

Music for a Summer Evening

By Robert Commanday, July 20, 2004

Critics are often asked to name the living composers whom they favor. Some have a hard time because they favor so many, because their lists are so long. For me it's a problem of being picky. Of the countless composers in action today, of course I've only been privileged to hear a tiny fraction, but of them, my list of favorites is small indeed. Many admired, a lot respected, but few loved, a precious few.

I make no apologies for my pickyness. Bless those who love 'em all, but I want to spend my time with music that is fresh, original, bold -- yes, new, energized; but rooted in the music that has spoken to me most persuasively. Here are two whose music speaks that way, that I can listen to again and again, who rank high on my list. There are recordings, newly released, to satisfy that desire.

Mario Davidovsky, 70, Argentina-born, has lived since 1960 in the United States, teaching in leading institutions, highly honored. He fits in no mold, sets no stylistic path for others, represents no -ism, just produces exciting, beautiful music. The stream of truly musical ideas that comes from his wondrously creative prominence in the 1960s for compositions that combined electronically-created and live-performed music, Synchronisms. At that time, many others heard and followed the electronic call, but very few, Davidovsky in the lead, were "chosen," very few had the gift to use the new medium with real musicality. The medium, we learned soon enough, was not the message. It was still about music.

Davidovsky has since written much music for live performance on regular, acoustic instruments, and a fine representation of that has just appeared on a CD, *Salvos, Chamber Music of Mario Davidovsky* (Arabesque Recordings Z6777). The performances of the five works are by members of the Empyrean Ensemble, resident at UC Davis where the group was founded in 1988 by the composer Ross Bauer, conductor of this recording.

The CD begins with "Simple Dances" (1991-99), 6 little gems, surprising in their richness and variety. "Solo" features the flute (Tod Brody) in a lyric and dramatic, almost rhapsodic piece for flute with delicate partnering by cello and piano. The "Pas de Deux" indeed suggests dance of graceful phrasing as piano and percussion alternate in subtle duets with the flute. Vibraphone and marimba take the lead in "Introduction Waltz," light and scherzando, now supporting an alto flute. Initiated with a tolling bell, the alto flute still in the lead, "Sarabande" is a song-dance of haunting beauty, thoughts unfolding slow as dreaming. "Marsch" is a brief, dark, dry piece, a kind of cartoon, political perhaps (the title's spelling is the clue). It works with snapping cello pizzicato, sharp percussion strokes, differently colored. Finally, "Tango" develops into a suggestion of that dance, not Piazzolla, but a saucy characterization, the textures lively-- a Davidovsky trade mark.

Cantione sine Textu (2001) is an engrossing interchange of roles. The wordless singing of the estimable Susan Narucki interacts with the flute, clarinet, guitar and string bass, at times closely as pinching fingers, at times she "instrumentally" vocalizes staccato consonants. The bending and portamento of the singing line, like paint applied with single strokes of the thumb, put expressive dashes into the continuity and signs off the piece magically.

Quartetto (1987) (flute and string trio) with its bursts of energy, sudden shifts and flashes, is more direct and forceful. There are four connected sections, the last climactic and driving. The instruments use a most refined vocabulary of their playing techniques, not for effect but for particular expressive characterization. When they are playing in closely combined lines, the continuity is exquisite, at one point, even poignant.

Salvos, (1986), which gives the CD its title, is a sextet that sounds as though many more than six are playing. It's not just the doubling, the two kinds of flutes and clarinets, and the addition of harp to string trio and percussion. More tellingly, the enrichment comes from the imaginative scoring, the shifting colors and textures. Always there is the unexpected and delightful. Events occur that catch the ear as brief, flirtatious discoveries, like one moment when the clarinet and flute whisper together, and another when a succession of entries build a harmony from which emerges thread-like strands in close counterpoint. There is both unpredictability and rightness in this music. You are always asking, "Now what is he doing?" and then smiling as it unfolds.

Finally, the oldest work in the collection. *String Trio* (1982) is intensely focused music built on three kinds of initial ideas, chordal, melodic and rhythmic (passages of sharp, short elements or gestures). The music challenges, leads, soars, and builds, finding its own large shape and fulfillment. It fulfills itself and the listener. For all the above reasons and more that can be found in conductor Ross Bauer's exemplary program notes, the CD *Salvos* is our recommendation for Summer 2004 listening, and beyond. The excellent Empyrean performers are Tod Brody, flute, Peter Josheff, clarinet, Terri Baune, Ellen Ruth Rose and Thalia Moore, string trio, Karen Gottlieb, harp, Kenneth Piascik and Daniel Kennedy, percussion, Michael Goldberg, guitar and Thomas Derthick, double bass, conducted by the composer and founder of Empyrean, Ross Bauer.