and my deeply entrenched love and belief in the immortality of the great Classics. Mozartiana was recorded at the marvelous Pooya Radbon Fortepiano Collection in Germany, on two rare, gorgeous keyboard instruments, wonderfully restored by Pooya.

ADP: Ci sono dei pianisti che adottano uno stile interpretativo "per tutte le stagioni", variandolo molto poco da un autore anche se di epoche molto diverse (e questo non è certamente il suo caso). Quale importanza lei riserva alla conoscenza del contesto culturale e storico, in cui l'opera nasce?
(There are pianists who adopt an interpretative style "for all seasons", varying it very little from an author even if from very different eras (and this is certainly not his case). What importance do you reserve for the knowledge of the cultural and historical context in which the work was born?)

A dear friend and a very fine composer from Mexico City, Prof. Leonardo Coral, once told me that I adjusted my technique and interpretative palette to best fit the compositional language of every era and each composer. It was a fantastic compliment!
I cannot imagine being an honest performer and not entering into an intimate dialogue with each composition I approach. Musical scores of all eras brim with important encoded information about what composers expect of us expressively and stylistically. What is textually written, as well as what is not specified have equal importance, particularly in scores from the Baroque and Classical Eras. One only has to have the courage and curiosity to explore all the details and integrate them as best as possible into one's personal, honest interpretation of the music. This influx of information and interpretation should not make us arrogant, however, believing we have all the perfect answers. In music there is simply not one truth. We are, after all, prisoners of our own time and the musical taste of our era. One of my most beloved hobbies is listening to recordings from the early 20th century. They are a treasure cove of beauty, inspiration and information. I find them unique and spectacular. Pianists such as Moriz Rosenthal, Ignaz Friedman or Benno

Moiseiwitsch (to mention just a few) move me profoundly. They perform with admirable freedom and abandonment, but also with a close attention to technical and expressive detail. Above all, there is a deep personal feeling, and a close connection to the musical traditions of the nineteenth century. There will be many today who will criticize them for being too "Romantic" and for taking too many liberties with the musical score. Our age favors a more objective, almost scientific approach to the musical score, where the interpreter is no more than a medium to transmit the annotated thoughts of the "Great Masters" to the audience. This is, of course, a rather limiting, erroneous view of the interpreter. Everyone in the eighteenth and nineteenth century understood that a prodigious pianist or keyboardist was also a remarkable musical orator, someone who could move the audience to laughter to tears, and sublime feelings through his personal vision of the musical score and the composer.

ADP: Tra i suoi numerosi video presenti su YouTube, ce n'è uno che mi ha fatto molto riflettere sul fascino sensoriale che presenta un'opera suonata su un determinato strumento. Mi riferisco alla Sonata I in la minore HedT 104.8.1 di Daniel Gottlob Türk, eseguita su un bellissimo clavicordo Gebrüder Krämer. Secondo lei come cambierebbe la percezione del valore artistico che un ascoltatore ha diquesto brano se suonato su tastiere diverse, per esempio un moderno Gran Coda Steinway & Sons?
(Among his numerous videos on YouTube, there is one that made me think a lot about the sensorial charm that presents an opera played on a particular instrument. I am referring to the Sonata I in A minor HedT 104.8.1 by Daniel Gottlob Türk, performed on a beautiful Gebrüder Krämer clavichord. In your opinion, how would the perception of the artistic value that a listener have of this piece change if played on different keyboards, for example a modern Steinway & Sons Grand Coda?)

MT: Speaking about Türk, I would like to first mention my mentor and teacher for six years, Prof. Joyce Lindorff, who introduced me to the composer, his treatise and his Sonatas. Together with Prof. Lambert Orkis and the late Prof. Harvey Wedeen, they provided me with the finest musical education I could possibly imagine during six years at Temple University (2002-2008). Returning to your question about Türk: One should avoid the perception that Türk and other North German composers of his generation could only express over-refined Rococo emotions in their keyboard works, which can only function in small chamber spaces on historical keyboards. It is true that when compared to grand sonatas conceived for the fortepiano and

concert hall by slightly later composers such as Beethoven and Clementi, Türk's affective musical gestures appear more limited to modern listeners, but within the aesthetic context of the 1770s and 1780s, his musical vocabulary is both varied and eloquent. Consider the *Allegro di molto e con fuoco* of Sonata I in A Minor, HedT.104.8.1. The movement is symphonic in its conception: it contains sudden dynamic shifts and strong octave doublings in the bass. Register and character contrasts of both stormy and "sighing" motivic material recall Haydn's *Sturm und Drang* symphonies from the 1770s. In the slow movement, there are sudden tonal shifts, dynamic contrasts, and carefully marked ornaments. The rhetoric style here is full of pathos and pleading. I have successfully interpreted and recorded this work on the harpsichord, fortepiano, the clavichord, the square piano, and the modern piano. Each instrument reveals different aspects of Türk's expressive compositional kaleidoscope, and requires subtle adjustments in tempo, dynamic range and the force, speed and character of my key attack. The final purpose is, of course, to communicate to the audience my understanding of the composition and the Classical style as practiced by Türk and his contemporaries. Ultimately, the instrument should be a pliable medium towards this central artistic goal.

ADP: Mi consenta di trasferire il precedente ragionamento su un'opera che conosco benissimo per averla ascoltata su svariati strumenti nel corso di oltre un trentennio: Le Variazioni Goldberg BWV 988 di J.S. Bach. Sentendo la sua interpretazione su un clavicordo Christian Kintzing, mi sono sentito come trasportato da una macchina del tempo in un'altra epoca, dove ho visto quest'opera quasi nel suo primigenio sorgere. È forse questo l'irresistibile fascino che ha uno strumento antico?
(Allow me to transfer the previous reasoning to a work that I know very well from having listened to it on various instruments over the course of over thirty years: The Goldberg Variations BWV 988 by J.S. Bach. Hearing your interpretation on a Christian Kintzing clavichord, I felt like I was transported by a time machine to another era, where I saw this work almost in its primeval birth. Is this perhaps the irresistible charm of an ancient instrument?)

MT: I wanted the challenge of performing BWV 988 on the most intimate of keyboard instruments. I had worked on the "Goldberg" Variations for quite a few years prior to the recording, having performed them on a variety of instruments: a double-manual harpsichord, modern piano, chamber organ, square piano, and

fortepiano. Bach originally conceived the "Goldberg" Variations for a double-manual harpsichord. Therefore, an interpretation on any other instrument means transcribing the work. In the case of the clavichord, I wanted to examine whether it was possible to express the flamboyance and wild imagination of Bach and his variation cycle within the relatively limited dynamic range of this instrument (rest assured that I love the clavichord with all its magnificent possibilities). This intrigued me in particular, since we have evidence that Bach viewed the instrument favorably. Of course, J. S. Bach had clavichords at home and taught his children on them. He must have spent many hours composing on Clavichords. The two reproductions of clavichords I chose for the project were models from the late eighteenth century built by the modern German master Sebastian Niebler from Berlin. The first was one with a lyrical timbre; it is based on a 1796 instrument by Johann Christoph Georg Schiedemayer. The other is a more robust-sounding instrument, based on South German and Swedish models from the late 18th century (i.e. clavichords by Christian Gottlob Hubert, Jacob Specke and Schiedemayer). Many of the interpretative decisions of which variation to play on which instrument were taken in the spur of the moment, being intuitive responses to the technical and dramatic requirements of each segment of the composition. My interpretation was a bow to the spirit of improvisation, freedom and imagination so abundant in the music of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries. Incidentally, the recording was very well received, which was lovely. Until today, I have had the privilege of performing the "Goldberg" Variations about 55 times in all continents. It is always a magical journey!

ADP: Quali sono le sue sensazioni nel poggiare le mani su uno strumento che ha una grande e lunga storia alle spalle come i due citati clavicordi?
(What are your feelings in placing your hands on an instrument that has a great and long history behind it like the two aforementioned clavichords?)

MT: Words cannot really communicate the emotions one experiences when one approaches a historical keyboard for the first time! Particularly an instrument that has been restored by masterful hands, or that has somehow survived the multifarious indignities of time. Humility, curiosity and excitement mix with a sense of privilege and fascination as one discovers with each new musical phrase the unique personality of the instrument. Each in truth can be a work of love and art (this of course does not mean that there are not historical instruments in lamentable conditions, which should not be played or

which were of an inferior quality from the time of their creation, yet even these instruments can be highly instructive for me).
Many of my recordings have been completed in a variety of instruments from significant historical keyboard collections from the U.S.A. and Europe, among them the Collection of Musical Instruments of the Metropolitan Museum of New York, the National Music Museum of the University of South Dakota, the Geelvinck Collection from the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, The Pooya Radbon Fortepiano Collection (Germany), the Schubert Club Collection (Minneapolis, USA), and the Nydahl Collection of Stockholm's Stiftelsen Musikkulturens Främjande. I have also had the opportunity of presenting recitals as soloist in some of the most important European collections of early keyboards, among them the Collection of Historical Musical Instruments of Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, Barcelona's Museu de la Música, Stuttgart's Museum of Music Instruments, and the Musical Instrument Collection of the University of Edinburgh. These experiences have left indelible memories, which I count among the most important in my formation and maturation as an artist.

ADP: Può anticiparci qualcosa dei suoi futuri progetti concertistici e discografici? (Can you tell us something about your future concert and recording projects?)

MT: I would need several more lives to complete all the recordings I have in mind! Concrete projects which I wish to achieve once the present pandemic disappears from our horizon, these upcoming years:

1) A recording of G. F. Haendel's *Overtures*.
2) Keyboard arrangement of Mozart's Magic Flute, played in various historical instruments.
3) A CD recording with my friend and colleague Alon Sariel (mandolin), presenting originals and transcriptions of works for mandolin and fortepiano.
4) Chopin Mazurkas, played on Pleyel and Erard historical pianos.
5) A Chamber music CD recording of the VMAA Chamber Soloists, a formation I co-founded and am co-directing, established October 2020.

ADP: Mi consenta un'ultima domanda maestro. Lei è un viaggiatore instancabile e si è esibito in tante parti del mondo. Secondo la sua esperienza ci sono delle diversità nella risposta dei vari pubblici a quanto propone nei suoi concerti? Che impressioni ha ricevuto dal pubblico italiano?

(Allow me one last question, master. You are a tireless traveler and have performed in many parts of the world. In your experience, are there any differences in the response of the various audiences to what you propose in your concerts? What impressions did you receive from the Italian public?)

It is quite mysterious, but audiences vary in their level of involvement and generosity. There have been concerts in which I have played my heart out and received only minor responses; and other engagements where I have captured the attention and hearts of most members of the audience from the first musical phrase. I suspect that extraneous factors, beyond the control of the performer, can affect the mood of an audience. Things such as the day of the week, or who is in political charge of a country! The magic is to make them forget for an instant these external circumstances.

Audiences are also dissimilar in their level of sophistication and knowledge. I have met some of my most enthusiastic fans in countries where the general public is not too knowledgeable about Classical music; and yet it would not be realistic for me to expect from them the sense of holy artistic communion which I have sometimes experienced with members of Austrian, Hungarian, or German audiences. From my perspective, as long as there is interest and a wish to learn, I consider myself a citizen of the world, and am delighted to play for any audience.

I love Italy, and travel to your country as much as possible! Audiences there have consistenly been generous, attentive, and emotional; grand conversations always ensued following my concerts. And I should not forget to mention the marvellous feasts of fine food and alcohol!

Thank you so very much, Alfredo, for this interview, and for your friendship, for which I am most thankful. May we meet again soon!

Michael