

Mario Davidovsky -- Liner Notes for a Bridge Records 2005 release

Looking back with the advantage of our early twenty-first century perspective, it seems obvious that Mario Davidovsky is one of the truly original musical voices to have emerged from post war America. Yet Davidovsky's music is paradoxical. In our first encounter with this music, we are drawn into a world that is highly coherent, elegant and compelling. The beginnings of pieces make us sit up and pay attention. And if we stay with them, there are landmarks, moments of clarity that give a strong sense of where we are in the musical narrative. At the same time, the pieces are layered, complex and the approach to counterpoint is something new and idiosyncratic. While the surface of the music is seductive enough to make the initial hearing appealing, even to the uninitiated, it is music that rewards repeated listening. This CD includes pieces for instruments alone as well as three of the famous *Synchronisms*, for instrument and electronic sound. The music dates from as early as 1969 and as recently as 2003. Thus, it provides glimpses at some developing compositional strategies and moments of discovery by one of our most pivotal composers.

Davidovsky was already a composer of great accomplishment when Aaron Copland brought him from Argentina to Tanglewood in 1959. The other composition teacher that year, Milton Babbitt, recognized the young composer's potential and made the crucial suggestion that he travel to New York City to investigate the new Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center being built on 125th street. The EMC, where Davidovsky eventually rose to become Director, was a magnet for composers from around the world. It was there that he met Edgard Varèse, studio directors Vladimir Ussachevsky and Otto Luening, and the Center's first technician, Turkish composer, Bulent Arel. According to Davidovsky, he and Arel spent countless hours together in the studio, catching "little cat-naps" and eating "meatball sandwiches from the corner store". With the most uncooperative and crude technology, the two developed techniques that Davidovsky continued to mine musically for ten years before he again resumed writing for purely non-electronic instruments. It was in fighting to create electronic pieces of a high musical standard, as sensitive as the long tradition of instrumental music, that Davidovsky's distinctive musical voice began to emerge.

It is a particular talent of Davidovsky to make us listen to details of sound, then to make these count as the musical plot unfolds. Each piece begins by establishing its own world – a sound space that poses musical questions, while setting a fresh profile and character for what is to come. Davidovsky captures the essence of the instrument he is writing for, the sense of it that we all hold in memory, and reinvents what it can do and become. And by using instruments in seamless combination with electronic sound, their shapes seem to modulate, along with their colors and tunings. Even the very space inhabited by the instruments morphs from one moment to the next.

Davidovsky contrasts his approach to that of Elliott Carter. Carter uses different instruments to layer simultaneous "stories" told by different "characters". Davidovsky combines different instruments to tell a single, highly inflected story, in which each

moment of each phrase is packed with nuance. The challenge is to integrate highly contrasting materials into coherent phrases. The material might be as simple as one held note in a particular register, cast in contrast to a trill, or tremolo. Such simple ideas are often layered sequentially with sudden instances of equally simple moments of great intensity, such as accented “tutta forza” double stop unisons in strings, or extreme, dissonant intervals in percussion or piano (the ninths and sevenths that pervade *Synchronism 6* and the *Chacona* respectively are good examples). This apparent simplicity allows details of sound to come to the fore and become part of the discourse. The result is an elegance seldom achieved in the music of our time.

Davidovsky has always thought deeply about how one’s spiritual and ethical compass naturally transforms artistic expression. He holds that the very act of composition requires moral choice. It is a process of constant questioning and argument akin to the study of Talmud. As Davidovsky sees it, the challenging work of creating a coherent whole from a broad universe of possibilities derives from monotheism. Many elements must be embedded to make the whole, but then “the whole is indivisible.” Of this perspective, Davidovsky says, “you are a real living, concrete person, and you are a soul; you try to harmonize these things.” Speaking in broad terms about his way of life, Davidovsky credits this philosophy to being a Jew – especially to the internal richness of contradiction created by being a Jew growing up in a Catholic country, where spiritual belief and Western art are inextricably bound one to the other. With this upbringing, music embodies both a form of knowledge, and evidence of faith.

A belief in the transformative power of Western Art Music then is at the root of everything new, personal, and innovative in the music of Mario Davidovsky. The music weaves traditional classical forms – Sonata, Chaconne, and Variation – together with more “modern” narrative possibilities. These conversations with the past create dramatic conflicts that allow for new sources of surprise within traditional boundaries. And a mercurial flow in the range of expression, from delicate to course, from humorous to tragic, is inherited from Beethoven. Sudden changes of character enrich one another as they circulate, with a result best described as musical wit.

Every piece on this disk invents ways of reconstructing traditional possibilities in order to unify contrasting instrument types and disparate musical materials. Three of these pieces digest the piano in the process. *Synchronisms No. 6*, (1970) integrates piano with electronic sound. Two other pieces, the piano trio, *Chacona* (1971), and the *Duo Capriccioso* (2003) for violin and piano, make traditional ensembles work in new ways. Other pieces seek to reconcile flute with strings, (Quartetto), violin with tape (*Synchronisms No. 9*), and percussion ensemble with a tape part that, in less capable hands, could easily be redundant.

Davidovsky describes combining the violin with the piano in the *Duo Capriccioso* as his attempt to make two totally different instruments work together acoustically without the benefit of the harmonic blending that would be automatic in tonal music. According to Davidovsky, the violin is by nature “a fly” and the piano “an elephant”. To compose

each moment within each phrase then he must find the pieces of sound that will “embed one instrument into the other”.

One kind of counterpoint in Davidovsky's music thus consists of the simultaneity of a melodic/rhythmic idea and a timbre/dynamic idea (what Bulent Arel liked to call “timbre melody”). In the opening of the *Duo Capriccioso*, the timbre line consists of an opening midrange violin tremolo-like motive which, as it opens out, adds harmonics that create, at once, abrupt shifts in timbre and leaps in register. This violin music sets up the piano entrance by increasing the energy and focusing on the pitch “A”. As the violin reaches the “A”, the number of timbres explodes. The first A is a left-hand pizzicato. The next attack is a regular pizz., the next bowed, and finally, the same A is played as intensely as possible, tripled on three of the violin’s four strings. With all of this timbral insistence on one pitch, the piano is able to sneak in softly, playing the very same A, as if it were simply *part* of the violin. As the music continues, the piano adds its share of mercurial changes in timbre, including notes “stopped” by touching and muting the piano strings and pizz, plucking inside the piano.

The *Chacona* is composed for the classical piano trio (violin, cello, piano) and embraces the traditional notion of a “chaconne” or repeating harmonic progression. In typical Davidovskian fashion though, the characters of individual instruments are subsumed into something larger, and the traditional form becomes a framework against which new structures may be invented. The three musicians captured in the performance of *Chacona* on this disk (Aleck Karis, Curtis Macomber, and Eric Barlett) shape each phrase with great confidence and a mastery that comes from a relationship with the piece that goes back twenty years.

While each of the first five *Synchronisms* has its own strengths, *Synchronism No. 6* (1970), for piano and electronic sound, stands out as one of the landmarks of twentieth-century music. In this piece Davidovsky reaches a high point of technical mastery and structural focus.

The beginning of *Synchronisms No. 6* is very striking – crazy really. How many pieces for piano begin with a rather anonymous single note? The piece opens with a single G in the piano, which as it naturally dies away is picked up in the tape – the tape makes this G crescendo and leads to two short punctuations -- G in tape, E in the piano. This compelling gesture seems to emanate entirely from the piano, using only two pitches, but with timbres and dynamics that no piano can produce. The most striking immediate illusion is that the piano is making a crescendo. The net effect is the magical transformation of an instrument we think we know into something surprising and malleable. The piano *is* a piano, but it is also the anatomy of a piano – a single note allowed to resonate and decay so that we focus on the sonority of *that* pitch in *that* register and its particular dynamic shape over time (the envelop).

This first phrase of *Synchronisms No. 6* also embodies the strategy for its structure. There is a strong tension between motion and stasis that will eventually get worked out. As the piece begins, we have something sustained, the frozen G in counterpoint with a fast

moving music, spinning out all twelve pitches with a wealth of timbres. Subsequent passages “cross-cut” between these two kinds of motion as distinct musical narratives, each with its own eventual resolution. This is something akin to the way the progression of narrative can be manipulated in film. A film can quickly jump from one story and one point in time to another in a nonlinear way (using flashback for example). Yet we have no problem following two stories. The technique actually deepens the experience, because one narrative begins to enrich the other as bits of both are revealed.

There is also a more traditional, overarching structure at work in *Synchronisms No. 6* -- the Sonata Form. The piece parses in three: Exposition, Development, and Recapitulation. It even contains a “false recapitulation” with a literal return to the opening G, complete with the tape-enabled crescendo. This return is immediately undercut, allowing the music to continue to big, dramatic climax, followed by the “real” moment of return. This return is not literal, but rather a striking distillation and simplification of the opening phrases.

One of the achievements of *Synchronisms No. 6* is nothing less than the invention of a new pianism – a new and distinct approach to the instrument. Davidovsky has always claimed that the piano is a problem for him to deal with – that he does not know what to do with it. What he means really is that he does not *want* to use the same piano as Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms or even Babbitt. Instead, every time the piano appears in the music of Davidovsky, it has been reinvented based on its relationship to the other resources in the piece – be they electronic or instrumental.

Synchronisms No. 5 (1969) is a brilliant combination of idiomatic and against-the-grain percussion writing. In hindsight, one can hear how *Synchronisms No. 5* points the way to *No. 6*. The two share many similar sounds, gestures, and formal techniques. In *No. 5* though, the percussion themselves form an “electronic ensemble” that creates timbre phrases before the tape ever enters. When the tape finally does enter, it amplifies and intensifies music that is already underway. One fundamental premise of the piece is the use of the timpani, as Davidovsky describes it, “to push pitches into the unpitched percussion instruments”. One layer through the piece consists of a rumbling background chorale created by an imaginative lyrical use of the timpani.

After *Synchronisms No. 8.*, for wind quintet and tape in 1978, Davidovsky decided stop composing electronic music. His instrumental music had, long before been transformed by his intensive period of work in the studio, so in some ways he was not really leaving anything behind. All of the public attention he was then receiving was focused on the *Synchronisms* pieces and their “novelty”. He had been type cast and would need some distance from the studio in order to make fresh work.

Synchronism No. 9, for violin and electronic sound, composed in 1988, marked Davidovsky’s return to the medium that had brought him fame as a young man. Refreshed by his sabbatical from the studio, and from a period of intense focus on instrumental writing, the new *Synchronisms* pieces would have important differences from their earlier siblings. Just as intensive studio work had changed Davidovsky’s

instrumental writing, his re-emersion in traditional ensembles would now affect his electronic writing.

Synchronisms No. 9 combines the technique of acoustical deconstruction with motivic material drawn from memories of the instrumental tradition. The piece opens with an idea that could easily have come from one of the earlier pieces. A simple repeated two-note motive is joined by tape and turned into an odd chorale that exploits the harmonic spectrum of violin's open strings. Latter though, the music launches a number of phrases derived from 19th century virtuoso violin literature, especially the music of Ysaÿe. As a child, Davidovsky studied the violin and internalized this literature. He explains that he eventually gave up playing the instrument because he had developed a strange and unsustainable bowing technique. Nevertheless, throughout his career, the violin has occupied a very special place in his music, as the violin *Synchronisms* demonstrates.

One of Mario Davidovsky's best-known pieces is *Synchronisms No. 1* for flute and electronic sound (1963). It is the work that launched his career in the United States, and it remains to this day a popular part of the flute repertoire. *Synchronisms No. 1* was composed for flutist-composer, Harvey Sollberger, and it was Sollberger's well-known double album on Nonesuch Records that brought it to the attention of flutists worldwide. When the National Flute Association instituted a new series of commissions, it was no surprise that Davidovsky was the first composer they approached. The *Quartetto* (1987) for flute quartet (flute, violin, viola, and cello) was composed in fulfillment of that commission and is dedicated to Harvey Sollberger.

Quartetto opens with a theme -- a lyrical, arching flute line that moves into and out of the string ensemble in the course of the piece. In one aspect, the dramatic shape of the piece is theme and variation, with a number of parallel beginnings that reactivate the theme. Each of the moments of return is clear enough, but following each the music veers away from literal repetition and finds surprising ways of developing and intensifying. Sometimes, development occurs through layering material of different affects, such as strident flute fragments placed in counterpoint to a thematic variant in strings. The phrase lengths are always changing and they frequently overlap by means of reharmonization. While the piece consists of two sections, there is overall an exaggerated arch, from the slow and lyrical beginning toward the extended passage of fast music. Most often in the music of Davidovsky, such passages are very compact and abbreviated, deriving their power from the way they are crosscut with contrasting materials (see the *Duo Capriccioso*). Here, the fast music is crosscut too -- appearing early on in the guise of quirky little sixteenth-note figures. As the fast music becomes more extended, it leads convincingly to the climax, and provides a dramatic release from the arching, slow music that pervades much of the piece.

All of Davidovsky's music is challenging to perform --requiring a high degree of virtuosity. The logic and beauty of the music though rewards its difficult preparation. Performers who discover Davidovsky's music often become passionate fans and begin to internalize the language over many years of repeat performances. The members of *Speculum Musicae* are a prime example, having integrated the music's idiosyncrasies

into their technique. We listeners are fortunate to have their committed, sparkling performances captured in this collection.

Copyright 2005 Eric Chasalow