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The Metropolis Ensemble, Andrew Cyr conducting

Avner Dorman Chamber Concerts

A conversation between Classical Domain, Metropolis Ensemble music director Andrew Cyr and composer Avner Dorman

Classical Domain: Andrew, when did you first hear Avner's music?

Andrew Cyr: I first experienced Avner's music while attending a CD launch party of his first album of solo piano music about a year and a half ago. The Metropolis Ensemble structures its concerts around premieres of new music, so I am continually seeking out new composers, and I always prefer to experience music live verses listening to CD's. I had no idea I was in for such a treat. The works were exquisitely crafted, full of color and imagination, and total daring! I was equally amazed with Eliran Avni, the pianist, playing completely from memory some of the most technically challenging music I had heard in a while. The audience was in equal rapture, and I left thinking, I can't wait to see his orchestral scores —

CD: Had you heard the Metropolis Ensemble before Avner?

Avner Dorman: No, but I think that at the time, they had just made their debut

concert. At the party I was introduced to Andrew and after the performance, we went out with a group of friends for burgers and fries, and I discovered that a lot of my favorite musicians were in his Ensemble! I sent Andrew a few scores of my chamber orchestra music and we started talking about how we could collaborate.

CD: How did this collaboration start?

AC: Of all of the scores I read through, I became instantly drawn to Avner's Piccolo Concerto, I had some ideas already brewing for a spring concert, and I lamented that it just didn't fit into the programming, but we kept in touch. After a few months we met for coffee at that hotel, and Avner told me about this Mandolin Concerto he just finished....

AD: Yes. I wrote that piece in record time — it was nuts! I was in NYC and the soloist Avi Avital was in Milan. A lot of the stuff I was doing was really extending the concept of what a mandolin could do so I had to check with Avi if its all possible and what it sounds like — so I was literally working all day on composing and then at night Avi and I would video-conference on Skype and try out all the new crazy stuff and see what works. I even had a mandolin that I sort of taught myself to play, just to experiment with colors and harmonics.

AC: It seems that should be an ad for Skype or something! I remember Avner telling me about the piece and I was really intrigued by the idea of a mandolin concerto — I knew the mandolin from Vivaldi, and a little blue grass, so I was intrigued to say the least. Then I read about the concerts they had in Italy and heard a recording, and the piece fit ideally into our next program last May. The concerto evokes such imagery, and its musical structures took you away from the western traditions into Middle-Eastern music, folk music, and back — which worked perfectly with the theme of our next concert.

CD: Sounds very interesting... do you agree with that Avner?

AD: Well — I think it's a good way of putting it — although that wasn't exactly what I meant when I wrote it. For me that piece is all about extremes — mainly sound and silence and motion and stasis. The main motif of the piece is the tremolo — which is probably the most characteristic technique of the mandolin. And the tremolo is a very interesting thing, its both motion and stasis at the same time. The pitches are static but the fast repetition is constantly in motion.

CD: I wonder, in a formal way, how do you compose with Middle Eastern elements, do you hear them as Middle Eastern elements?

AD: Well, I actually don't so much; this music is a part of me. It's funny because in Israel I was never considered someone who uses a lot of Middle Eastern elements. Even my most Middle Eastern influenced pieces come across as simply very local — very Israeli. I think this has to do with the fact that popular music in Israel is a strange marriage of western pop and Arabic music — and someone

who grows up hearing that a lot just doesn't hear it as something strange. I have studied the musical systems of Arabic and Indian music to a certain extent, so I know how to use them, but for me they seem almost as natural or inevitable as the major-minor system.

CD: I guess I am asking about the difference between influence and association?

AD: I think it's probably both in this case and I believe that these kinds of cross-cultural things can only work when the artist personally experiences both cultures as their own. If I didn't identify with Middle Eastern music and had I not grown up with it and played it myself, I don't think it would have made it into this piece.

AC: In terms of the orchestra accompaniment, though, it's very rich music, full of dramatic contrasts, and juxtapositions of style that serve as structural elements, which is what I think makes this piece so captivating — it's gripping! Once we started rehearsing it with the orchestra, the musicians felt the same.

CD: Avner, how was your experience working with the musicians of the ensemble?

AD: Well — couldn't be much better (laughs). At the first rehearsal that I attended the orchestra was playing with the vigor and energy that my music needs. I think they really see this ensemble as large chamber music making so everyone brings in their artistic vision and qualities. And the musicians are just of such high caliber, it's actually very inspiring.

CD: And the spring performance of the Mandolin concerto lead Metropolis making a recording of Avner's chamber concerti, correct?

AC: After the concert everyone felt that we just had to do more of Avner's music and that recording it would be a great opportunity for all sides. It was almost a natural extension of the concert to go on and decide to put on this concert and recording.

>CD: From my vantage point I am amazed that you got (Grammy Award winning) producer David Frost to record it for you... To some degree I wish that it was commonplace in the recording industry....

AC: Yes, it's really exciting! He was at the concert in May and the opportunity for us to work with a world-class producer and engineer was just something we didn't expect to happen this early in the life of the Ensemble, and so we were honored to collaborate. For sure, it's our most ambitious project yet, and the momentum from the last concert really energized our musicians and supporters to come together and make it happen.

CD: So Avner, tell me more about the other piece on the program. I see

there's the Piccolo Concerto, a piano Concerto in A, and a concerto Grosso. Which one did you write first?

AD: Well — the Concerto in A is a piano concerto that I wrote when I was 19. I was serving in the Israeli army at the time (I was an orchestrator for the military chamber orchestra and some army bands (no real military stuff) and I remember sitting in the piano room at my parents place and hearing Bach's A Major keyboard concerto. It was performed on piano and strings and the beginning of the third movement just struck me as so fresh and



Avner Dorman, photo: Dan Seltzer

beautiful. You know, I was studying all these complex pieces at the time and was trying to write music that was as complex — and suddenly this doubling of the piano's right hand with the Violins just sounded so good! Just scales going up and down, and simple harmonic sequences. So I sat down and improvised what became the opening 2 minutes of the concerto. It just poured out of me...

The other side of this was that I grew up listening mostly to pop and rock music (I did not like classical music as a kid! — as funny as that sounds today).

CD: It sounds like your version of “third stream music” or fusion, so why think of it as neo-baroque?

AD: Maybe they're not so far in concept — but I still think there's a difference in the approach to composition — mine being much closer to the traditional way of working with motif's, counterpoint, orchestration etc... but if someone prefers to label this music differently — I am perfectly fine with that. I think the compartmentalization of music should be done by listeners/audiences and not by composers — since we don't really know how our music is finally perceived.

When I worked on this piece I noticed that because Baroque music is so bass oriented its very easy to ingrate pop, rock, and Jazz into it. There's just so much in common between these styles. Its the bass and the harmonic language and also the reliance on perpetual motion that just make these styles blend so well.

AC: And in Avner's music they blend but also mutate and become something new.

AD: Well — I sure hope so (laughs).

CD: But then you didn't write another concerto like this for almost six years, why?

AD: Well — that's not exactly true. I do admit that some composers reacted with a lot of anger to this piece — especially the very avant-garde ones... I remember at a scholarship interview I had this huge argument with one of the composers on the panel — he could not accept someone starting a piece with a descending A major scale in 1995!!! It was quite a scene! When the piece was first performed it was very successful — but I do admit that some of that criticism deterred me a bit. But the truth is that I did explore similar ideas in the works I wrote for my Rock Band in the years after that.

CD: You had a rock band? Why couldn't you settle questions about an A Major scale with the rock band?

AD: Oh no — I could settle it with the rock band (laughs). It was the hardliner concert world avant-gardists who were not willing to accept an A major scale in a “serious” composition in 1995 or later. They were the kind of people who really looked down on anything that had electric guitars in it... or a tonality god forbid! In the band it was a real cool combination of one of Israel's best solo violinists instead of a singer and leading rock players on drum, bass and guitars, but the style was influenced by similar ideas to the concerto. But actually the piccolo concerto was my next real neo-baroque concerto.

CD: And how did that piece come about?

AD: It started as a commission for Piccolo and Harp from Lior Eitan. I wrote the first movement as a piece for piccolo and harp first. My vision was mainly that of a flute player in ancient Israel playing a piece with a harp. That's why the piece is quite modal. When I played it for Lior we decided that it must become a concerto. The materials just screamed — MAKE ME A CONCERTO!!! So I did. While orchestrating the first movement the Jazzy and Rock elements in the music became much clearer. It wasn't a conscious decision but it was just there. For the second movement I started it like a real baroque concerto with some clear quotes from Bach's Italian concerto. Very quickly though the traditional elements fade away and the ornaments take over creating an atmosphere that is very much Israeli in my view.

AC: It's one of the most magical moments in all the concerti...

AD: Thanks. Eliran told me when he first heard it that it sounds like the waves of the Mediterranean sea — I think that's a great metaphor for what it is. I would say that the piccolo is different from the Concerto in A in that the influence of Middle-Eastern music is much more pronounced.

AC: And the harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary is much more based in 20th Century compositional techniques, as well as influences from post-bebop jazz avant-garde.

AD: Yes — that too....

AC: In some places there are four different meters and keys happening at the same time, and the amazing thing is that it all sounds so natural — it's like a perfectly notated jam session.

CD: It's a fascinating confluence, hmm.... a third stream allusion. Anyway, I've heard only a sound clip of the Piccolo concerto but these influences are subtle, really subsumed with in your own compositional style, any plans to be post-modern and bring them to the surface?

AD: mmmm... I am glad you think so. I am not so interested in doing the post-modern collage thing myself. I do like some post-modern composers very much, but it's not what I want to say. I think post-modernism was very important in the development of musical styles in that it broke many psychological barriers. Having post-modernism behind us actually enables composers today to create music that is far more inclusive of music of the world and yet is not eclectic as a statement. I am a product of a generation that grew up with postmodernism and eclecticism as a fact.... so doing that again seems a bit redundant to me. And then again — maybe you'll think a more recent piece like the mandolin concerto is more postmodern....

CD So finally, is the concert a warm up for the recording session, and when do you expect the CD to come out?

AC: I might not call it a warm-up *per se*, we'll invest the same energy and focus into the both the concert and the recording — in the end, it's about being as musically in the moment and communicative as possible in both contexts! Putting the two together into the same week energizes all of us, really, and sort ups the ante. Avner's music is equally rewarding to play and listen, so the Ensemble musicians are really thrilled to have the opportunity to come together to perform this for our audiences here in New York, and now beyond. We hope the CD will come out next fall sometime.

The Metropolis Ensemble
The Complete Chamber Orchestra Concerti of Avner Dorman

Andrew Cyr, conductor
Mindy Kaufman, piccolo
Eliran Avni, piano
Avi Avital on mandolin
Aya Hamada, harpsichordist

Concerto in A, For Solo Piano and String Orchestra
Mandolin Concerto
Concerto Grosso (US Premiere)
Piccolo Concerto (New York Premiere)
Piano Mandolin Concerto (2006)

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