

On the Recent Activities of Mario Davidovsky John Halle

One year ago, Mario Davidovsky accepted a position at Harvard University, bringing to a close his tenure as Fritz Reiner Professor of Music at Columbia where he had been serving since the early sixties. While Davidovsky has appropriately been identified with the academy, it would be a mistake to assume that his influence does not extend much further. Numerous institutional affiliations including seats on various foundations boards and the artistic directorships of several performance groups have given Davidovsky a considerable measure of control over the higher profile new music series and ensembles in New York. By extension his tastes have done much to determine what the public identifies as the basic sound of contemporary music and for this reason, much general commentary on the state of contemporary music is implicitly directed at Davidovsky's aesthetic agenda. However, owing to the "stealth" nature of Davidovsky's activities (the composition of these boards is often not made public, and their deliberations, never) and his preferred mode of operation (covert), commentators are not aware that what they are responding to in new music programming is in fact, Davidovsky's perspective on what constitutes "serious" composition which, even in comparison to his ideological cohorts is a narrow one.

It might seem odd, particularly to Europeans, that a composer would go out of his way to acquire so many bureaucratic responsibilities which could only impinge on the time needed to function as one of America's most in demand composers. What explains this enthusiastic embrace of what many artists would consider odious is the fact that Davidovsky has bigger fish to fry than obtaining performances of his own work. Even among the institutional academic modernist community Davidovsky is known for a hard line with respect to deviance from the traditional modernist canon and he will pursue what he sees as deviance with an unrelenting zeal. Furthermore, he regards himself as a lone voice in the wilderness standing up for virtue in the face of an onslaught from all manner of musical degeneracy, barbarism and immorality.

A profile in last February's New York Times is revealing in these respects. According to the article, Davidovsky "knows what he likes and he doesn't like much." Surprisingly, given his long residence in

academia, the basic principle underlying Davidovsky's catholic tastes is strikingly anti-intellectual: what he doesn't like is not bad music per se but what he regards as bad kinds of music such as "minimalism" or "neo-Romanticism." Having consigned these to the flames, Davidovsky is spared the trouble of actually developing standards for evaluating musical quality rather than simply classifying pieces according their musical "camp." Davidovsky is clearly neither interested in nor prepared to deal with sticky but interesting problems which arise when attempts are made to relate musical style and musical substance. Rather he prefers ad hominem attacks on composers' "ethics" and "compositional responsibility" which he takes to be intimately connected not with musical quality, craft, or seriousness of intention, but trivially with the musical style of which a given piece is representative. Accordingly, this means that those working within Davidovsky's approved genre, namely, academic modernism, are attempting, when successful, to advance a "spiritual dimension . . . in striv(ing) after hard-won and transcendent human excellence." Those laboring within other genres, no matter how talented or capable, are derided as "derivative and unimaginative." By not "being worthy of (their) heritage" these artists are accused by "the charming gadfly" Davidovsky of "artistic immorality."

Two other aspects of this diatribe disguised as a puff piece also deserve mention here, not so much for the light they shed on the substance of Davidovsky's beliefs, but for tactics he will make use of in acting on them. One is the Stalinist omission of the names of the objects of his wrath leaving all potential deviants in fear of their ultimate punishment: a hoped-for commission will disappear, an academic job interview will mysteriously vanish, or tenure will be denied. Second, in a profile which ostensibly celebrates a thirty year tenure, many spent as chairman of his academic department, Davidovsky makes no reference to the current state of Columbia program which he played a decisive role in building up. The impression left is that even his hand-picked successors have "gone wet" and cannot be trusted to carry out his "rigorous" legacy. The message is that those who expect to benefit from Davidovsky's largesse in the future will toe the line with even greater vigilance.

As the article demonstrates, Davidovsky is passionate about what he believes and one senses from his inflammatory rhetoric that he will take no prisoners in pursuing his aesthetic agenda. However, the article is misleading in portraying Davidovsky as "a mischievous

iconoclast" whose chosen form of musical expression "is lost or surviving in very small quantities" on the periphery of New York's new music community. In fact, Davidovsky influence is as decisive as the music which he champions is pervasive. And if Davidovsky bemoans the "very small quantities" of new music performances which meet his specifications, he only has himself to blame. As we shall see, much of the most visible new music performed in New York is a result of Davidovsky's direct or indirect connivance. And, more importantly, much new music which is consigned to the margins, performed by unknown ensembles in obscure performance spaces, is often relegated to that status because of Davidovsky's (and his compatriot's) worm's eye view of what constitutes artistic seriousness.

As a minor player on Davidovsky's hit-list, I have apparent personal experience with the effects of Davidovsky's efforts to stifle that which he does not want to hear. I say apparent because the covert nature of Davidovsky's influence makes it generally impossible to know that he has struck. However, I have it on good authority that on the rare occasions when my head has popped up in his presence, he has taken the trouble to chop it off. For example, very recently my work was rejected a commission by a foundation on which Davidovsky is a board member. This is not uncommon for even the most prominent composers. What was less usual was, according to a participant, that my submission was simply passed over without being listened to, Davidovsky having led the consensus that my work was not within the officially approved "tradition" and not to be taken seriously. It is not paranoid to suspect that having been tarred with this brush, my scores and tapes have been and will be similarly treated by committees on which Davidovsky is not represented.

I have no idea how often Davidovsky's invisible hand has had an effect on my career in a similarly covert fashion. However, on another occasion Davidovsky slipped up and the stiletto left more of a scar than he was intending. This occurred at the Wellesley Composers' Conference to which I received a fellowship thanks to one of the guest composers that year, John Harbison. Davidovsky tolerated my presence for the two weeks, though his disapproval of my string quartet was made apparent in his contemptuous reference to the "boooogie woogie" bass line of the finale movement. Unfortunately for Davidovsky, the Conference offers a commission for one of the composing fellows and this commission is decided on

by a committee drawn from the amateur chamber music players who subsidize the conference in exchange for receiving coachings from the players in residence. The committee, according to one of the members, voted unanimously to award me the commission for the following year. Davidovsky was outraged at the choice, though I don't imagine he was surprised. My quartet, somewhat "tonal" and formally traditional, also bore the influence of various vernacular musics. These characteristics made the piece at least minimally comprehensible, especially in comparison to the "cognitive opacity" (to use Fred Lerdaahl's term) of much of what was offered up by the officially approved composers at the conference. Responding to these same characteristics, Davidovsky regarded the piece as a shameless capitulation to the debased impulses of the musical mob, probably "made more to fit a market than to continue ideas from the tradition." As director of the conference, he therefore felt impelled to act unilaterally in reversing the committee's irresponsible decision, awarding the commission instead to a composer who no doubt "strive(s) after hard-won and transcendent human excellence" and aspires to the highest "spiritual and redemptive" values.

While the \$5,000 commission would have been appreciated, this is, of course, a trivial matter and barely constitutes a blip on the screen on the larger musical picture. I mention it here because it demonstrates the lengths to which Davidovsky will go to stamp out musical expressions which he regards as ideologically suspect and this is by no means the only story of this type which has been circulated. Furthermore, for those who have gotten as far as the Wellesley Composers Conference one can assume many more who were discouraged by Davidovsky or his ideological compatriots installed at academic satellites throughout the country at much earlier stages, even before their music ever managed to see the light of day.

A postscript to this affair reveals Davidovsky's attitude in even starker relief: some years later, having confirmed the accuracy of my account, an acquaintance had occasion to ask Davidovsky for his version of events. He asked Davidovsky directly whether he went over the committee's head to deny me the commission. "Of course I did! We are not in the business of promoting that sort of music." was Davidovsky enthusiastic response. More tellingly, Davidovsky seemed surprised that his interlocutor was at all taken aback by his behavior. Davidovsky's Manichaeian musical world view takes for

granted a state of perpetual total war between where both sides will take any advantage in advancing their righteous ends. For Davidovsky, marginally unethical behavior in the service of "the good" is not just necessary, but an opportunity to be relished. Such is the impression left by these sorts of actions, of which my case is by no means an isolated example.

The flip side of Davidovsky purging of those whom he regards as ideologically suspect is his energetic, though always provisional advocacy of those composers who have accepted his rules of the game. To these winners go a particular set of spoils and here it is worth reiterating that Davidovsky's influence extends far beyond the academic circles with which he tends to be associated. For example, Davidovsky's advocacy is known to be decisive for obtaining the Guggenheim fellowship, one of the few grants which provides composers with a full year's support so that they may devote themselves full time to composition. Another is the Koussevitsky foundation which provides several commissions for composers each year and on which board Davidovsky serves, along with other like minded "senior figures." Then there is the American Academy of Arts and which disburses cash awards, commissions and recording grants. Davidovsky routinely sponsors several loyalists for these, as well. Then there are residencies at the Atlantic Center and Tanglewood to which Davidovsky has brought of some of his chosen students. Finally, there is the Wellesley Composer's Conference referred to earlier where a crack New York ensemble somehow is recruited to perform works by a carefully selected group in addition to coaching amateur chamber ensembles for ridiculously paltry compensation.

These commissions, awards, fellowships and performance opportunities constitute the Davidovsky pork-barrel. Then there is the Davidovsky patronage network which includes two wings: a national wing comprising a far flung though mercifully diminishing coterie of former students at academic music programs who attempt to obtain a tenureable professional profile largely by means of the pork doled out from the above list. Secondly, a local wing which includes positions in the Columbia-Princeton electronic music studio, administrative positions at the Reiner Center and the Miller Theater, and will include many others now that Davidovsky has expanded his power base to Harvard. In terms of influence, the local New York wing is arguably more significant, as these positions provide a means for composers to live and work in what is still the

world's musical center and lobby for the performance of their works by the few remaining ensembles which perform contemporary works. The sheer mass of music produced and lobbied for by these approved composers, and, when pressure is successfully exercised, by their presence on high profile New York concert programs, constitutes an additional on-going component of Davidovsky's aesthetic legacy. Furthermore, by petty and not so petty administrative decisions in their official capacities these loyalists can and do make life easy or difficult for those who either abide by Davidovsky's sanctioned path, or fail to.

Finally there is Davidovsky's influence on performing organizations and concert series through his seat on the boards of Speculum Musicae, the Riverside Symphony, and Parnassus, among others. How Davidovsky exerts his influence on these organizations is unclear however, the programming of these ensembles bears the distinct claw mark of his veto power if not his active participation. Davidovsky's most recent large scale enterprise is "the Consortium" whose charmless, corporate-style logo and publicity materials accurately reflect the faceless, anonymity of much of the alleged music performed under its auspices, as does its overwhelmingly white, male board of directors and stable of composers. Financed by a pooling of grants from the Ditson Fund, the Fromm Foundation, the Mellon Fund, the Reiner Center along with "special assistance" from Columbia's Miller Theater (obtained through the Davidovsky appointed Miller Theater director Mike Ross), the Consortium concerts feature ensembles performing works by appropriately credentialed composers a high fraction of them former and present Davidovsky students. With the expansion of the empire northward, the performances take place at Paine Hall on the Harvard campus in addition to at Davidovsky's former seat of power, at Columbia.

The cumulative effect of Davidovsky energetic, some might say fanatical pursuit of musical power is that which has been noted earlier: an enforced and stultifying conformity which is paradoxically virtually invisible because of its pervasiveness. Unfortunately, despite the expensive flyers and programs, the excellence of the performances, the well appointed venues, all of which result from Davidovsky's access to huge amounts of funding, concerts of the music which Davidovsky advocates are invariably exceedingly joyless affairs bearing a much closer relationship to religious services than musical events. And how could it be otherwise? Despite the Times' profile's attempt to point out

Davidovsky's humor and warmth, the personality which is revealed in the music he supports (though, interestingly, much less so in the music he creates) is consistent with grimness and censoriousness of his stated institutional agenda. While the critical establishment has been cajoled or cowed into a respectful passivity, word has long since gotten out to audiences which avoid concerts having any hint of the "uptown" stamp of approval like a bout of flu. Attendance is, as is usual at such establishment "contemporary music" events, limited almost exclusively to close acquaintances of the composers and it is difficult for even its strongest adherents to escape the impression that Davidovsky's is a dying musical culture. That this culture can continue to exist is itself a testimony to a facet of Davidovsky's organizational genius: his ability to convince administrators that the overwhelming cultural significance of such events compensates for the bitter medicine of their lack of economic viability and the general tedium induced by them even among the most specialized audiences. One gets the impression, however, that this pseudo-Adornoesque argument is becoming increasingly untenable even within the elite circles which ought to form the natural constituency for the music of Davidovsky and his hand picked protégés. I welcome its demise though I confess to being highly skeptical and more than a little fearful of the market-oriented anarchy which the breakdown of Davidovsky's Stalinist culture portends, and for which it will bear ultimate responsibility.