Harpsichord & fortepiano

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INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL TSALKA

By Pamela Hickman

Michael at the harpsichord. *Photo by Juan Contreras.*

On December 21st 2016, I spoke to performer, scholar, teacher and editor Michael Tsalka in Acapulco, Mexico. Israeli-born and today living in Spain, Dr. Tsalka plays solo- and chamber music from Baroque- to new music on the modern piano, fortepiano, harpsichord, clavichord, square piano and chamber organ. Performing worldwide, he has released some 16 recordings; in 2013, his recording of J.S.Bach's "Goldberg Variations" on two clavichords was chosen by MusicWeb International as one of the CDs of the Year.

H & F: Michael Tsalka, you play many different keyboard instruments of different periods. Which is the real you?

MT: An intriguing question. I love the modern piano and I love all early keyboard instruments, actually. In performing, teaching and lecturing, I use all of them.
So, I think that, at this point, I approach each instrument, from the humblest triple-fretted clavichord to the most extravagant modern Fazioli piano, looking for dialogue with it, and, in many ways, searching for the soul of the instrument to instruct me as to what it wants me to do. This is especially the case with original instruments that are so beautiful and individual in many ways. For example, if you think of Vienna in 1790, there were some 50 shops of fortepiano builders; each builder had his own sound concept in mind. As you look at the history of instruments, we have all these marvellous inventions that were meant to advance instruments, like the Venetian swells of the Kirkman harpsichord – very large pieces of wood inside the harpsichord, opening when you push a pedal, meaning you can create a kind of crescendo effect, something not available in regular harpsichords. We have so many strange inventions throughout the history of instruments and such a great, rich variety. There is also the question of defining the character of each historical keyboard instrument. As to the clavichord, there have been instruments from 1500 to those in still built in Scandinavia around 1840. I find this is also the case with pianos, to a certain

extent, and with any other early historical keyboards, so I attempt to discover the beauty and possibilities in each individual instrument. After having studied both the modern piano and early keyboards for many years, I have found that acquaintance with both promotes openness, leading one on a path of discovery and constant renewal. This, for me, is preferable to saying "I specialize in harpsichord or in modern piano." Of course, if you read about the 18th century, musicians did not only play the harpsichord: composers were improvisers and they could play string instruments and keyboard instruments, also being capable Kapellmeisters and conductors. I think that early keyboards bring a lot to my modern piano-playing and vice versa, so I try to embrace this approach, because it has so many more rewards. Which is the real me? Who I am really depends on my current project and the time at which I am preparing works on certain instruments, this meaning a lot of reading and thinking deeply about the repertoire. I tend to love each instrument more specifically when I am working for a project on it, but I also find it fascinating belonging to all these "worlds".

H & F: Let's talk about your home and its influence.

MT: I was born in Tel Aviv, Israel. My father, Dan Tsalka, was an important writer. One grandfather – Pinchas Hollander – was actually a lyrical tenor. He fled from Holland to the USA in 1940, spending some years in New York before immigrating to Israel. I grew up being familiar with philosophers, painters and writers of western culture and meeting many artists. The great artists of the past were very much evident in discussions at home: we would often speak about Shakespeare and Dante. I think I must have heard Mozart operas thousands of times and much of Bach's music. In our home, these things were as basic as breathing air. I think this idea of secular humanism is something I have carried with me since then – a way of "Tikun Olam" (repairing the world) – when I teach and perform, even when playing and recording works of a lot of unknown masters, trying to do them justice.

H & F: Apart from your grandfather, were there other musicians in the family?

MT: Well, my mother is a flute teacher and a fine musician. My father was a brilliant lecturer on music, giving talks and writing essays on opera and such composers as Scarlatti, Mozart and Donizetti. He had the uncanny ability to speak for hours on subjects to do with music. Of course, he was a very important influence in my life.

H & F: And your earliest musical experience?

MT: I started playing the recorder at age 4 and then the piano at age five. It took a while till I decided that I wanted to become a musician. At around 14 or 15, I started waking up at 5 a.m. to practise the piano; it was now clear what I wanted to do professionally. I took lessons at Tel Aviv Conservatory, then continuing on to the Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts, later receiving a Bachelor's degree from the Rubin Academy of Music, Tel Aviv University.

H & F: When did you start being interested in early keyboards?

MT: From age 15 to 17, I took part in early music workshops in Jerusalem, studying harpsichord with David Shemer and Ketil Haugsand. During these years, we had a spinet at home, which I enjoyed playing. Later, at Tel Aviv University, I took some organ lessons. So, the interest has always been there.

H & F: Following your studies at Tel

Aviv University you left for Europe. What motivated you to go there?

MT: I felt the need to expand my knowledge, to travel, to learn much more about music, about the world of music and about repertoire. And I had the help of several scholarships and prizes.

H & F: Where did you go to study?

MT: I started in Germany, where I lived for five years, residing in several cities. Then I moved to Italy, where I studied for two years at the Scuola Superiore Internazionale in Trieste with Dario di Rosa. The pianist of the Trio di Trieste, he had a strong influence on me; he was a marvellous Mozart player and chamber musician. In perfect Italian style, I lived in Rome and Florence for two years, taking the night train to Trieste, arriving at 6 a.m. in time for cappuccino and a brioche and then starting a day of music lessons. After these seven years in Europe, I felt I was still missing a lot of scholarly knowledge. I wanted to learn much more about early keyboards. Of course, living in Europe had many advantages, like competitions, and I did a lot of freelancing, but I was beginning to feel I needed something more stable and academic. I then met Prof. Harvey Wedeen, former chair of the piano department at Temple University (Philadelphia). He had heard me at a concert in Florence and invited me to go to Temple University, arranging six years of full fellowships and teaching assistantships for me. So, I moved to Philadelphia, completing two Master's degrees and my doctorate. Harvey was an incredible teacher and mentor. During that time, I also had two fantastic professors of early music – Prof. Joyce Lindorff, my main harpsichord teacher, someone who taught me so many of the instrument's secrets, the great value of scholarship and research and who introduced me to what it was to be a scholar, a thinker and not only a performer.

H & F: What was the outcome of your study with her?

MT: It was through her that I got to the Daniel Gottlieb Türk project, leading to my recording five CDs of his music for the Naxos label and a critical edition for Artaria Editions (New Zealand), on which I am still working together with Dr. Angelica Minero Escobar. (There are also plans to produce a critical edition of sonatas by Joseph Anton Steffan and of some fantasies and variations of Ferdinand Ries.) I also worked with Prof. Lindorff on chamber organ and clavichord. (I had a key to the room where all the early keyboards were kept and would arrive there at 6 a.m. and play all day.) She was a very important mentor for me.

H & F Who was the other important figure?

MT: Lambert Orkis, who played with Rostropovich for many years and still plays with Anne-Sophie Mutter. Besides having played all the chamber music repertoire, he is also a phenomenal fortepianist and has recorded numerous CDs playing on that instrument; he has immaculate technical control, beautiful colours and strong concepts which allow him to be a master of the fortepiano. He also performs a lot of contemporary music; George Crumb, for example, has written works for him. So, these three teachers – the late Prof. Harvey Wedeen (who brought me to the USA), Joyce Lindorff and Lambert Orkis - really provided me with six of the best years of my life, in which I was working very intensively on early keyboards, the modern piano, writing articles and doing research. I feel that those years really made me a more complete musician, for which I am most grateful.

H & F: Let's touch on the subject of your repertoire. You seem to choose works and composers that are, let's say, "off the beaten track".

MT: I have always been attracted to uncommon, unique repertoire, strongly believing one should explore it. For example, during my seven years studying in Europe, I gave a few recitals of Mendelssohn's piano music, performing many of his less known pieces and not the three or four works that we constantly hear in concerts. There are two volumes of his music which are almost never performed or studied. I think I have always had the idea of finding fascinating repertoire which was unknown to the public and going beyond mainstream programming to see how the little-known repertoire would fare.

H & F: Where do you stand regarding the authentic movement?

MT: Well, I think it was a highly important movement, from which we have all benefited. It has produced many fundamental performances and ideas. It is highly important for us to continue to play, research and know more about early instruments and performance practices. I have to say that today there are a few wonderful instrument builders, restorers, performers, ensembles and scholars who were formed in that movement. I know some people are not optimistic about the early music situation, but I am. If you go to Naxos CLASSICSONLINE, you can find so many great recordings not previously available and if you search on IMSLP, you can find numerous first editions and manuscripts. On completing my doctorate in 2008, I received a grant from the university to do research into Daniel Türk's 48 Keyboard Sonatas; I spent some weeks travelling to Geneva, to the Berlin State Library and to the Marienkirche in Halle. Today, most of the first editions which I found there are available on line, not like in former times, when you would save for years to buy a reproduction of an autograph, or your professor would lend you a copy after five years' study with him to show his respect for you. Today, with two clicks, you can get to these works. These are all positive developments. As to the authentic movement, it has a dogmatic side, as does every revolution, and I don't agree with part of this dogmatism.

H & F: So the question remains as to how to play early keyboard repertoire.

MT: I am very much for the idea of playing repertoire on different instruments, of exploring repertoire. For example, when I play Scarlatti sonatas, I believe that some of them are suited to being played on chamber organ, some on clavichord, some on harpsichord, some on a Cristofori early piano, some on a Viennese fortepiano and others on modern piano. I think one should try to follow the music and not dogmatism. Certainly, I find that some of the recordings today are too fast and too light. In my opinion, the modern piano today is less divorced from the early music world than many think. When I visited my friend and colleague Prof. Max Yount, who composed a beautiful Sonatine for me, he told me that when he was a student in Bloomington some 50 years ago, people used to protest or leave the hall if somebody played Bach on the piano! I would say we have advanced from then. For example, I believe one can learn a lot from recordings of great pianists playing Bach in the early 20th century, or from recordings of Clara Schumann's students and those of Liszt (Moriz Rosenthal is my favourite) or from listening to composers performing their own works on pianola roles (composers such as Grieg, Saint-Saëns, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff or Mahler). There is so much beauty and

drama, individualism and lyricism in their playing. The idea that we should not listen to this music because it is not performed on the harpsichord or that it does not follow our modern concept of historical performance practice is something to which I object. I do find that the performer and level of musicianship are of first importance and not necessarily the instrument being played. I would much rather hear a very fine pianist playing Bach than a horrendous harpsichordist playing Bach. I would say that I very much try to rotate between these two worlds. Teaching master classes all over the world, I am keen to bring students closer to early instruments, from which there is so much we can learn about style, ornamentation, improvisation, early dances, about heavy and light touch, articulation and phrasing. One needs to be open-minded in working with pianists who have not taken years of study on early keyboards. Actually, I love doing that, bringing their attention to all the great richness and possibilities of early keyboards. It seems that a lot of my colleagues would rather not do that, preferring to work closely only with harpsichordists or fortepianists. This closed-mindedness and the musical "ghetto" which exists in the early music world (also very strongly in the world of modern piano, but in a different manner) is something to which I object.

H & F: What motivated you to record the Goldberg Variations on two clavichords?

MT: I wanted the challenge of performing the work on the most intimate of keyboard instruments. I had been working on the Variations for quite a few years prior to the recording, having performed them on a variety of instruments - double-manual harpsichord, chamber organ, square piano, fortepiano and modern piano. Bach originally conceived the Goldberg Variations for double-manual harpsichord, so interpretations on any other instrument mean 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 limited dynamic range of this instrument. This intrigued me in particular, since we have evidence that Bach viewed the instrument favourably.

H & F: What clavichords did you choose for the project?

MT: The first was one with a lyrical timbre; it was based on a 1796 instrument by Johann Christoph Georg Schiedemayer. The other was 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.)

H & F: How did you decide which movements to play on each instrument?

MT: Many of the decisions were taken on the spur of the moment, being intuitive responses to the technical- and dramatic requirements intrinsic to each variation. 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!

H & F: What is your focus at the moment?

MT: Well, Alon Sariel, Izhar Elias and I have formed a trio – mandolin, guitar and fortepiano/harpsichord, with which I am delighted. We have released two CDs together: the first, "Paisiello in Vienna", presents variations by Beethoven, Giuliani, Wanhal and Bortolazzi on the beautiful melody "Nel cor più mi sento" from

Paisiello's opera "La bella molinara". The second CD, "Sharkiya", released last month by the Israeli Music Institute, is dedicated to the late Prof. Yehezkel Braun, I have many other projects going; for example, a trio with saxophonist Yiannis Miralis (Cyprus) and violinist Miltiades Papastamou (Greece); I play the piano. We play contemporary works, most of which have been written for us by Mediterranean composers. We are about to release our first CD: this music has that wonderful nostalgic, folkloric influence, also including jazz and improvisation. Greek- and Cypriot music have a certain sadness about them - music that has its roots everywhere and nowhere. It's very hard to define!

H & F: That brings us to the subject of new music.

MT: I love studying and performing new music. More than 40 composers have written works for me – solo music for piano, music for early keyboards, chamber music. I find working with contemporary composers fascinating.

H & F: Would you like to say something about your film music project?

MT: Yes. I have the privilege of collaborating with organist Dennis James. We call ourselves the Filharmonia Duo. Dennis has been playing for silent films for some 50 years. He also owns a collection of rare instruments and is one of the masters of the Franklin glass armonica. In 2016, the National Gallery of Arts in Washington commissioned us to devise a score to a 1921 silent film of "Hamlet" (in which Hamlet, incidentally, is a woman!) It was Dennis's brilliant idea to use music only by Bach's sons. We have chosen two hours of music by four of the sons. Having assembled a puzzle out of many short pieces to suit the film, it is truly remarkable how well the gestures and musical style of the early Classical period work with the film. Playing as we watch the film, there must, of course, be some improvisation, especially when it comes to humorous moments or moments of great dramatic power and flair. We are using organ, harpsichord, fortepiano and modern piano, playing solos and duets. Last September, we gave the first performance of our score at the National Gallery of Arts in Washington. In 2017, performance venues will include the Grosse Saal of the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Cornell University, several theatres in Washington State (USA) , Würzburg, Amsterdam, etc. Dennis and I are also planning to perform together in the future, using the Franklin glass armonica together with clavichord, with several other projects on the drawing board involving some of the other wonderfully rare historical instruments Dennis plays, aspiring to record and tour as the Musica Curiosa Duo.

H & F: And other upcoming keyboard recitals?

MT: In the coming months, I will be performing the Mozart 4-hand sonatas in two recitals together with Prof. Maria Teresa Frenk in one of the most beautiful halls – the Museo Nacional de las Artes - in the historical centre of Mexico City. Other performances will include Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata Op. 106, a program of French harpsichord music, Bach's Art of Fugue BWV 1080, a program titled "Dancing in the Moonlight", Poulenc's Concerto for Two Pianos and another program titled "Feminine Voices: keyboard works from women composers and their friends from across the centuries".

H & F: And new and future CDs?

MT: Three will be released in 2017 – one with the Mediterranean Trio and one of organ trio

sonatas of Bach BWV 525-530 transcribed for two harpsichords by Norberto Broggini (he will be playing one of the harpsichords); the third will feature keyboard transcriptions of symphonies of Dittersdorf, which I recorded for the first time with Prof. James Tibbles on one fortepiano in Auckland, New Zealand. Then, in Sydney in June 2017, Diana Weston and I will be recording a CD of contemporary harpsichord music for one or two harpsichords by Australian-, Mexican-, American- and Italian composers for the Wirripang label; all the works were written for us. I am also planning a CD recording dedicated to Spanish music with mandolin player Alon Sariel, in which I will be playing an 1880 Pleyel piano.

H & F: What keyboard instruments do you own?

MT: I have a double-manual harpsichord built by William Dowd (Boston), a Bettenhausen spinet, an excellent five-and-a-half-octave unfretted clavichord based on late 18th century South German and Swedish models and built by Sebastian Niebler (Berlin), a wonderfully expressive Bechstein grand piano from the 1860s, an early 20th century Steingraeber grand piano and a modern Kawai piano. I am not a collector, but do need instruments that can provide me with a wide range of timbres on which to prepare my concerts and various projects. There are two more keyboard instruments I would like to acquire over the next years in order to serve my needs - a square piano from the Classical period and a fortepiano based on Romantic instruments of the 1820s.

H & F: Do you enjoy teaching?

MT: I love teaching. It is a highly important part of what I do and in what I believe.

H & F: Do you teach mostly master classes?

MT: I have taught more than one hundred master classes worldwide over the last eight years. I have also organized extensive master classes (and scholarships for young performers and students) during festivals I have directed in Mainland China, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands. Today, I teach in a lot of one- or two-week artist residencies all over the world, which I prefer, as one can work in depth with the students, give each several lessons, feel the pulse of the place, see how people are instructed, advise them as to what they should read, how to think further about music and, most importantly, assist them in finding their own way as young artists. In 2018, for example, I will have a two-month residency in New Zealand. I held teaching positions in the USA when I was studying for my doctorate, then taught harpsichord and chamber music for three years at the National Center for the Arts in Mexico City, in the three years following that, teaching at the Lilla Academy in Stockholm.

H & F: Do you publish articles.

MT: Yes. One article I have published, for example, compares lesser known composers of the Classical period to Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven and examines what we can learn from their compositions. Other articles are related to the critical editions I have worked on with musicologist Dr. Angelica Minero Escobar or to recordings I have made of works of Wanhal, Ries, Türk and J.S.Bach. My articles have been published in scholarly journals in Italy, Germany and Taiwan, the United States and the Netherlands; I also write program notes and liner notes for my CDs.

H & F: You have a huge range of activities. How would you define yourself?

MT: As a performer, teacher and scholar...and in that order.

H & F: When it's not music, what interests you?

MT: I very much love reading great literature and visiting museums. I love wandering around beautiful cities for hours and discovering the beauty of their various quarters. I also love animals, especially cats and birds. Well, this is not part of your question, but I really must add that one of my hobbies is listening to recordings from the early 20th century. I feel humbled by them; they put things into perspective. I find them so unique and spectacular.

H & F: Dr. Michael Tsalka, many thanks for your time and for sharing so much of your musical experience and ideas.

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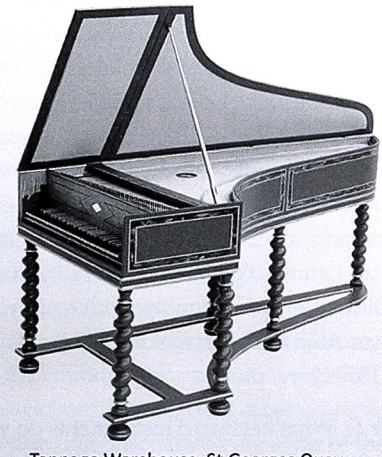

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