

The Synchronisms of Mario Davidovsky – Eric Chasalow (February 2021)

This album captures part of the singular contribution of composer, Mario Davidovsky (1934 – 2019) – his twelve *Synchronisms*, scored for instruments and electronic sounds and composed between 1962 and 2006. Musicians are drawn to this music due to its amazing detail, intimacy, warmth, intensity, humor and, ultimately, elegance. For those of us privileged to have known Mario, this sense is amplified by our experience of his generosity, intellect, and humanity. Davidovsky's music is personal and idiosyncratic, but it is also accessible and compelling and deserves to be more widely known. It is my hope that this valentine from Ensemble Phoenix will help make that so.

Commenting on an early example of Mario Davidovsky's electronic music in the 1960's, Karlheinz Stockhausen declared, "I feel that after hearing this piece I am no longer the same person as before." But what is it about Davidovsky's electronic music that inspired a renowned and experienced composer to make such a statement? Stockhausen was actually expressing a reaction that many, many musicians have had. As a college student in the 70's, studying flute and composition, when I first heard *Synchronisms No 1* for flute and electronic sounds, my sense of what music could be changed. It used electronic sounds to create new kinds of phrases that were both sophisticated and sensitive. And I was surprised that someone had found a way to integrate instruments with tape sounds that was free of the crude electronic clichés that we had come to expect.

How then, can this music be at once so sensuous and beautiful yet so complex? Technically speaking, part of the answer lies in a new way of integrating musical elements. Davidovsky has actually created a new counterpoint of musical time and acoustical space. His early years of intensive electronic music experience focused his ear on details of sound so that the progression of the timbre layer becomes a player in the musical narrative. While timbre has been an elevated concern of composers over at least the past one hundred years, Davidovsky discovered how to completely integrate timbre so that it motivates each phrase. It is this convincing interplay of subtle details that permeates Davidovsky's music and completely engages the careful listener.

Like any artist as impactful as Mario, he had to invent himself – a job he relished. The majority of the work in realizing the *Synchronisms* took place with the primitive technology in the classic tape studio. When my wife, Barbara Cassidy and I interviewed Davidovsky in 1996 for the Video Archive of Electroacoustic Music, he compared being in that studio to finding yourself in the desert with nothing but a knife and a jug of water and having to find your way out. This kind of metaphor is classic Mario – down to earth and direct, but also poetic.

In that constrained environment, where each tiny sound was cut out with a razor blade and spliced to the next, it was necessary to find exactly what one *could* control to shape musical phrases. As the *Synchronisms* pieces themselves make clear, and as Mario often explained,

the envelope characteristics – that is, the attack, sustain, and decay of each sound – were key. A phrase could now open up or find closure not just through a series of pitches, but also through a succession of different attacks, from very hard and abrupt to ones so gradual that notes gently appear out of silence. A succession of widely varying articulations can shape a *motive* that can be developed over the course of an entire piece. Moreover, the live and electronic sounds could modulate one another and become something totally new, joined in one expanded acoustical space; a kind of musical virtual reality. 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.

The *Synchronisms* were each written with specific players in mind. In a sense, Mario considered the conception of each piece collaborative, intimate and personal. His inspiration for each involved imagining the instrumental possibilities as realized by his close friends within the somewhat small circle of virtuoso interpreters of contemporary music in New York City at that time. For example, *Synchronisms No 1*, was the chance to collaborate with his friend and colleague, the composer-flutist, Harvey Sollberger. According to Mario, Harvey taught him what the flute could be and this discovery helped him shape the piece. Other examples include *Synchronisms No 6*, composed for pianist, Bob Miller, 9 for violinist Rolf Schulte, 10 for David Starobin, and the final two, 11 for bassist, Don Palma, and 12 for clarinetist, Allen Blustine.

The first three *Synchronisms* form an opus of their own as Davidovsky discovered what was possible in this new medium. After the first, for flute, came one for a quartet of flute, clarinet, violin, and 'cello – a wonderful yet infrequently-performed piece with both an expanded palette and increased energy. The third is once again for solo instrument - this time the 'cello. The nature of the 'cello *Synchronisms* will feel familiar to anyone having heard the first two. They all share a preoccupation with leaps in register as a means of distinguishing different timbres, not just as a way of separating contrapuntal voices. They move quickly, circulating episodes of contrasting energy. Some parts feature solo while others include tape enhancement. With the 'cello, the solo music can also take advantage of a wide variety of different modes of articulation including pizzicato and sul ponticello, so that even the solo passages are enlivened by constantly shifting timbres. When tape joins in, it does so to expand on an already heightened reality. In hindsight, we find embedded in the first three *Synchronisms* the seeds of the territory Davidovsky would explore to the end of this series of pieces and, to an extent, throughout his career.

In *Synchronisms 4* and *5* we find Davidovsky exploring ensembles once again. Number four, for men's chorus, has been withdrawn. Number 5 for percussion ensemble, on the contrary, is beloved and often programmed. *Synchronisms No. 5* is scored for a broad range of instruments, including several batteries of timpani employed to create a counterpoint of sustained "singing" textures, the pitches gradually sliding up and down using the pedals. The piece starts with a long ensemble passage establishing the language and landscape of the piece before tape enters. After this long absence, listeners have likely ceased waiting for the tape entrance, and when it does finally begin, it feels completely natural, making its expansion of the sound-world better integrated and even more astonishing. To open this way would not have been an obvious choice and in it we see just how careful was Davidovsky's

choreographic process as he conceived of each work.

By the time Mario composed his Pulitzer Prize winning, *Synchronisms No 6* in 1970, his vocabulary was well established. “I got my chops in that piece”, he told me. In this virtuosic piece, which is my personal favorite, the musical ideas can only really be expressed by this combination of instruments - physical and virtual. A mercurial interplay of alternately fragile and brutal piano sounds is modulated by the electronic sounds. Structurally, there is a momentum built up by cross-cutting among sections of contrasting musical time – sometime fast moving, at other times slow to static. While earlier pieces are also comprised of sections with alternating states of energy, *Synchronisms No. 6*, achieves this with a new level of distillation – a perfection of the technique. The simplicity of the materials in this piece allows a greater clarity and directness of expression, intensifying the feeling of expectation that pulls the listener along. Ultimately, the experience seems paradoxical. The form is clear and concise, yet somehow it all feels surprising and inevitable at once – even after multiple listenings.

The simplicity of the motivic material in *Synchronisms No.6* is central to its overall clarity. It is music of great economy; nothing is wasted, every detail is rich with possibility. Here, the natural envelop of the piano, with its limited range of attack possibilities - mostly fast and fairly hard - is the point of departure. The piece opens boldly. We hear a single G in a weak register struck by the pianist. It is an oddly unpianistic gesture and a bit unsettling. As the note naturally dies away it is surreptitiously picked up in the tape which crescendos and leads to another attack point in the piano part. It sounds as if the piano is making the crescendo, which is surprising, delightful, and potentially, in the hands of a lesser composer, a gimmick. In *Synchronisms No. 6* however, something more profound takes place. In addition to the attractive sleight 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 crescendo 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. We hear numerous variants of this material re-invented again and again. When the opening motive returns much later in the piece, at pitch, Davidovsky seizes the opportunity to create a classical period structural moment. This time, the G is, surprisingly, voice-led to A, disrupting the strong sense of return and creating a “false recapitulation”. The problem of how to employ such Beethovenian structural moves in a completely new context was something Davidovsky thought about throughout his life, and in *Synchronisms No. 6* he found totally convincing solutions.

The next two *Synchronisms* were composed for ensemble – No. 7 for Pierre Boulez and the New York Philharmonic in 1973 and No. 8 for the Dorian Wind Quintet in 1974. Davidovsky felt that the orchestra piece was a failure, disappointed by what he perceived as the impossibility of blending his electronic sounds with the orchestra in one space. Perhaps this accelerated his move away from the studio following *Synchronisms No. 8*, but he was

already starting to shift his focus to instrumental music. The attention he received writing for instruments and tape had helped in establishing his reputation and he easily could have spent the rest of his career writing more *Synchronisms*. The very thought of that future made him eager to move beyond what he already had mastered. His intensive experience in the studio, however, had a profound effect on all the music to follow. Davidovsky's ear was now focused on the micro-details as each sound compounded with the next and evolved into a phrase. We can hear this attention to detail throughout his catalog, no matter the forces employed.

Davidovsky completed many commissioned works for ensemble without electronics in the years following 1974 and it was not until 1988 that he returned to the studio. By the time he set out to compose *Synchronisms No. 9*, for violin and tape, digital studios had mostly replaced analog. Rather than learning the new technology, he collaborated with a composer-technician who created the sounds under his direction, a practice he followed all the way through the final piece, *Synchronisms No. 12*. With the ease of digital recording, *Synchronisms No. 9* is also the start of the use of instrument samples along with purely synthesized sounds in his tape parts.

Synchronism No. 9 presented an opportunity to expand the conceptual framework of the earlier pieces, incorporating new kinds of material and new relationships between instrument and electronics. While the primary focus was still on how electronics could expand upon instrumental reality, Davidovsky also began to embrace the differences inherent in the live and pre-recorded forces. Having been a violinist as a young man, the composer reached into memory to invoke Ysaÿe and others of the late Romantic violin tradition. Idiomatic violin writing is now integrated with Davidovsky's arsenal of means to create electronic continuity, but also in some episodes to set the violin apart. In an example of integration, the chorale texture prominent as the piece begins carefully emphasizes the open strings of the violin, with doublings at extreme octaves and harmonics. This serves to subsume the violin into the tape. As the piece progresses, rapid arpeggiation, reminiscent of the late Romantic virtuoso tradition becomes more and more frequent, ultimately forming the climax. In these later passages, the fast percussive tape textures so familiar from the early *Synchronisms* stand apart from the violin, less fused and more distinct; more like lines of counterpoint provided by a second instrument.

Synchronisms No. 10 for guitar shows just how much Davidovsky was able to achieve in response to a new set of challenges by drawing on a combination of accumulated technique and an eagerness to engage in meaningful collaboration. The piece was commissioned by long-time friend, David Starobin. Admittedly ignorant of the range of instrumental possibilities, Davidovsky enlisted Starobin's help to purchase a classical guitar and learn enough to experience the physicality of performing on the instrument. He worked with great care and diligence, unravelling all of timbral and technique complexities to be able to incorporate them into his thinking. The resulting composition embodies an expansive and flexible view of the guitar, eschewing the dynamic limitations. As in earlier works, Davidovsky's imagination turns those limitations to possibilities. Like *Synchronisms No. 5*, *No. 10* starts with a very long solo before the tape enters. According to guitarist, Dan Lippel,

Even if Davidovsky had not written the final section of the piece with tape and guitar, the solo introduction of *Synchronisms #10* would stand as one of the most important works for the instrument of the last twenty years. Within this introduction, Davidovsky addresses several of the most pressing issues confronting composers writing for guitar, including achieving registral distinction, sustaining notes beyond their attack, and achieving significant dynamic and gestural contrast. Once the tape finally arrives, it picks up where the introduction has left off, extending the instrument's capacities even further.¹

The opening motive of *Synchronisms No. 10* might be viewed as combining the thinking of No. 6 and 9. The flourish that opens and permeates this piece is made of the repetition of one pitch three times in rapid succession. Davidovsky told me that this gesture was so embedded in the guitar repertoire that it has become a cliché and this memory was something he thought he could exploit. When we hear it, it immediately screams “guitar” The motive also incorporates the alternation of short and long notes found in the piano *Synchronisms* and foregrounds the acoustical problem both instruments share – that neither can sustain notes. Each articulation dies away quickly. The issue, first addressed with piano, is even more of a challenge with guitar. Unlike the piano though, guitar has a wide range of different kinds of articulation and these Davidovsky exploits to the maximum throughout this inventive and motivically saturated piece.

In the years leading up to his seventieth birthday in 2004, I began a campaign to convince Mario that he really did have more to say in the instrument and tape medium all the while assembling a consortium of his friends and former students to arrange a commission. Just about the time that I was beginning to think my efforts had been futile, Mario called to say that he would accept the commission on one condition – that he compose two pieces rather than one. What I had not realized was that years before he had promised pieces to bassist, Donald Palma and clarinetist, Allan Blustine. A consortium of universities ultimately did come together under the umbrella of the Society of Electro-Acoustic Music in the US (SEAMUS) and made it happen.

The tape part for *Synchronisms No. 11* was completed at the studio of University of Texas, Austin and No. 12 at Rice University. In addition to having been both composed in Texas, these two pieces share an even greater lyricism and economy than the previous pieces in the series. The vocabulary is familiar, with long pure tones and short percussive flurries of attacks, but there is also a sense of a more transparent long line extending from start to finish. Number 11 starts with the purity and beauty of bass harmonics – very much like the slightly enriched sine waves in the tape. Both fusion and counterpoint are in evidence, with the tape often using bass samples to create counterpoint with the live instrument. In spite of the presence of lots of lightly modified bass samples in the tape part, many of the lines are not far removed in effect from those orchestrated electronically in earlier *Synchronisms*.

When Davidovsky completed the work on *Synchronisms No. 12*, for clarinet, he called to let me know how excited he was about the piece. “I know you think that the piano Synchronism is the best one”, he told me, “but this one is better”. I can't agree that *Synchronisms No. 12* is better than 6, though it is special. In earlier pieces, the tape and a fast progression of different

¹ Lippel, Daniel; “*Synchronisms #10 for guitar and Electronic Sounds and Festino: Seminal Works for Guitar for Mario Davidovsky*” (DMA diss, Manhattan School of Music. 2006), 48.

instrumental techniques seem to constantly be reshaping the instrument into a new form. In *Synchronisms No. 12* though, the clarinet starts and ends as its most lyrical and characteristic self. When listening to this piece, I often feel that I am hearing the same clarinet that Mozart wrote for with such love. The pure sonic beauty of the instrument remains center stage while the tape adds shifting overtones, grit, and density as the narrative progresses.

And yet, distinctive as it is, *Synchronisms No. 12* also sounds coherent with the other pieces in the series. Each one honors its instrument's basic characteristics, moving out to some expanded reality and back again. The last section of the very first *Synchronisms, No. 1*, in fact embraces the same lyricism we hear in No. 12, the final one. Following a loud, powerful and unmistakable climax, there is a silence and the entire affect of the piece begins to relax. The ensuing solo is the first time in the piece that we hear flute without tape and Davidovsky takes the time necessary to gradually release the compressed energy characterizing much of the piece. The passage is marked, "freely", and recapitulates all of the previous material, though now with a new-found restraint. We are returned to a more familiar notion of the flute - connected to its traditional sonic beauty and focused on the breath of the performer, who has our undivided attention as we anticipate one final, magical gesture.

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