

Argentine-American composer Mario Davidovsky (b. 1934) is a fearless sculptor of sound and a compositional commentator on the human condition. His music demonstrates a focused intensity on minute details and an uncanny sense of dramatic and structural balance. Two of Davidovsky's significant works involving guitar, *Synchronisms #10 for Guitar and Electronic Sounds* and *Festino*, are fine examples of the sophistication and profundity of his music, and they represent landmark additions to the contemporary guitar repertoire. This article briefly examines these two works and how they exemplify a few core characteristics of his style -- electronic music's role in transforming his musical palette, his unique approach to guitar composition, and his deeply personal treatment of motivic development and form.

As a young composer, Davidovsky's intense commitment to sonic truth drew him to the growing field of electronic music, as he developed tools to manipulate the most fundamental aspects of sound. In 1959, he joined a group of forward thinking composers in the newly formed Columbia - Princeton Electronic Music Center, eventually becoming this influential organization's director. Later in his career, the same obsession with the basic properties of sound led to an integration of electronics inspired techniques into his acoustic writing. Despite his clear role as a pioneer in the genre, labeling Mario Davidovsky an "electronic music composer" is misleading. Rewarding analysis of his work requires deep musical examination that goes beyond his chosen tools to the heart of his aesthetic goals. In a published interview, he addressed his attraction to the electronic medium.

"The genuine value in electronic music concerns such aspects as the control of dynamics in time. You can control a crescendo or a diminuendo in time with a precision that is not available anywhere else. If these elements happen to be of extreme importance in terms of what you are trying to articulate musically, then you can see why you better do it in the laboratory; people playing instruments simply couldn't do what is needed." ¹

Davidovsky's attraction to electronics is based on what the technology allows him to do with the musical material itself as opposed to an interest in technological innovation. His drive to have control over minute dynamic and articulation details is consistent with a general trend throughout the 20th century toward notational specificity, exemplified in the work of Boulez, Babbitt, and Carter, among others. Davidovsky had philosophical and aesthetic concerns about some of the potential implications of this new electronic presence in concert music.

"I did not write any purely electronic pieces after 1965. At that time, one of the many aspects of electronic music which I was bothered by was its elimination of the performer. I was rather philosophically bothered; I asked myself what would happen if music is going to be frozen and not subjected to any possible reinterpretation." ²

Electro-acoustic music, works with a live performer and electronic element, was the ideal genre for Davidovsky. It satisfied his interest in musical gestures that were liberated from the limitations of individual players while preserving the dynamism of live performance and the possibility for interpretative evolution. In order to further cement the organic integration between acoustic instruments and electronic sounds, Davidovsky used pre-recorded material generated from recordings of guitarist David Starobin, the dedicatee of the work, as the basis for the electronic part. Literally drawn from acoustic sounds, Davidovsky's compositional use of electronics here can be understood in three contexts: augmentation of an instrument's acoustic characteristics, creation of a composite instrument, and engagement with a chamber music style dialogue with the live performer.

¹ Mario Davidovsky, interview with Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras in *Soundpieces: Interviews with Composers*, London: The Scarecrow Press, 1982: 133.

² *Ibid.*, 134.

Ex. #1 *Synchronisms #10* – Entrance of electronics

Giusto ♩ = 60
intimo, espress.

pp gliss.

pppp

nobile

p

f *mf* *mp* *f* *mp* *p*

① VII
 ⑤ IX
 ② IX
 ⑤ XII

Always subverting expectations, Davidovsky waits until midway through *Synchronisms #10* for Guitar and Electronic Sounds to introduce the electronic part, and its entrance (Ex #1) is stealthy. Pitches articulated by the guitar are sustained in the tape part, as if caught in mid-air by an electronic bow, extending the guitar’s sustain and addressing one of the instrument’s most fundamental weaknesses, its quick decay. The accumulating chord hangs in the atmosphere until a cue in the tape part, a loud crash, and a Bartok pizzicato in the guitar mark the transition to the second half of the work.

At the climax of the piece, the electronics again sustain chords attacked in the guitar, this time with an intensifying hairpin *crescendo*. Paired with tight rhythmic coordination between performer and tape, the passage obscures the lines between live and pre-recorded material. This type of ensemble mechanism is central to Davidovsky’s aim of creating a composite instrument, or what he calls a “big guitar.”

Ex. #2 *Synchronisms #10* – Climactic passage

The musical score for Ex. #2 *Synchronisms #10* Climactic passage is written for two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The piece is in 3/4 time. The score begins with a *secco* marking and a dynamic of *f*. It then moves to *a tutta forza* with a dynamic of *ff*. The piece concludes with a *secco* marking. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. The bottom staff features several triplet markings (3) and a sextuplet (6). The dynamics range from *mf* to *ff*, with a *p sub.* marking. The piece ends with a *mf* dynamic.

Immediately after this climax, there is a reflective solo guitar soliloquy.

Ex. #3 *Synchronisms #10* Soliloquy-Chamber Dialogue

The long rest preceding the reentrance of the electronics allows the performer flexibility within the solo passage; they must respond to the electronics cue to sync up when it arrives. In the subsequent phrase, the guitar line bounces off of key rhythmic landmarks in the electronics (i.e. the offbeat electronics entrance in m. 258, the unison arrival on b. 2 of m. 262, or the last 8th note of m. 266) not unlike how one might respond to another voice in an ensemble work. Once a performer has internalized these cues, there is a subtle degree of freedom in these passages. This freedom allows for the spontaneity that makes live performance so dynamic – an element that Davidovsky was careful to preserve. These three examples give a broad sense of how the electronics function in Davidovsky’s *Synchronisms* series – as an augmentation of an acoustic instrument’s properties, integrated into a composite texture that blurs the lines between acoustic and electronic, and in a “dialogue” with the live performer.

In many of his recent purely acoustic chamber works, Davidovsky aimed to integrate characteristic electronic gestures back into his instrumental writing. Principal among these efforts is his continued interest in creating a composite instrument – this time out of the different components of the acoustic ensemble. Written in 1994 for the New York based *Speculum Musicae* ensemble (with David Starobin on guitar), *Festino* constructs a versatile and quirky hybrid instrument. A *festino* is “basically like a serenade, an entertainment, a fiesta,” drawn from the *commedia dell’arte* tradition.³ Davidovsky intentionally selected middle and low register instruments (viola, cello, double bass, guitar), writing virtuosic material for this slightly clumsy quartet, and drawing out the comic side of the *festino* character.

“To a certain extent, I think that the trio with the guitar is very often playing at the margins...to create that kind of hybrid, huge guitar, or big percussive ensemble...a crazy ensemble.”⁴

³ Mario Davidovsky, interview by author, 15 March 2006, New York

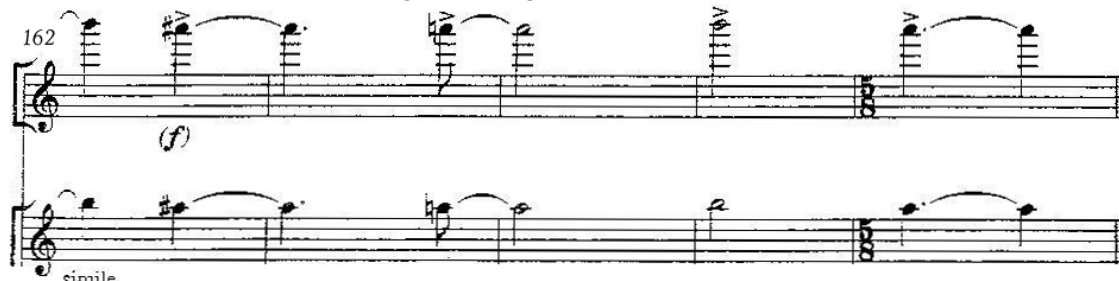
⁴ Mario Davidovsky, interview by author, 15 March 2006, New York

In *Festino*, we find some of the same timbral analogs that Davidovsky used in the *Synchronisms* work. The string trio expands the dynamic and extends the sustain of the guitar, creating composite ensemble mechanisms with pops, clicks, and unorthodox means of sound production. The string trio has essentially stepped into the role that the electronics were playing in *Synchronisms #10*. In his liner notes for Bridge Records, annotator Martin Brody observes this reciprocal relationship between Davidovsky's electronic writing and his acoustic composition.

"In his purely instrumental chamber works, Davidovsky has also developed a repertory of orchestrational analogs to electronic techniques, for example, simulating the technique of spliced tape by grafting together dramatically different instrumental attacks and sustains--e.g. a sharp, loud, and short (often pizzicato) event in one or more instruments that triggers a sustained (often soft) sound in another. Such composite sounds function not only as articulative nuances but as syntactical elements themselves."⁵

Similar to the opening of the electronics section in *Synchronisms #10*, there are passages in *Festino* where the bowed string instruments extend the guitar's quick decay. The viola and guitar play unison attacks with the viola sustaining the pitch, creating a new "orchestrational analog" to use Brody's term.

Ex. #4 *Festino* - Orchestrational analog between guitar and viola



The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is for guitar, starting at measure 162. It features a series of sharp, short attacks (pizzicato) on a single note, each marked with a 'p' and a 'v' above it. The bottom staff is for viola, marked 'simile' and 'f'. It shows a sustained, soft attack of the same note, with a 'v' above it. The two parts are aligned to show the viola's sustain extending the guitar's quick decay.

Events in one instrument often trigger others in the ensemble, creating a quirky rhythmic machine (a la Rube Goldberg).

Ex. #5 *Festino* - Rhythmic ensemble machine

⁵ Martin Brody, liner notes to *Mario Davidovsky's Flashbacks*, Bridge 9097, 2000, compact disc

The image shows a musical score for measures 98 and 99. It consists of four staves: Violin (V), Viola (v), Cello (c), and Bass (b). Measure 98 is marked with a 4/8 time signature. The Violin staff has a *pizz.* marking above the first half and an *ord.* marking above the second half. The Viola staff has a *pizz.* marking above the first half and a *puntal.* marking above the second half. The Cello staff has a *pizz.* marking above the first half and a *col legno batt.* marking above the second half. The Bass staff has a *pizz.* marking above the first half and an *arco* marking above the second half. Dynamics include *pp* (pianissimo) in the first half of all staves, *p* (piano) in the second half of the Violin and Viola staves, and *mf* (mezzo-forte) in the second half of the Bass staff. Other markings include *short* in the Cello staff and *Sul E spicc.* in the Bass staff.

On beat 4 of the 4/8 bar in m. 98, the guitar *pizzicato* triggers the viola's 32nd notes, which then catalyzes the cello ricochet bowing, leading into the *crescendo* on the sustained note in the bass, and culminating in the *forte* arrival between guitar and bass on the last 32nd note of the bar. The timing and tautness of this passage owe a debt to Davidovsky's electronic works, and when executed well, there is a slapstick, mechanistic quality to the sound of instruments bouncing off one another. That slapstick character is *a propos* to the expressive underpinnings of the piece. That Davidovsky also plumbs the emotional world beneath the clown's mask is what makes this piece so compelling.

In a passage later in the piece, the viola and guitar are again paired, but another layer of activity in the guitar part is linked with extended percussive techniques in the cello, creating a stratified hybrid texture.

Ex. #6 *Festino* – Multi-layered motivic texture

The quirky rhythmic triggers between cello and guitar occupy a contrasting expressive world from the expansive *tutti* line between the viola and guitar. All the while, the bass intones a line in a third, more romantic character. Davidovsky's interest in creating a hybrid instrument gives him the opportunity to compose a complex and multi-layered expressive landscape. The presence of many strata of material and expression reflects his interest in capturing the multi-dimensional nature of human thought and identity.

“We are often thinking of several things at once, bouncing back and forth between different ideas. And we are many different people, both to ourselves and to others.”⁶

Davidovsky's music throws all of these ideas and personalities into the ring together, not unlike how we as human beings must integrate these disparate aspects of ourselves in our own lives. These ideas inform his approach to motivic development and narrative shape. In both *Synchronisms #10* and *Festino*, motives go through a journey in the composition and are subjected to transformation and synthesis with contrasting material. Sometimes they appear in multi-layered textures like the passage in Example #6. Other times they are developed or emerge in a new tempo context. Speaking about the basis for his approach to motivic development, Davidovsky references Beethoven.

“I try to make a statement in a similar manner to how Beethoven would present a theme in a symphony--very consistent and cohesive and natural and elegant. In my case, I will construct that kind of statement out of motives that are essentially very different from each other. You could say that each of those motives have their own implied rhythm, their own implied harmony, even their own character. Then what I do, more or less looking back at Beethoven, is to take those motives, and actually generate a different piece of music. Instead of constructing voice leading, I will develop a strata. You could say that Carter does stratification, but the difference is that Elliott seems to talk about each instrument as a different person. In a way, my case involves one person telling four stories--the one person is the remnant of the voice leading. What I like to think I do is that each of those motives develops their own trajectory. Even though they might seem completely unrelated, eventually the four voices come together. Let's go back to the bunch of motives that I have in my theme, one is sweet, etc. As the process of the piece begins, take the sweet guy; rework the material in such a way that it becomes bitter. The next time, go back and make it dancing and funny. What I like to do expressively is take all of these motives that have a certain character and make them imitate every character that exists in the *commedia dell'arte* so to speak.”⁷

For Davidovsky, motives represent sides of ourselves, and his pieces take us on a journey where our many identities rub against one another, clash, and transform.

⁶ Mario Davidovsky, interview by author, 15 March 2006, New York

⁷ Mario Davidovsky, interview by author, 15 March 2006, New York

Ex. 7 *Festino* coda: Earlier primary motives co-exist

The musical score for Ex. 7, *Festino* coda, consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 301-302) features a treble clef staff with dynamics *f* and *p*, and a bass clef staff with dynamics *mf* and *pp*. The second system (measures 303-304) features a treble clef staff with dynamics *mp*, *pp*, and *f fff*, and a bass clef staff with dynamics *pp*, *mp*, and *ff*. The score includes various articulations such as *sul pont.*, *arco*, *ord.*, *secco*, *on side with flat fingers*, *a tutta forz*, *pizz.*, and *col legno batt.*. Fingerings (3, 6) and slurs are also present.

In this example from the coda of *Festino*, two of the primary motives from earlier in the work bleed into one another -- skittish triplet material gives way to a whimsical passing of the main motive through the ensemble. Not unlike the indigenous music of his home country, Argentine tango, Davidovsky's music constantly vacillates between elegance and restraint, melodrama, and wry humor. He acknowledges his restless nature -- "I have this kind of valve inside, it's almost automatic inside myself. I am always two places at the same time, or nowhere, ever. Theologically, on the side that I am on, ambiguity... white and black are simultaneous."⁸

Davidovsky's in-depth involvement as a pioneer in electronic music and in late 20th century modernism are ultimately tools in service of this restless artistic voice. Beethoven was a product of the ethos of his time; the ecstasy and elation of Enlightenment thinking manifest themselves in his bold, confident structures. The late 20th and early 21st century is a decidedly more neurotic age, as our awareness of the relative nature of human and cultural experience, our global interconnectedness, and dire threats to the sustainability of human civilization have tempered our understanding of the individual and its relationship to the communal. Davidovsky's music is at once wildly dramatic, yet carefully balanced; temporally experimental, yet demonstrative of classical structure; sonically avant-garde, yet gesturally traditional. These contradictions are at the core of his artistic response to living in an age of ambivalence. It is precisely his courage in tackling the

⁸ Mario Davidovsky, interview by author, 15 March 2006, New York

ambiguous nature of modern life and his capacity to embody it in his music that make him an important artist for our time.