

# Mario Davidovsky: An Introduction

by Eric Chasalow

Upon meeting composer Mario Davidovsky, one cannot help but be quickly won over by his openness, warmth, and intensity. There is an immediate, yet respectful sense of intimacy in the way that he readily shares his thoughts and passions about everything from the state of culture and the history of art and religion to the details of his latest carpentry project. Although he rarely speaks in public about anything, let alone music (including his own), he is phenomenally articulate, and tells fascinating, at times hilarious stories of growing up in Argentina, life in New York City (in 1959 Aaron Copland helped him become a fellow at Tanglewood. Soon after, he came for good) and now Boston. It is perhaps not surprising then, to find that Davidovsky's music shares many of these same qualities in generous proportion. It is clear and compelling, drawing the listener immediately into its personal, idiosyncratic world, yet it handsomely rewards repeated listening and study.

In the context of a decidedly anti-intellectual and market-driven climate for the arts in the United States, Mario Davidovsky's sustained contributions over a career of more than 35 years, are both admirable and remarkable. A consummate musician who always focuses on core musical issues, he has never been concerned with superficial aspects of career. Nor, recognizing the necessity of artistic risk-taking, has he ever taken the easy path. Of late, Mario has become fond of explaining his approach this way: "I always enjoyed the challenge of being left in the desert for a few days with a knife and a jug of water. . . I thought it would be important to try to do the opposite of what came naturally to me." In the 1960's, that "desert" was the emerging world of electroacoustic music, and the "knife and jug" the classic tape studio—the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. Together with his close friend, Turkish composer, Bulent Arel, Davidovsky invented an approach to electroacoustic music that uses electronic sounds to enrich the art-music tradition, not to replace it. He has shown a whole generation of younger composers that it is not necessary to throw away the musical past in order to embrace the resources of new technology. While many others, then as now, have been seduced by the novelty of electronic sounds, Davidovsky has continuously discovered how to use new sounds in musically motivated ways. The handmade tape sounds in a Davidovsky piece are just as sensitive and convincing as those made by any virtuoso instrumentalist. Further, the musical ideas seem so completely motivated by the electronic materials, that they could only be expressed in the studio and not by any other instrument. Davidovsky has emerged from his desert looking like he must have been born there.

In the 1950s and 1960s, much electronic music consisted of dense layers or successions of sounds whose placement in time was of little consequence. Composers of the period were often satisfied with "discovering" sensuous sounds and few would go any further to build these into a musical architecture. A lack of musicality in electronic music composition pervaded the profession then as it does today. Poor composition hides behind the seductive idol of the machine, enabled by the twentieth-century habit of blindly valuing technological innovation above all else. Beginning almost fifty years ago, the profession of composer became artificially fractured into several specialties. On one

hand, there are those who continue to write for traditional instruments, on the other, those who specialize in electroacoustic composition. Electroacoustic composers who work with the computer often insist on arrogantly dividing the profession further, between digital or computer composers and everyone else, which in the 1960s meant those working in the analog studio. These divisions have allowed the claim (most often by those with more technical than musical training and ability) that because we have new models for creating and controlling sound, that we should ignore the most central realities of music. These are that it unfolds in time and that to follow a musical argument, one must have and use memory. If we discard these tenets, then it is enough for a composer to “invent” sounds and simply expose them without any attention to ordering. Such an approach can, in some hands generate mildly interesting sound environments, but more often it is an excuse for a disengaged, mindless activity that reveals nothing and produces little that resembles art. When Davidovsky came to the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in 1960, he became a central part of a community of composers seeking new expressive means and willing to use their highly developed musicianship as the point of departure. His development at that time of a new mode of phrase articulation, which builds upon his history of successful instrumental writing, can be followed through a series of evermore masterful pieces for tape, *Electronic Study I*, *II*, and *III* (1960, 1962, 1964). In these pieces, Davidovsky finds ways of making every aspect of each sound count. When first confronted with electronic sounds, Davidovsky heard, not something exciting and new, but something very crude, especially when compared to the highly refined, two hundred plus year old tradition of western instruments that was already in his ear. To begin to approach the sensitivity of traditional instruments, Davidovsky spent countless hours listening to each sound. He painstakingly constructed phrases made up mostly of short articulated events, accepting nothing that did not have a convincing dramatic shape. If this was all he had done, however, the music would have been no more than a kind of synthesized traditional music—a pale imitation, for example, of music for solo violin. Instead, he invented ways to use aspects of each sound that, in older music, had been less prominent in shaping musical ideas. The envelop (attack, sustain, and decay) characteristics of each sound became especially useful. A phrase could now open up or find closure not just through a series of hierarchically related pitches, but also through a succession of different attacks, from very hard and abrupt to ones so gradual and soft that notes gently appear out of silence. Of course, traditional instruments also have a range of articulations, but these are usually only a detail of the musical surface, lending a general character to a passage of music.

In Davidovsky’s electronic works, control of articulation becomes more significant. A succession of widely varying articulations can shape an event, a gesture, a motive that can be developed in the course of a piece. The control of articulation also allows the composer to choose what, if anything, feels like a downbeat and the sense of pacing of each episode. This is no small matter. When a live musician performs a piece of music in concert, there are many cues, visual as well as aural, that project the sense of phrasing and pacing to the audience. We take this for granted, and many tape pieces fail to take the need for these cues into account. As he worked in the studio, Davidovsky cannily realized not only that he was creating the actual performance, but also that he needed to find new ways of compensating for the loss of the live musician.

Still, composers primarily write music for concert performance, and tape pieces played

back through loudspeakers, no matter how brilliantly made, make for a dull concert. It was natural for composers to begin to think about combining electronic sounds with live instruments. It is for his work in this area that Davidovsky is certainly best known. His series of Synchronisms pieces, beginning with Synchronisms #1 for flute and electronic sounds in 1962, had an immediate impact. Here is music in which live and electronic forces reinvigorate one another in surprising ways. In these pieces he achieved the first true “hyper-instruments” where the live and electronic modulate one another and become something totally new, joined in one expanded acoustical space; a kind of musical virtual reality.

The key to the Synchronisms pieces, from #1 (1962) through #10 (1992), is that each takes into account the most basic acoustical properties of the live instrument employed. While today computer tools make it possible to do sophisticated acoustical analysis of instruments, Davidovsky’s approach has always been to use the most sensitive tool of all, his musician’s ear. Every detail of a sound becomes an important part of the basic material for a piece. As in the tape pieces, envelopes, overall tone color, even individual overtones are each considered and used. Here, we also have the reality of the live instrument’s limitations to contend with. It is Davidovsky’s ability to exploit our expectations about the instrument in front of us—to manipulate the instrument’s normal limitations with wit and sophistication, that make these pieces so compelling. To this day he remains the acknowledged master of the medium of electronically manipulated instruments and these pieces the touchstones for anyone trying to work in this area.

In Synchronisms #6, for piano and electronic sounds (awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1971), the natural envelop of the piano, which has a limited range of attack possibilities—mostly fast and fairly hard, is the point of departure. The piece opens with a single G from the piano, which, as it naturally dies away, is surreptitiously picked up by the tape, which then crescendos and leads to the next attack point in the piano part. The net effect sounds like a piano making a crescendo—a decidedly “unnatural act.” This is surprising, delightful, and potentially a gimmick. In Davidovsky’s hands however, something more profound takes place. In addition to the attractive, but most superficial slight of hand, the composer has focused our attention on something musically generative—a motive from which every aspect can and will be exploited. The listener is given an important pitch, the G (which remains static, controlling the harmonic pacing), two different registers (that of the high G and the midrange E that follows), and a sparse texture in which piano and electronic sounds seamlessly mix to make a single gesture. The motive is also defined by envelop type—the long cresecendo followed by the staccato attack. The simplicity of texture allows us to focus on these sonic details—hard, bright, short attacks and longer, mellower sustained and crescendoing sounds. So strong is this opening motif, that when it returns much later, at pitch, it creates one of the most significant structural landmarks in the piece. From the first, we know that this is music of great economy; nothing is wasted, every detail is rich with possibility.

Synchronisms #9, for violin and electronic sounds, was composed in 1988 after the composer’s fifteen year hiatus from electronic music. This piece reveals a new resource from which Davidovsky draws basic materials. Having been a violinist as a young man, the composer reaches into memory to invoke Ysäye and others of the late Romantic violin tradition. Idiomatic violin writing is now integrated with Davidovsky’s arsenal of means to create electronic continuity. A chorale texture is prominent as the piece begins

and the careful emphasis on the open strings of the violin throughout the piece, with doublings at extreme octaves and harmonics, serves to blend tape with live violin. As the piece progresses, rapid arpeggiation, reminiscent of the late Romantic virtuoso tradition becomes more and more frequent, ultimately forming the climax.

During the 1980s and 1990s, historical resources of the type invoked in *Synchronisms #9* have become a more overt part of Davidovsky's music. In his *Concertante* (1990) for string quartet and orchestra, composed for the Guarneri Quartet and the Philadelphia Orchestra, a rhythmic motive from Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue* is the source. His *Synchronisms #10* for guitar and electronic sounds (1992) begins with what Davidovsky describes as the most cliché of classical guitar gestures possible—a quick triple attack on a single pitch, “almost a flamenco gesture.” *Morenica*, a *mi me llaman* (*Morenica*, *They Call Me*), the first song of the *Romancero* cycle, begins with a folk-like tune in the voice which is soon set in tension with a successively more aperiodic, strikingly inventive instrumental accompaniment. In each of these examples, the choice of source is merely a point of departure. Its shape motivates a musical discourse which does not require that the listener remember various historical styles.

Many composers would have done everything possible to capitalize on the success of the first *Synchronisms* pieces. Davidovsky could have easily written nothing but electronic music for the remainder of his career. He eschewed this approach, finding it limiting and rejecting the idea that a composer needs to specialize in either electronic music or music for instruments. His achievements as composer, teacher, and mentor have proven the wisdom of this view. Following *Synchronisms #8* in 1974, he focused on a series of purely instrumental pieces which exploit many of the lessons learned in the studio. The sound-world and sense of continuity Davidovsky invented in the studio is translated to various chamber ensembles in a long list of compositions that includes *Inflexions* (1965) (perhaps the most electronic sounding chamber piece ever written), *Pennplay* (1979), five string quartets, a flute quartet, *Quartetto* (1987), and many others.

Commenting on an early example of Davidovsky's electronic music in the 1960s, Karlheinz Stockhausen declared, “I feel that after hearing this piece I am no longer the same person as before.” Dozens of students (including this author) have felt much the same and have flocked to study with Davidovsky, first at the City University of New York and Columbia University, now at Harvard University. A whole generation of composers is now working at studios throughout the United States, extending Davidovsky's tradition and the standard he has set by steadfastly pursuing musical clarity, inventiveness, and wit in the face of ever-greater pressure to conform to the latest stylistic trend. His primary lesson for us is to take the work, and not ourselves seriously.

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