

Works by Mario Davidovsky, Anthony Korf, Maurice Wright
New World 80383-2

by Mark Swed

It was once convenient to consider new music in New York according to zip code. Downtown Manhattan—with its fashionable Soho galleries and then inexpensive lofts—attracted the experimental, nontraditional composers, principally the minimalists. Uptown—where the Juilliard School and Columbia University are located—was the more academic music world of the serialists. But American composers, who are typically inclined to be inclusive rather than exclusive, can rarely be so easily confined. So if a musical wall once stood along 34th Street, it hasn't lasted. “Downtown” composers have become more academically respectable, while “uptown” composers have relaxed somewhat in their serial dogma, though not their formal rigor.

Three three works on this recording are by two generations of uptown composers whose music is not readily classified by compositional camp. Take **Anthony Korf**, who was born in 1951. His uptown credentials are impeccable: a Master's degree from the Manhattan School of Music; founding director and conductor of Parnassus, the uptown ensemble that specializes in “difficult” music. Yet it takes only the first two bars of Korf's Second Symphony (1987) to discover just how unpretentiously it wears its learning.

The entire symphony is based upon permutations, variations and developments of a theme made up of three two-note chords, which may sound like an exercise in serialism. But Korf was thinking more Beethoven than Babbitt, and he introduces his theme with the slyness of one who knows some jazz tricks along with his classical ones. First the theme is plucked in the basses and cellos in the manner of a walking bass; it is then extended in the second bar with a bluesy bowed slur. In both cases, the rhythm has a saucy syncopation.

That walking bass and bluesy slur color the whole symphony. Korf may have written his Second Symphony for a Beethoven orchestra, but he has titled it *Blue Note*, and the sound (the symphony incorporates a prominent part for a synthesizer) as well as the compositional techniques are varied and unpredictable. The bass line propels the symphony through difficult rhythms. The harmony can speak a simple tonal language or a fancy dissonant one, depending upon the character of what is being developed. Each movement drifts off into space with an ostinato redolent of minimalism.

Korf's symphony is concerned with mood, which is also a new development in abstract uptown music. If the overall tone of *Blue Note* is slightly melancholic, each movement tints the mood a different shade of blue. The first movement contrasts the walking bass theme with three sections of flighty counterpoint, the first for flutes, the second for muted trumpets, and the third for both, with the addition of a sulky clarinet ostinato. In the four waltz episodes of the second movement, ephemeral wisps of 3/4- time fragments momentarily coalesce into fullfledged waltzes, only to disintegrate into ostinato patterns

in the synthesizer and basses. The third movement first contrasts, then superimposes, the walking bass idea with lush chordal writing; the climax leaves in its wake a synthesizer cadenza followed by a coda that is reduced into an obsessively repeated viola ostinato.

The career of **Maurice Wright** offers another good example of the changing character of uptown music. Born in 1949 and possessor of Master's and Doctorate degrees from Columbia University (one of his composition teachers was Mario Davidovsky), Wright's oeuvre has progressed from early works built on complex pitch material to more intuitive scores, such as *Night Scenes* (1989). *Night Scenes* is music that, again, does not limit itself to one technique, but uses many devices to evoke and sustain nocturnal moods not easily described in any other way.

The composer says that *Night Scenes* is not meant as program music, but its inspiration does come from night imagery, from the fantastical turn the imagination takes in the late hours; and its form—loosely ABA—is to some extent evocative of that murky world between sleep and consciousness. Consequently the score begins with its most alert, agitated music, with nervous violins and violas irregularly dividing the bar.

Sleep is not easily won, and even the initial repose is a fidgety one, but eventually the music enters a *calmo*, full of dreamy string harmonics, yawning slides, and clockwork ticking violas. From idyllic reverie the dreamer is twice startled awake by blasts of horns and clanging bell, the second time for good. But with the return of the agitated music, what had been small motives earlier on now seem imposing statements, nighttime having the ability to exaggerate the insignificant.

Mario Davidovsky, born in Argentina in 1934, has long represented the uptown school as composer and teacher through his association with the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center and through his music, which has applied classical compositional procedures to electronically generated sounds. But those sounds, whether electronic or instrumental approximations of electronic effects (as found in *Divertimento*), are so rich and subtle in color that Davidovsky's writing could perhaps be called impressionistic.

Certainly it was the dappled interplay of tone and color in Davidovsky's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Synchronism No. 6*, for piano and tape (1971), that made it one of the most successful works combining live instrumental performance with recorded electronics. And it is the elegant and subtle interplay of tone and color between the solo cello and orchestra that characterizes *Divertimento* as well.

As with the works of his younger colleagues Wright and Korf, Davidovsky's *Divertimento* is fragmented, elusive music, though less stylistically eclectic. It begins with a fluid, rhapsodic cello solo—always striving upward but full of fanciful ornaments—that sets the tone for the whole piece. The cello's long lines continue to dominate as the orchestra enters, first with brass chordal passages. But gradually the orchestra and solo cello begin to influence each other—with the orchestra becoming more vigorous, the cello's long lines turning fitful—so that their separate identities blur.

This quality of changing roles is what gives *Divertimento* its drama. In a long, slow middle section, plaintive melodies are magically decorated with interjections that are attention-getting without interfering with the overall elegiac mood. The dramatic outbursts of brass and drum in the outer section, and especially in the last, never pull the long lines completely apart. And exactly where and how those upward striving lines change direction is one of the piece's enticing mysteries, the change of direction being something that is felt rather than identified. At the end, the solo cello returns to its rhapsodic opening character; but this time when it sinks to its deepest note, the low C on which it began, a sense of resolution is ineffably conveyed.

—Mark Swed

Mark Swed is a classical music critic for 7 Days.

THE RIVERSIDE SYMPHONY was founded in 1981 by music director George Rothman and composer/conductor Anthony Korf. The orchestra has premiered works ranging from Ravel to contemporary masterworks, and has initiated a series of commissions from celebrated as well as emerging American composers. The Riverside Symphony has been in residence at Columbia University since 1988, and performs an annual concert series at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall.

GEORGE ROTHMAN has been the music director and conductor of the Riverside Symphony since its inception in 1981. A native New Yorker, he received his formal training at Queens College and the Manhattan School of Music, and later at the Juilliard School and at Tanglewood, where he worked with Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa. Rothman also has an extensive background performing jazz/fusion piano and keyboard. In addition to appearances as guest conductor throughout the United States, Rothman is Director of Music Performance and conductor of the orchestra at Columbia University.

FRED SHERRY, a remarkably versatile cellist, is equally at home with the music of Monteverdi, Mozart, and the moderns. As a founding member of TASHI, he has played with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the New Japan Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. He has appeared at major music festivals throughout the world, including Tanglewood, Chamber Music Northwest, Casals, and Spoleto. Mr. Sherry has been performing with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center since the early 1970s and became an Artist of the Society in 1984. In 1989, he became the Society's Artistic Director.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mario Davidovsky Gagne, Cole, and Tracy Caras. "Mario Davidovsky." In *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982.

Trimble, Lester, and Noel B. Zahler. "Mario Davidovsky." In *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds. London and New York: Macmillan, 1986.

Maurice Wright

Duckworth, William. "Maurice Wright." In *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds. London and New York: Macmillan, 1986.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Anthony Korf *A Farewell*. Parnassus, Anthony Korf conducting. CRI SD 499.

Mario Davidovsky

Pennplay. Parnassus, Anthony Korf conducting. New World 80306-2.

Romancero. Diane Ragains, soprano; Syzygy New Music Ensemble, Larry Livingston conducting. CRI SD 530.

Scenes from *Shir ha Shirim*. Phyllis Bryn-Julson, soprano; Parnassus, Anthony Korf conducting. CRI SD 530.

Synchronisms, Nos. 1, 2 and 3. Harvey and Sophie Sollberger, flutes; Stanley Drucker, clarinet; Paul Zukofsky, violin; Robert Martin, cello. CRI SD 268.

Symchonisms, Nos. 5 and 6; Electronic Study No. 3. Robert Miller, piano; The Group for Contemporary Music, Harvey Sollberger conducting. Turnabout TVS 34487.

Maurice Wright

Cantata for Tenor, Percussion, and Electronic Sound. David Gordon, tenor; Tom Jones, percussion. Smithsonian Collection N-027.

Chamber Symphony for Piano and Electronic Sound Lambert Orkis, piano. Smithsonian Collection NK-022.

Like an Autumn Sky. The New Calliope Singers; Michael Skelly, piano; Peter Schubert conducting. Finnadar 90850-1.

Quintet. American Brass Quintet. New World 80377-2.

Sonata. Marc-André Hamelin, piano. New World 80378-2.

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Symphony No. 2 recorded March 2, 1987, at Holy Trinity Church, New York. Produced by Anthony Korf and Raymond Mase, engineered by David Hancock. Divertimento recorded March 20, 1989, at Whitman Hall, Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts, Brooklyn College, New York. Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman; Christine Bronder and Paul Zinman assisting. *Night Scenes* recorded May 5, 1989, at Holy Trinity Church, New York. Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman.

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RIVERSIDE SYMPHONY

GEORGE ROTHMAN, CONDUCTOR

Anthony Korf: Symphony No. 2 (*Blue Note*)
(publ. American Composers Alliance)

1. Blue (10:19)

2. Solitary Waltz (6:34)

3. Springing Eternal (8:58)

4. **Mario Davidovsky:** Divertimento (15:46) (publ. C.F. Peters Corp.)
Fred Sherry, cello

5. **Maurice Wright:** *Night Scenes* (19:35) (©Maurice Wright)

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