

DAVID TANENBAUM

The son of two musicians, David Tanenbaum was born in New York City in 1956. His route to the classical guitar led through the piano and the cello and, at the age of ten, the electric guitar. Study with Aaron Shearer at the Peabody Conservatory, along with a couple of good prizes at international level, launched him on a successful career on the global platform.

David Tanenbaum was in London to give the first British performance of Hans Werner Henze's new concerto, 'An eine Aölsharfe' (To an Aeolian Harp). It was an unusual way for a young guitarist to make his UK debut, but he had met Henze in the USA, and the German composer had been impressed by his playing. The concerto followed.

The performance was more than usually interesting, with the guitar placed far forward of the orchestra. What it lost in intimate cooperation with the orchestra, it gained in clarity and focus. It was a concert that brought much critical acclaim to both composer and soloist, and by extension to the guitar itself.

A short time previously, the American magazine 'Guitar Player' had put forward the suggestion that the classical guitar was, not to put too fine a point on it, dead. It was not something that I had noticed, and David Tanenbaum's performance of a new concerto by a leading composer certainly suggested that there was life yet in the 'corpse'. My first question asked if he had noticed any significant lack of animation during his travels.

David Tanenbaum: Not at all. I think it's changing a lot. It seems to have reached a certain peak in popularity which perhaps has gone down some, but there are so many people involved that I think there will be peaks and valleys a little bit. People are learning a lot; ideas are being tossed around internationally, and certain directions are being forged.

What always strikes me about the guitar is the incredible dimension of the instrument; how it expresses so much of the music of today — and not just classical — and how interesting some of the crossover is. I think we need to utilize that and express the different colors that the guitar has. I think they are perfect for expressing the music of today.

I started as a pianist. My parents are both classical musicians, and one of the reasons that I feel I'm not intimidated by modern music is that my father is a composer. From three years old I was listening to the most contemporary music. When you do that a lot, you begin to discriminate and perhaps to trust your own judgments. I think a lot of people are put off by new music. They might have an authentic reaction, but perhaps not trust it.

My mother's a pianist, and she taught me when I was four or five. And I also played the cello. Interestingly enough, I was sort of forced to do those things. It was a requirement. I had to take lessons, so I had to practice. I started to rebel. And when I was about ten or eleven I didn't practice so much. I remember doing very badly in some performances in the local conservatory. A teacher suggested to my parents that I be

allowed to quit. He thought that I was talented enough that I would drift back into music.

So I did quit everything at that point and sort of rebelliously played electric guitar. I found the classical guitar after that. It was for me a very private musical experience. The instrument was quiet, it couldn't be heard by anyone else if I shut the door. The repertoire was unknown — and that was one of the reasons why I took to it so much. I became fascinated by the different colors that it had. It was full of possibilities.



Can you tell me something about the Henze concerto, the Aölsharfe? It's very much in my mind after the experience of the concert. You've played it before, in Austria and Germany, haven't you?

Yes. The world premiere was August the 27th 1986, in Lucerne, Switzerland. I played it two days after that in Frankfurt. I played it in Vienna in October with the ORF Orchestra. The performances in Switzerland and Germany were with the Ensemble Modern, which is part of the Junge Deutsche Philharmonia, the Young German Philharmonic, the part that specializes in modern music.

The Vienna performance on January the 9th was a lecture recital on the piece. Henze talked in German about it at length, and we did examples, and then we performed it. The difficulty for me was that I did a solo recital in Austria on January 8th, and played that on the 9th; on the 10th I had to take a polar flight to California and play a concert which I had to do on the 11th. Then on the 12th I came back to London.

This is, I guess, the fifth performance of it. Henze has now cancelled all his conducting engagements so that he can write his new opera, which is based on Mishima's book 'The Sailor who fell from grace with the sea'. The next performance will be the US premiere on March 9th in Los Angeles.

Aölsharfe is a very interesting piece. Bayan Northcott said that he felt that the textures were too difficult; there was too much going on, and it became sort of a harmonic muddle. Henze, interestingly enough, began the last rehearsal of the piece this time saying that he felt that in his last few orchestral pieces he may have indulged himself in too much counterpoint, that there was too much going on in the orchestra and that it was hard to hear. I think that's a danger with this piece. I believe it can be made very clear, but I think it requires an enormous amount of clarifying and keeping the textures very transparent.

It's an interesting challenge for an orchestra. They have to learn to play very quietly with the guitar — even if it's amplified — so that the guitar is absolutely above. So I think it's a challenging piece, and one that can be very successful. But I think it's going to be a difficult one, one that has to be rehearsed very carefully. Henze's procedure was to rehearse with sectionals, and to have me play through almost every movement with each member of the orchestra. So everybody got to hear my part, and I got to hear their parts.

So much of his music is programmatic. This piece is based on the poems of Eduard Morike, an early 19th-century lyric poet. Henze actually sets this music as if it was a vocal setting. In other words, the guitar is playing a line that's supposedly speaking the poetry. These important lines go from one instrument to another, and it's very important to be able to trace them and find out where they are. Sometimes one has to be told that by Henze, sometimes it's a little diffuse and you can't tell right away where the important line is, but it's always important to search for it and to bring it out.

It's very interesting how he chose to set it. As Bream said once, Henze makes very large gestures for the guitar, and he has done so again with *Aölsharfe*. It's very lyrical, very legato in style. The writing for the guitar feels very grounded to the fingerboard. I found the first and fourth movements extremely difficult but very rewarding to work on, because it was almost like a new style, a new kind of guitar playing, one that I had not physically experienced before.

A different style of writing from, for instance, the Royal Winter Music?

Yes. There's always the emotional climate of the poetry or the program aspect that he is trying to create, and I find there is an emotional climate of Shakespeare in *Royal Winter Music*. For instance, when I play one of the Sonatas in a program, for me the music that works best after it is John Dowland, which is music from that time. But the emotional climate of *Aölsharfe* is really more from that early romantic, early Schubert period.

Sometimes it's hard to put your finger on exactly what tools are used that make it so different. Henze is very hard to pin down. He will dip into any kind of method; he'll use a 12-tone row, and then come back to it with a few fragments here and there. He doesn't often stick to one thing throughout a large work.

He uses the Landler, doesn't he? The three-in-a-bar Austrian dance.

He uses that in the third movement, which is a kind of joking movement, a scherzo. When we rehearsed in Germany and in Vienna, the conductors and the orchestra and everybody got that one right away!

But in England it had to be explained.

That's right. But it was very interesting to see this piece from its genesis. We met in 1983. A pianist friend in the Peabody Conservatory introduced me to a lot of Henze's works, and one in particular was *El*

Cimarrón. I always wanted to play that piece, and I think it was in 1979, when I was teaching at my home in California, that the phone rang and it was a singer who was putting together the first West Coast production of *El Cimarrón*. He wanted me to be part of it.

I did that piece on tour. Andrew Porter, the critic of *The New Yorker*, was doing a six-months sabbatical on the West Coast about the music scene there, and he happened to be at the first performance. There was a reception after the first performance, and he came up to me and was really excited. I waited and waited for the review to come out in *The New Yorker*, because it would be very important for me, but it never came out. So I wrote to him. He immediately wrote a letter with a very nice quote, explaining to me that the performance was too complex to fit into the space that he had. There were certain things he liked, and he said that my playing was among them, but there were other things he didn't like. But he said, 'I've just seen Henze in New York and I told him about your playing'. So that was how Henze first found out about my playing.

After that I began to play *Royal Winter Music*. I sent Henze many reviews of the piece, and when he came to California for a festival in 1983 I asked if I could perhaps play the *Royal Winter Music* for him. I was very interested in first of all getting what I thought were some mistakes in the score corrected. He's an enormously busy person, and I didn't think there would be a chance. But finally on a Sunday morning, the last day of the festival, he did have some time. We went out on the balcony of his hotel and played. I played the second movement, 'Romeo and Juliet', and he said: 'I'm going to write you a concerto' — just like that!

Certainly I didn't expect it. I wasn't there for anything like that. I was just interested in his thoughts — and I got the music. It was very hard to play on after that. It was an astonishing thing.

Two years later he was asked to write a piece for the Lucerne Festival, because it was his 60th birthday. He wanted to write something for the Ensemble Modern, so he suggested this piece. And that's how it came about. I got a telegram in November of 1985, in which Henze explained that he was going to write the piece. At that point he outlined what his entire schedule would be like for the year. He said I'd get the first movement here, the third movement would come next, then the second movement will come, then please keep July as free as possible, because the last movement will come in middle to late July.

Of course, July wasn't free at that point. The movement did come in late July, five weeks before the premiere. That was the most hysterical time, trying to learn the whole thing.

When I first looked at the score, I must say that it looked completely unplayable to me. I worked with Henze in New York. I'd just done the first movement, and it turned out that the kind of relationship he was interested in was a very creative one where he was working not so much with the details of the instrument or how it could be played, but rather with the romantic sound concept that he had for this poetry, and the sound concept of the balance of the ensemble. He wanted the guitarist to take a very active role in the creating of the piece — you know, rewrite things if you had to.

In the fourth movement there are 11-note and 12-note chords. Unbelievable! I cut them all to six notes, sometimes five notes. The guitar and harp are playing together, and it's just a very big plucked string sound. The guitar is being made as big as possible.

Why do you think he did that? He knows about the guitar. He knows that 12-note chords are impossible. He just wanted to show the harmonic structure that he wanted. He wanted to let me create the chords and find the best place to put them. As you know there are many different ways you can play a B flat seventh chord, for instance.

So it was a lot of fun. I tried to keep the general range of the top line going, but I also tried to experiment and make chords as big as possible. On the last chord, which I think is a very haunting effect, he wrote 'Sons étouffés' — muffled sounds — and asked me to find some way to realize it. I tried tambura and I tried flesh thumb strokes, and I finally came up with a pizzicato stroke with the thumb with the hand then released — a sort of muffled sound that opens up.

There is a lot needing to be rewritten, especially in the first and fourth movements. The second and third, by the way, had very few changes made in them. The structure of the piece is such that the second movement is mostly single-line. The guitar is reduced to a simple single line, the idea being that the guitar from that point starts to feel like it's growing bigger again. It's almost like a deception in the sound, where it starts coming out of the ensemble as the piece progresses. The third movement has a lot of thirds and sixths, and the fourth movement unleashes.

The fourth movement also is the one where the strings finally take the mutes off. I find that to be true of a lot of Henze's music. Sometimes in the last movements, things really reach their peaks, and the most amount of sound is made.

From the audience's point of view, that makes good psychological sense, doesn't it? In the theatre, if the last act of a play is good, the audience tends to forget, or at least to forgive, what has gone before.

Yes, I think so. The other analogy is the solo guitar program, where perhaps you'd start with a thinner-textured renaissance piece, and go towards modern music, where there's a feeling that the sound is getting bigger.

I saw the microphone in front of the guitar at the performance. How much amplification was there in fact? The sound seemed to come from you, not from the speakers.

There was a little bit of amplification of the guitar. They did a very good thing, which was to put the speakers behind the orchestra, so that the orchestra could hear the guitar. Even in the concertos where you can play without having amplification, I worry that the orchestra's playing an accompaniment to a concerto and can't hear the soloist. I've always liked the idea of at least letting them hear you.

This piece was conceived to be done without amplification. That's why the instrumentation is so low. There are no violins, no regular flutes. The instrumentation is alto flute, bass flute, oboe d'amore, cor anglais, bass clarinet, bassoon, harp, one percussion player — although there were actually two people doing this part — viola d'amore, which has a very prominent role, two violas, viola da gamba, two cellos and a bass. It's written to be like an old consort. The oboe d'amore and the cor anglais are two of the highest instruments, the only ones that can really conflict with the guitar. The guitar, of course, is used very high most of the time, so that it can work above the instrumentation. I think it can be heard well without amplification in all but the last movement, in which it joins the ensemble and really does get lost sometimes.

I think that is what a lot of guitarists in the audience felt — that it could too easily become lost. They want to hear it all the time, even when it's in a concertante role. It's funny, you know, all the guitarists complained to me about the amplification — and no-one else did! I think it's a borderline piece. We did it once without

amplification in Vienna, in the Schubertzaal, which probably has four or five hundred seats. I think it can be heard well there, but there are times — for instance, there's a harmonic section where you're going to lose those very high harmonics sometimes.

It's a real problem. When we did the premiere in Lucerne, the speakers were on the side of the stage. Henze really did not like the fact there was so much of a visual focus on the guitar, yet the sound was coming from a different place. He wanted the sound and the visual focus in the same place. Before the premiere he said, 'You know, you move around when you play', and he asked me to really indulge myself, to act the movements and choreograph them. So he wants a lot of gesture from the guitarist.

I'll have to do it a few more times to decide on the application. I think there are certain halls where it's not going to work without amplification. I really do.

Another aspect was the sideways posture, a bit like a pianist, who of course can see the conductor. It's not so easy for a guitarist.

That's true. He's over there to the left of you, and you're sort of looking over the fingerboard to the left.

But because you were slightly turned, some people in the hall felt that they were being deprived of the guitar.

It's a problem also. And it's tricky enough that I'm still reading it, so that's a problem. I always want to have the music stand not in front of me but to the left.

Would there be a case for having the guitar back among the other instrumentalists and facing the conductor?

Yes, that's possible. Interestingly, in this piece, Henze asks the ensemble to move as far back and away from me as possible. But of course when you're doing that, I think it's important that the orchestra hear you. If they're way back and you're way up and pointing outwards, I think you're going to have to get speakers behind them.

You know, I don't think amplification in itself is necessarily such an evil. I think it can be done really successfully. I felt John Williams did a very good job when he toured the US. Very tasteful. It enhanced the experience rather than take anything away from it.

Is Aölsharfe going to be published soon?

Henze wants it to get out in the world. Schott will

publish it soon. The piece is dedicated to my wife and me, by the way, which is a very sweet thing for Henze to do. Her name is Julie; Henze calls her 'Juliet' — one more Shakespearian angle!

What is he like as a conductor?

Well, I will tell you that technically he's certainly not the greatest conductor I've ever worked with, but he is absolutely musical at all times. His ears are just phenomenal. He tends to be a little bit unpredictable as a conductor, in the sense that he, I think, hears things, or has an inspiration on the spot and just goes for it, and it may not be something that you've rehearsed. One has to be very much on one's toes.

It's such an interesting experience, because there's always a sound idea. The listening is fantastic. I've learned more about the piece in the past week, doing it with him twice, than in studying it for eight months.

He really senses the deepest aspect of one's musicianship. He wants you to bring that out. Every time I've done less than that, or maybe been a little timid, he just says: 'Do more of it'. He never gets in the way of the essence of your musicianship; he just wants it to come out as much as possible. He's like a great teacher.

I think it's that way with orchestras too. He really wants them to listen. He just wants to participate in the listening. It's a very good experience to work with him.

I know that you will be playing this concerto many more times, but will other guitarists also be playing it?
I have exclusive recording rights to it, and the US

premiere, but the general thing is in my experience that you get rights more when you commission the piece yourself. I certainly didn't have the funds to do that, so it wasn't right for me to ask for the rights. Anything that Henze has given me has been given out of generosity — and there's been a lot.

Have you played all the other concertos — the standards?

I have not performed the Ponce concerto, but I've done all the others. I did an interesting concerto job once with the San Francisco Ballet, which did a ballet choreographed to the Rodrigo *Aranjuez* and the *Fantasia para un gentilhomme* — played back to back without a break. They changed the order of the *Fantasia* a little bit, and in the *Aranjuez* the order was 3, 1, 2 — ending with the second movement. I did that ten times in one week. Ever since then, I've not been scared of the *Aranjuez*.

Do you play any other contemporary concertos?

I've played the Bennett, which I think is a very nice piece. I think it would work on the other side of the Henze recording, because it's for 13 instruments.

I've had a number of concertos written for me. I haven't premiered all of them. There's a deluge of new concertos now. People have recognized that there's a great need for a bigger variety of concertos, and I hope it continues. It is very important for us to get as much into the mainstream as possible.

How do you persuade orchestras to play something other than the Aranjuez concerto?



Well, that's hard work. Sometimes you can ease them into it. When you have a conductor you've worked with regularly, you can sometimes get him to do the Castelnuovo-Tedesco, which is a popular sounding concerto, or the Villa-Lobos. Another way you can do it is to do two concertos, which guitarists are doing more and more. The *Aranjuez*, then the Bennett or something else more modern. The *Aranjuez* is not that long compared to some of the piano concertos. It's a short 20 minutes, so there is time to do more.

The other way is to work with venturesome conductors, which will not often be with the most highlighted big orchestra series but which is a great experience for a guitarist, to work with an ensemble and to give these pieces an airing.

The Henze piece is a very unusual ensemble, and it's sort of caught in between the size of a major orchestra and a small chamber group. I admire the fact that he wrote for these instruments even though it's probably going to limit the number of performances. With a major orchestra, it's going to be featuring nine or ten of their players and four or five specialists. And a chamber group will often have trouble in getting good players on viola d'amore or oboe d'amore who can play modern music. But composers must first write what they hear, and worry about the prospects later.

Sir Peter Maxwell-Davies said to me after the performance that the thing with this piece is to get a recording. I think he's absolutely right. It's a hard enough score to hear; we need to have a recording that's well prepared, to be a document, a reference point.

(Editor's note: David Tanenbaum later recorded this work for Harmonia Mundi, with Hans Werner Henze conducting the Ensemble Modern.)

You gave a masterclass in the Purcell Room the day before the concert. What did you think of the students?

I was quite impressed with the level of the students. Three of them were, I guess, 17 or 18, finishing their high school studies, and one was just beginning at college level. I thought the playing was quite impressive. With the exception of the student who played the Brouwer piece, I thought there was a need for a little more flexibility and a little more range of dynamics.

In the States, do you notice any significant difference in quality between private teaching and institutional teaching?

That's a very hard one. I think with some more time under our belt, it will level off and there will be more

uniformity. Right now there's a great diversity. You can have some very high level teaching privately, and in the universities you can find some pretty bad teaching. I like to think that with enough people and enough ideas going around, that we shall naturally weed out some of the lesser work.

The level continues to rise; young guitarists start at earlier ages, and the educational system is getting better and better — partly, I think, through the transference of ideas. I don't think there's any sort of system that is universal — yet! Perhaps there will be more educational systems as we go along, which people will either adhere to or react against, but that will be helpful, I think.

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