

Like One Single Continuous Voice

“Nothing I know counts.”

Thus did Mario Davidovsky sum up his attitude toward entering what was for him the uncharted territory of electronic music, a world that would bring him not only his first significant recognition as a composer but, eventually, a Pulitzer Prize. For a period of about five years, from roughly 1960 through 1965, he embarked on a self-imposed exile of sorts, at a place then known as the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, for which his prior musical and cultural experiences could have hardly prepared him, or so it might have seemed. Not a period of exile in a total sense, for he was surrounded by the stimulating presence of colleagues who, like him, were at the forefront of some of the most exciting developments in contemporary composition. Furthermore, he was creating stunningly beautiful and highly original music such as the three *Electronic Studies* and the first three of the pathbreaking *Synchronisms*, in which he combined prerecorded electronic sounds with live performers. He did, however, see clearly that his trek through this new terrain would be a solitary and challenging one, on the surface difficult to connect with the traditions and training he had brought with him from his native Argentina.

What did he know that needed to be, if not jettisoned, put in abeyance as he stepped into this new sonic universe? He certainly had been steeped in the Viennese classical tradition of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, whose chamber music he played as a young violinist. His body of knowledge also included a thorough grounding in the venerable contrapuntal disciplines, particularly the polyphonic vocal style of such Renaissance masters as Palestrina, Victoria and Lassus. Davidovsky has often recounted visiting his family years after having left home to settle in the United States and finding stacks of motets and mass movements that he had composed in this idiom while a student. These compositional studies received practical reinforcement in a chorus in which he sang as a young man, inspiring in him a lifelong delight in and love for what is now commonly referred to as “early music,” particularly the bracingly edgy sonorities of the Middle Ages. This intimacy with musical traditions born of Christianity, inescapable for a young musician growing up in a Latin American Catholic culture, were complemented by a strong Jewish intellectual heritage and a deep and abiding preoccupation with the ethical responsibilities of the artist. In addition, as a young composer attending concerts in Buenos Aires, he discovered and found himself enthralled with the music of the masters of the Second Viennese School, Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. Indeed, he has described his early, “pre-Opus 1” music as having indulged in an intensely Bergian lyricism.

All of the music that affected Davidovsky so profoundly is dependent upon traditional Western European notions of directed, linear motion, often in a way that emulates narrative, dramatic and rhetorical models, and upon the artful combination of beautifully shaped lines into elegant contrapuntal structures. It is also highly dependent on precise and complex pitch relationships. Davidovsky now confronted an electronic studio severely limited in terms of this last concern, as keeping the oscillators that produced the raw sound material in tune to any reasonable degree was almost impossible. Once produced, this material had to be committed to audio tape and molded, subjected to the various manipulations that would yield a satisfactory aesthetic result; many tiny pieces of tape would be spliced together to this end. One had to conceive and create not only the music, but all aspects of the musical

tone itself. These included its overtone structure; its attack, or the degree of sharpness or imperceptibility of the sound's initiation; its duration; the manner in which it is sustained (vibrato, changes of tone color, etc.); and the slowness or rapidity of its decay. Defining these characteristics was not only difficult, particularly given the studio technology available in the early 1960s, but was tantamount to constructing the musical instrument itself, for these very aspects enable the ear to differentiate between, for example, the timbre of an oboe and that of a clarinet. The new medium also demanded attention to and was able to take advantage of the space in which the music was to be experienced, as sounds could now be passed rapidly back and forth between loudspeakers and made to surround the audience.

Davidovsky and other composers exploring the tape medium tended to emphasize those things that could be exploited in it that were impossible for—or at least much less congenial to—conventional instruments. Among these was a rapidity of articulation hitherto unknown to human performers as well as the ability to make precipitous and precise changes of volume and timbre. Such newfound capabilities had to be carefully balanced with the desire to build into the sound to the greatest degree possible the warmth that comes from the limitations and unique expressive sensibilities brought to bear by the human executant. This was all the more challenging because of the difficulty of creating a long, sustained, beautifully tuned electronic tone that could hold a listener's interest.

Ultimately for Davidovsky the best reconciliation of these contradictions, given the constraints imposed by the technology of the time, would prove to be the combination of one or more live performers with prerecorded sounds meticulously shaped by the mind, ears and hands of the composer. The performer(s) could lend human expressivity and, partly due to the added visual element, a sense of drama to the unvarying and potentially sterile experience of taped sound. For their part the electronic sounds could extend the physical limits of the instrument, altering its timbre and allowing it to do things that it, literally, physically could *not* do, creating, for example, in *Synchronisms* No. 6, the illusion of an isolated piano tone that could swell in volume.

An interesting by-product of this conjoining of live instrument and tape was the emergence of younger performers who increasingly were able to replicate to an amazing degree the quicksilver changes and extremes of velocity and volume associated with the electronic medium. Composers then began to demand this additional level of human virtuosity. The stage was now set for Davidovsky's return to writing for purely acoustic instruments, this time employing techniques learned in the electronic studio, such as the creation of hybrid instruments. For example, a sharp, loud attack on the piano, played on the keys but with the hand stopping the strings, masks an imperceptibly soft entrance on the same pitch by the clarinet. The clarinet in turn makes a crescendo as a violin enters, *senza vibrato*, once again on the same pitch, and so on. Thus is created a constantly evolving composite instrument. This imparts to many of Davidovsky's scores the sense of a continuously changing single line, which periodically thickens or thins out, sometimes blossoming into polyphony before contracting once again; it is also a line that is frequently interrupted, often in a very brusque manner, before being allowed to proceed. This sense of line is of course central to all the music that Davidovsky knew before his electronic sojourn, but it is a sense of line that has been transformed, expanded and enriched by his experiences in the tape studio. And this renewed and reconstructed sense of line is critical to understanding how what he knew

could once again count in a more direct way in his music. It is also crucial to understanding the first vocal work of his compositional maturity, the cantata *Scenes from Shir ha-Shirim* (1975), as well as the vocal works that followed it. Fittingly, Davidovsky's first verbal instruction in this cantata to the singers and the strings that are doubling their unison line reads as follows: "like one single continuous voice."

At age 17, Davidovsky read the Song of Songs (known in Hebrew as *Shir ha-Shirim*) for the first time, and its impact on him was immediate, powerful and lasting. As a sensitive and impressionable adolescent, he was simultaneously exhilarated and dispirited by, on the one hand, the poetry's representation of the ideal of pure love, and on the other, the impossibility of attaining that ideal. Thus the Song of Songs became for him a lifelong obsession, one that went hand in hand with an equal and ongoing fascination with questions of religion and the nature and meaning of existence—not to mention the nature and meaning of music itself. While he has often jested about the advantages of circumventing copyright issues by using public domain sources such as Biblical texts for vocal setting, it is clear from the white-hot intensity of his musical responses to them just how compellingly they speak to him.

The poem that Davidovsky had found so overpowering in his youth provided the perfect opportunity for him to return to composing for the human voice, an instrument he had always loved and whose greatest traditions he revered. While it can be argued that the fundamental impulse behind all of his music, electronic or otherwise, is a linear and lyrical one, he had for years refrained from writing vocal music, partly fearful that the musical language he had crafted for himself would prove unidiomatic for singers. Now the ancient biblical canticle would serve as a framework within which the composer could begin to effect the reintegration of his natural expressive tendencies with the new idiom he had had to create by, in part, denying those very tendencies, and the music would be further enriched.

In a sense, the desert atmosphere of the Song of Songs provides a perfect analog for Davidovsky's music in general: oases of sensuous beauty and passionate, if at times restrained, lyricism, surrounded and often threatened by a barren, harsh, potentially and often actually brutal landscape. Conjuring up such a landscape in *Scenes from Shir ha-Shirim* was complicated by the instrumentation specified by its commissioners, the New York Chamber Soloists. With its four solo strings, piano, percussion and woodwind trio, the composer frankly described this ensemble as being more redolent of "a Viennese café orchestra" than evocative of the sun-drenched, parched terrain he wished to suggest. His first task, therefore, was, in his words, to "destroy the ensemble," i.e., force it to function in ways that ran counter to its natural inclinations. For example, the piano is used exclusively as a provider or reinforcer of sharp attacks and as a resonator, eschewing its conventional role as soloist and chamber music partner. Similarly the strings are rarely employed in their customary *espressivo* fashion; as often as not, they are neutralized, playing *senza vibrato*, muted, combining with the voices or other instruments to form composite timbres. They are used percussively as well, as is evident in the various degrees of pizzicato required, and the use of special effects such as striking the strings with the wooden part of the bow.

One of the first things from Davidovsky's musical past to resurface in this work is his love of the medieval and Renaissance music he had discovered years earlier as a chorister. Tangy

sonorities, such as the nasal, shawm-like quality of the oboe, handheld percussion instruments, such as tambourine, finger cymbals, triangle, that the singers are asked to play, and the use of two tenors in extreme falsetto, in a manner that often makes them sound like countertenors, are only some of the more obvious manifestations of this affinity. Many of these characteristics are also found in Middle Eastern music, which also seems to be strongly evoked here. The metallic sonorities Davidovsky synthesizes from this band of instruments also recall those he learned to create in the electronic studio.

The unison D at the work's outset acts as a pitch anchor that will recur in this movement and at the beginning of the last and initiates the *exordium*. This term refers to the practice common in settings of, among other texts, the Lamentations of Jeremiah, from medieval chant through Renaissance masters such as Lassus, in which the title of the work is itself set to music, often fairly elaborately, before the main text commences. With the upper three vocal parts and muted strings, all without vibrato, and the two tenors in falsetto, Davidovsky alchemizes an otherworldly, sexless yet oddly sensuous choral sonority for his introit, out of which the solo soprano is gradually allowed to emerge to begin the poem proper. During this ensemble *incipit*, the voices indulge in yet another medievalism, a springing, short-long triplet rhythmic figure that lends an almost dance-like quality to the passage. Throughout the work the vocal lines are preeminent, the instruments acting upon them in much the same way that electronic sounds act upon instrumental ones in the *Synchronisms*: amplifying, modifying, shading and extending. In keeping with Davidovsky's youthful realization, gleaned from his initial encounter with the poem, that "love is impossible"—at least in this ideal state—, the listener may throughout the course of the three movements detect a gradual darkening in the overall tone of the setting. And, in the final movement, added later and dedicated to the memory of the composer's sister Clara, the music is pared down to absolute essentials. After striking the same unison D that initiated the first movement, the instruments immediately drop out to reveal the soprano soloist, who sings the poignant opening words of the third chapter, to a melodic line that is motivically similar to that of her first solo appearance in the entire work. Instrumental support is kept to a bare minimum—gone are the bright shards of percussion and the restless manipulation of constantly mutating timbres. The cantata's culmination is reached in its extraordinarily moving final bars, in which Davidovsky's vocal counterpoint is as pure, elegant and unimpeded as the sixteenth century polyphony that exerted such a profound influence on him as a student.

Davidovsky's next vocal work, *Romancero* (1983, Bridge 9097) took its texts from early anonymous Spanish poetry. In the *Biblical Songs* (1990) and *Shulamit's Dream* (1993), he has chosen English for his settings. In contrast to *Scenes from Shir ha-Shirim*, in which the singers alternate between articulating the voices of the lovers and making commentary, never settling into rigidly defined roles, the two English-language pieces on this recording have more of a sense of being dramatic monologues. This is especially true of his second major Song of Songs setting, *Shulamit's Dream*. Davidovsky has referred to the piece, dedicated to the memory of his mother, Perla Bulanska Davidovsky, as a kind of "mini-opera." Commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony, which premiered it with soprano Susan Narucki under the direction of Herbert Blomstedt, this work shows the composer reconnecting with another part of his musical heritage, his affinity with the lyrical modernist tradition of such composers as Berg and Dallapiccola. *Scenes from Shir ha-Shirim*, with its use of the ancient Hebrew language, spare textures and evocation of ancient music, now

strikes Davidovsky as perhaps embodying a purer, more innocent vision of the poem. *Shulamit's Dream*, on the other hand, with its luminous orchestral brilliance, greater harmonic opulence, and at times more languorous sensuality, projects a more knowing, if no less impassioned, approach. One need only compare the restrained, chaste beauty of the final movement of the earlier cantata with the setting of the very same text in movement two of *Shulamit's Dream*. In the latter the anxiety of the lover ("I sought him, the one I love") is made palpable in the nervous repetitions of the vocal line and the relentlessly agitated orchestral writing, in contradistinction to the understated grief of the former. The difference between the two settings is in many ways as great as that between treatments of the same words by a Renaissance composer and a late Romantic composer, and yet both belong unmistakably to Davidovsky. The radically abrupt, vividly dramatic changes of color, texture and dynamics are orchestral descendants of many similar gestures in his electronic pieces, but in a new expressive context. Even the lush, almost Wagnerian harmony in the first movement, just before "his hands like rods of gold set with beryl," is handled in masterful, Davidovskian fashion. Articulated first by the full string orchestra and horns, it is rudely interrupted by low piano, trombones and percussion, only to return abruptly, this time scored for a quartet of solo strings. In common with *Scenes from Shir ha-Shirim*, the entire work ends with the unaccompanied solo voice (as indeed do all three works on this disk), and the soprano's final statement of the main motive of the piece concludes with the same E \flat (here spelled D \sharp) as did the earlier work.

The *Biblical Songs*, composed with the aid of a Meet the Composer/Reader's Digest commission for a consortium headed by the Dallas-based ensemble Voices of Change, begins with still another, more intimate setting of a passage from the Song of Songs, this time dedicated to the composer's wife Elaine. Opening with a constantly mutating composite instrumental sonority initiated by a middle C struck quietly on the piano, a first high point is reached at the words "there I will give you my love," accompanied by the two strings, who at the peak of their crescendo suddenly add vibrato. This climax does not really subside, but is immediately replaced by the coolly sensuous, exotic roudades of alto flute and clarinet, reminiscent of the quasi-medieval figuration of portions of *Scenes from Shir ha-Shirim*, as the soprano sings of the fragrance of mandrakes and all manner of "pleasant fruits." Anxious *tremolandi* and trills in strings and woodwinds reinforce the exhortation for the beloved to "make haste, swift as a gazelle," before the return of the calm lyricism of the beginning.

The second song, "And Samson said..." bears a dedication to Davidovsky's daughter Adriana, and is by far the most straightforward song from a rhythmic standpoint. That quality, along with playful reiterations of words and syllables ("with with the the jawbone bone") and the optional repeat of the main body of the piece, recall a hallowed tradition of children's songs based on rather grim, bloody events, in this case Samson's dispatch of "a thousand men." Oddly, even this relatively innocent piece cannot, for this listener at least, completely escape its composer's tape studio heritage: the syllabic repetitions mentioned above recall, at least slightly, the use of electronic reverb.

Psalm 137, the apotheosis of lament in exile, is the dramatic core of the *Biblical Songs*. The unaccompanied vocal line that begins the song ends with a crescendo, and the players, instructed to match each other, again "like one single instrument," continue the line, which

they periodically shade and highlight as the piece progresses. After its outburst at “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” the vocal part reverts to Hebrew for the passage that begins “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither away.” It is a withdrawal into the comfort of the ancient tongue, as if the anguish is too much to express otherwise. The final cry for God’s vengeance against the Babylonian captors is the climax of the entire cycle, and is no less hairraising for the extraordinary instrumental economy with which it is achieved.

After the palpably horrific violence of the end of *Psalm 137*, with its bloodthirsty vision of retribution against Babylon the destroyer, *Isaac’s Blessing*, dedicated to the composer’s son Matias, is by far the most serene, unperturbed setting in the cycle, in keeping with the more bucolic imagery of the text. Uncharacteristically for Davidovsky, the piano is given a somewhat more prominent role, in contrast to its usual task of contributing to the composite color of the ensemble, and once again, the voice, the true single line, has the final word, unadorned by the other instruments.

One of Mario Davidovsky’s most strongly held convictions is that art has a greater purpose than entertainment or indulging in clever aesthetic games. He has spoken of the “transcendental, profound wish that someone is served.” In other words, he wishes to engage the listener in the deepest and most powerful way, and to give him or her something of real value. In order to accomplish this, he had to question all that he knew, in many ways leaving it totally, if only temporarily, behind, to explore not only the very nature of music, but that of sound itself. As he learned to build sound from the ground up, so to speak, in the electronic studio, he gradually heightened the expressive capabilities of both synthesized and humanly produced sounds as he combined them in ever new and fresh ways, creating in the process an enriched concept of musical line. It is this sense of line—enhanced, refreshed and transformed—which, when wedded to the essentially vocal and lyrical propensity that is the true heart of Davidovsky’s musical personality, has given rise to some of the most beautiful music of our time.

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