

Shai Maestro Is Only Human

The pianist and composer's music may sometimes suggest otherwise, but he's very much of this world—believing in the value of intimacy, conversation, and the “Grandma Rule”

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Absorption. Energy. Pinched nerves. Grandmothers. These might seem like off-kilter topics for an interview with athletic Israeli pianist/composer Shai Maestro and his equally intense longtime bassist [Jorge Roeder](#).

Yet throughout our lengthy Zoom chat from three points along the map—Tel Aviv, Brooklyn, Philadelphia—subjects like Maestro's obsessive, sponge-like immersion in a sound or style and the elegant manner in which he folds himself into the ambience of a room as an ultimate form of improvisation became part of many conversational lists, ticked off by Maestro in a fashion that went, “A, B, three.”

The pinched nerves? That's just what happens, on occasion, when you try to keep up with Shai's Olympian chord stretches and sped-up meter readings.

“Yes, I've gone to the hospital because of Shai,” Roeder said with a laugh of the only hurtful moments of their now decade-long collaboration, which includes all six of Maestro's albums as a leader. “I wouldn't have it any other way.” (More on this later.)

After all, making the most complex improvisations sound (in Sinatra's words) nice and easy, as well as honestly portraying the pain and joy of Maestro's compositions—that's just human. And *Human* just happens to be the name of his newest ECM record, recorded at Studios la Buissonne in France, produced by label boss Manfred Eicher to fit ECM's usual airy austerity, and featuring not only Maestro's usual trio members Roeder and drummer Ofri Nehemya but also a new associate: trumpeter Philip Dizack.

“Making the three of us into the four of us—a pie split into equal quarters—just felt right, and came so naturally,” Roeder said of a trumpeter whose silvery, spacey tones on *Human* resemble those of Mark Isham and, at times, *Sketches of Spain*-era Miles.

“Now we are a conversation among four people,” Maestro added.

How does one get to be part of the *Human* conversation, which includes tributes to the synergy of pianist Hank Jones and bassist Charlie Haden (“Hank and Charlie”) and the motherly love of Talma Maestro (“Ima”); gracefully beatific ballads such as “GG” and “They Went to War”; the aptly titled likes of “Compassion” and “Prayer”; the rumbling zigzag of “Mystery and Illusions”; a restless, heaving hyper-dance called “The Thief's Dream”; and a gently frenetic take on Ellington's “In a Sentimental Mood”?

It's a bit like that old joke, “How do I get to Broadway?”

Practice a lot. Improvise a lot more. Then forget about it.

The unified physical aspects of practicing, improvising, forgetting, laughing, and being a band have been fleeting, of course, during the COVID-19 lockdown, with Roeder hanging at home in Brooklyn and Maestro hunkered down with his extended family in Israel.

During the pandemic's long break from live performance, neither Jorge nor Shai have felt compelled to live in jazz's virtual roundabout. "I'm not into," Maestro said, with a snicker, of online gigging and livestreaming showcases. "I miss the face-to-face encounter and feeling the energy of the room."

What he *has* done at home during the pandemic is work with filmmakers to create scores: "It's something I can complete, from A to Z, and feel good about, rather than do something that is more and more frustrating each time I try it." Currently, he's working on two cinema projects, one with a Japanese director in dedication to the 2011 tsunami victims, the other a feature film score with an Israeli director that mixes solo piano, full orchestral pieces, and electronic music. "Of this, I am very excited," he said. "Signing as I just did with Sony Publishing, I'd love to continue down the scoring road. That and getting back to business with the trio and Philip."

Maestro talks about reuniting with fellow Israeli Nehemya, the Peru-born Roeder and U.S. grade Dizack with the sort of yearning usually reserved for family members, fraternity brothers, and war buddies. In a way, jazz makes them all of those.

"Funny you ask that," he said when quizzed about his and Roeder's initial meeting in 2011. "Yesterday I was teaching a private lesson with a student piano player who just happened to be there in Lima, Peru, the first time Jorge and I met in a club, Cocodrilo Verde. I was playing with my bassist Eduardo Perez and Jorge was there, and he and I spoke after our concert. When we got home, Ziv Ravitz, our former trio drummer, organized a session in Brooklyn with Jorge, and we ... just took it from there. It's been a great ride. 10 years' worth, can you believe it?"

"It is hard to fathom that *that* much time has passed," Roeder countered. "Though I'm from Peru, I wasn't living there at that time. I was visiting with a different band, semi on-tour, during a jazz festival—the same festival Shai was playing." He had heard Maestro's name and knew his reputation from the pianist's five-year stint in fellow Israeli jazzmaker Avishai Cohen's band.

"That night, the piano Shai was playing was a beat-up, out-of-tune baby grand. It didn't matter," Roeder recalled. "He made it sing. My most vivid takeaway was that they were playing an arrangement of a Peruvian classic, 'Todos Regresan'—'everybody returns'—and Shai was playing with the inflections of a Peruvian, an interpretation that felt incredibly close to home; that's the only way I can state that. It was as if he was of that land. 'Wait, this guy is Israeli. How can he know this music that well?' Shai dives into something and absorbs it, and plays like the best and most deeply ingrained among them."

“Absorbing is what I do. I’ve been like a sponge since I was a kid, sucking up energy and vibes.”

Absorption. One of our feature's principal themes hangs in the air like a clue to a mystery or a superhero's secret power.

"When I study, whether it's a style or a person's music, I try and get all of the smallest nuances from it," the pianist said. "If I transcribe Coltrane, my intention would be to play in an accurate way without aping. I did this with flamenco in Israel. When I prepared for [the] Lima gig, I checked out as much as I could of Peruvian music. Plus, Peruvian and Israeli folkloric music is similar in its harmonies—not a completely new set of colors. Absorbing is what I do. I've been like a sponge since I was a kid, sucking up energy and vibes. Sometimes it's good and intense to be like that, sometimes a disadvantage. Too much absorption and everything gets soaked."

Soaked or not, the results are always magically fluid.

"The whole point of *Human* is to not try," Maestro continued. "Stop trying. What that means is, if the music is real, then your entire history is in it: your values, mores, heritages. Everything is in there. Respect for your elders. Hopes for the future. Both Jorge and I have such tremendous respect for what happened before us—musical and personal heritage—that it's always there, second nature. I don't feel a pressure to respect it because that is who I am. No effort ... It just is."

Vocalist Theo Bleckmann, who collaborated with Maestro on the majestic 2017 ECM release *Elegy*, picked up on the audaciousness of the pianist's approach before they'd even officially met: "I got an email from somebody saying, 'Hi, my name is Shai Maestro. I'm a fan of your music. Would you be interested in getting together to jam?' All I could think was, 'Who is this dude? Probably not. But let me click on this link he sent.' Already in my head I'm thinking that this could only be bad. The next thing I knew, two seconds in, it was 'Yes, please.'"

Maestro, bold from the start ("No, Shai is not shy," the singer cracks), set up a date with Bleckmann, first as a duo, then with other musicians, and ... absorbed.

"He picked up on things about me so quickly," Bleckmann says. "That's rare. But what I truly love about Shai is that he plays with his heart on his sleeve. He has a way of playing music, whether it's complex or not, that makes you weep. So much heart and blood in what he does, without it being labored and heavy. He could make a stone cry. He is a tad unpredictable, he keeps you on your toes, but he does it all in the spirit of joy. That's his personality. He has something of a mischievous devil in him when he interacts with you."

So how do you take that mischief, that fluidity, and bottle it in a recording?

"The first word that comes to mind is 'trust,'" Maestro said, revving himself up for one breathless quote. "Having mileage with Jorge and Ofri plays such a huge role in getting into the studio and capturing something a) to the point, b) alive, and 3) human. The two years that we played together with Ofri as a band before recording [2018's] *The Dream Thief*, then *Human*—the spectrum of energy in which we operated—found us going from the slowest, most sparse ballads, almost not playing anything, to rock & roll. Jorge, do you remember in the Czech Republic someone passing out at one of our shows? We got to such high levels of intensity and super-intimate stuff that going into the studio was with all of that knowledge of everything that we *can* do. How the music *can* feel. Second is the knowledge of the songs. The music on *Human* is incredibly hard to play and has a lot of challenges for all of us: rhythmically, harmonically, technically. Jorge is doing crazy bass acrobatics on this album. So is Philip on trumpet. But knowing the music well, to a point that we can play it with ... I don't want to say ease, but the ability to make the difficulty more natural, was a huge key in making *Human* human. The last ingredient, then, is letting go. Then things just happen by themselves. I know that sounds a little clichéd, but we are trying to channel something or be a vessel to something larger than us. Those are the main ingredients—the secret ingredient being Philip, who is *amazing* and brought a whole other level of spirituality."

But what about that difficulty? Where did it come from? The pianist blames both the inherent nature of the compositions themselves and the audacity of his collaborators. "It is the chutzpah of having Jorge and Philip tackle songs and moments of music that weren't originally intended for them," Maestro said with a smile. "The best example is our take on Ellington's 'Sentimental Mood.' The arrangement was written for a duo, for vibraphone and piano, for me and Joel Ross. For piano, it's hard-ish. For vibraphone, it's *hard* because there are really big leaps, more distance to travel with the mallets. Joel did it wonderfully. But Jorge and Philip heard it and wanted in. I knew what the difficulties in making big leaps on the bass entailed—staying in tune and such. Jorge created his own brand of hell going into it. My 'Sentimental Mood' has two characters, one being all those crazy arpeggios and the other [being] the melody that's wound through the song in weird, displaced locations. I told Philip to have at it, but that I need the melody to be played in such a way that it sounds easy. So he had to play the melody a little louder and then play the rest of the stuff a little quieter. Which is insanely hard on trumpet."

Don't ask. Just listen to the leaps and bounds made by the participants in one take, a (dare we say) superhuman effort.

"This was *not* my fault, make that clear," Maestro laughed.

Which brings us back to the pinched nerves.

"One more thing that I should add," Roeder said, "is that we did it in one take because I had to go to the hospital due to this."

Seriously?

"Oh yeah. I developed a pinched nerve in my cervical vertebrae and I was in such a ton of pain I couldn't go into the upper register. I actually had to stop, go to the hospital. It was one take, as I had to be bedridden."

"That's pretty Olympian, no?" Maestro said. "I told Jorge that it wasn't meant for him. He wouldn't listen."

"I'm allowing more in, allowing things to happen. I would be sitting next to the piano *not trying, not playing.*"

Finally, we came to grandmothers. "I'll tell you what each song has to have with me: I go by the Grandma Rule," Maestro said. "Which means that my grandma must be able to enjoy it. Even if it is incredibly complex, a song must have a thread that allows you to follow it. That thread could be elusive, subtle, or quite obvious—but a thread has to exist."

When putting together *Human's* "The Thief's Dream," Maestro wanted to nerd out and be show-offy. "Then I had to consider that I was doing this for ECM, as well as the Grandma Rule," he said. "Having mined the values of space and honesty, and melody and air, I had to think things out, which created a separation between its layers: a rhythmic layer, which is 13/8, on top of this ballad, [which is] something like a waltz. So you get something that is multi-dimensional."

During the two-year workshopping period of *Human*—a significant portion of which he originally wrote for a project called "Time," commissioned by the Jazz Gallery—Maestro absorbed much that was around him in his home of New York City, a "constant culturalism" that included daily shots at theater, film, dance, and museum/gallery exhibitions. "I'm allowing more in, allowing things to happen," he said. "I would be sitting next to the piano *not trying, not playing*. And when I do, instead of trying to conquer and manipulate the listener—writing and playing the thing that will bring success—it doesn't become about the process anymore. I'm *there*, recognizing a zone that is real and honest and essential. Then I capture the moment, which can be very big or extremely small and nuanced, all of which I treat like precious cargo, like finding gold nuggets in the river."

"Shai's process is becoming broader and broader—complex, then simple, but all played with the same intention," Roeder said. "We're getting better at it, and he, as a composer, is becoming more self-referential. It's as if, on *Human*, he's putting Easter eggs along the trail for us to follow. So we just keep exploring."

Maestro believes *Human* is his most distilled work to date. "It's like what you do to a diamond," he said. "You polish it. It's like studying a language, where you master the vocabulary, the different aspects of grammar, and the accents to have a conversation. That's how you give another person the fullest picture of who you are—as a human."

But what about Maestro's grandmother, who inspired a new rule?

"My grandmother is alive and kicking and hilarious," Maestro says with a giggle. "She's full of joy, and it's a privilege to have her around. And yes, she loves the record. The Grandma Rule worked."