

# THE PLAIN DEALER

CLASSICAL MUSIC

**In grand coincidence, innovative composers visit to share, inspire**

Sunday, April 16, 2006

**Donald Rosenberg**

**Plain Dealer Music Critic**

Eminent composers visit Cleveland on a regular basis, but not usually within days of one another. The sonic stars align this week, when two Pulitzer Prize-winning composers who've made crucial contributions to contemporary music are in residence at schools four miles apart.

Milton Babbitt's appearance at Cleveland State University will help mark the iconoclast's 90th birthday, which is Wednesday, May 10. At the Cleveland Institute of Music, Mario Davidovsky, who studied with Babbitt almost half a century ago, will be the honored guest.

Both composers' music - complex and meticulous in design - will receive performances this week on programs that include pieces by predecessors or contemporaries. The residencies of these innovators is oddly coincidental, especially given that both were associated with the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center.

Indeed, it was Philadelphia native Babbitt who inspired the Argentine-born Davidovsky to become involved in electro-acoustic music - the blending of electronically produced sounds with acoustical instruments. Davidovsky was a student at the Berkshire Music Center in 1958 when Babbitt and Aaron Copland were the mentoring composers.

In 1960, with encouragement from Copland, Davidovsky moved to New York and began a long association with the Columbia-Princeton center, where he became known for cutting and splicing tape to produce electronic works of surprising inventiveness.

Babbitt's path-breaking musical work in "total serialization" dates to 1947, when he extended Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone method - the systematic ordering of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale - in his own "Three Compositions for Piano" to include rhythm, dynamics and timbre.

One of the first champions of electronic music, Babbitt helped develop synthesizers, and he influenced legions of composers of classical and other ilk. One student who went in a different direction was Broadway's dominant composer-lyricist, Stephen Sondheim. (Babbitt himself is a theater maven who's written Broadway-style songs that have never been published.)

"Although a lot of people don't like [Babbitt's] music, they like what he stands for," says Andrew Rindfleisch, artistic director of CSU's Cleveland Contemporary Players. "You can't not like what he stands for: total innovation, always thinking about the future, never compromising."

Babbitt became famous, after a fashion, in 1958, when an article he wrote for the magazine High Fidelity was published under the title "Who Cares if You Listen?" He had wanted it to be called "The Composer as Specialist," but an editor changed it to be provocative. Since then, Babbitt has had to defend a view the article doesn't reflect.

"Of course, he cares very much if you listen," Rindfleisch says, "and if you read the article, that becomes clear."

Rindfleisch, who heads CSU's composition department, was a student at the University of Wisconsin in

Madison in the early 1980s when he first encountered Babbitt, who had come to campus for lectures that would be published in a seminal book, "Words About Music."

"Of all the composers I've met in my life, he's the most intoxicating speaker when he talks about anything, from his expertise on Broadway musicals to his expertise on beer and baseball," says Rindfleisch. "He talks about them all with equal passion and knowledge."

One of the chapters in "Words About Music" Rindfleisch most admires is "The Unlikely Survival of Serious Music."

"He's capable of being very funny, but at the same time it's a really sad lecture in terms of how people think about music and how difficult it is to survive as artists," Rindfleisch says.

While in Cleveland, Babbitt - who still teaches at New York's Juilliard School - will meet with CSU composition students and tape Rindfleisch's radio program, "The New Music Studio," for broadcast at 9 p.m. Tuesday, April 25, on WCLV FM/104.9. Babbitt's talk for CSU's composition seminar at 4 p.m. Monday in Room 311 is free to the public.

Margaret Brouwer, head of the composition department at the Cleveland Institute of Music, also wanted her students to come into contact with an influential composer of the past half-century. Davidovsky, 72, taught at Columbia University for many years before taking up a post at Harvard University, from which he recently retired.

"When I bring composers in, I have master classes where my students meet with these composers in groups of five to show their music and get comments," says Brouwer. "Mario doesn't even want to do that. He wants to meet with them individually."

Brouwer first invited Davidovsky to work with her students when she was on the faculty at Washington and Lee University in Virginia. She also met him at his festival, the Composers' Conference at Wellesley College.

"His music is wonderful," Brouwer says. "Yes, it's abstract and atonal a good deal of the time. But it's also so elegant and refined."

Davidovsky is especially noted for his 10 works with the title "Synchronisms," which place acoustical instruments and electronics in lively conversation. The composer won the 1971 Pulitzer Prize in music for "Synchronisms No. 6" for piano and electronic sound. Friday's CIM program will include "Synchronisms No. 10" for guitar and tape, his last work in the genre from 1992, featuring faculty guitarist Jason Vieaux.

"The electronic instrument becomes another partner in the music," says Brouwer. "It's like chamber music, like two people playing together, except the one difference with electronic tape is that there's no give and take. The way it is is the way it is. The sounds are so integral with what the guitar is doing."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

drosenberg@plaind.com, 216-999-4269