

Avner Dorman
Lost Souls - a Piano Concerto (2009)

Article by Michael McCurdy / www.schirmer.com

On November 20, **Michael Stern conducts Alon Goldstein and the Kansas City Symphony** in the premiere of **Avner Dorman's** new piano concerto **Lost Souls**. Referring to the work as a "séance for piano and orchestra," Dorman calls on the ghosts of music's past to weave the three movement concerto.

For Dorman, this work is channeled straight from his relationship with the pianist, Alon Goldstein: "Alon seems like he is from a different era — the way he carries himself, his mannerisms — it seems like he was born and lived in the 19th century," Dorman recalls. He wanted to capture Goldstein's special quality in this new work and took what he could from their relationship and his knowledge of Goldstein's musicianship — Goldstein has performed Dorman's Piano Sonata No. 2 close to forty times. Dorman explains that Goldstein "can go quite crazy during the sonata, but in the end he is a very refined classical pianist, with all of the notes coming out very clear, as if he had predetermined all of the dynamics and articulations — he has very stylized playing. I wrote this concerto to give him those moments, on the one hand, but to also give him the simple melodies, to give him room to bring out his style."

Lost Souls begins quite dramatically: the pianist, in a departure from all other concerti, is not on stage, but is called from beyond by the orchestra's microtonal séance. As the 'soul-oist' emerges, a tense polytonal dialogue begins between the two worlds and Dorman begins to seamlessly echo various musical styles through his own evolved voice, recalling hints of Bach, Art Tatum, Messiaen, Lutoslawski, Ravel, Ligeti, Sweelinck and Gershwin.

Music history's graveyard is a harrowing resource for many composers; for Dorman, the weight of the past is not a burden, but can be embraced in the present through his own art. As with many works by Avner Dorman, **Lost Souls** brings together his cultural mélange and melds it into a dynamic work that is a combination of his disparate influences — in one moment in **Lost Souls**, Cuban Bata drums accompany a baroque toccata that in the end sounds as if it were Arabic in its origin.

Perhaps for Dorman, his own soul has found its place in this globalized culture where Art Tatum and Johann Sebastian Bach converse on the Ouija board of the 21st century, and where these souls of the past can be the inspiration for the future.

Short Musical Analysis by the composer:

In three movements performed continuously (attacca).

1. Séance: Ghostly – Allegro – Adagio – Allegro – Presto
2. Twilight: Adagio – Scherzo “Mischievousso” – Adagio
3. Exorcism: Presto

Timing – ca. 25 minutes

1st movement – closely related to sonata form with a short introduction in the high strings and a concluding coda in the tonality of D. (i) The opening haunting motif (the Séance motif) consists of soft high string slides over an interval of a minor third. It is followed by the soloist’s wild entrance cadenza – a hard landing back from the after life. (ii) The main motif of the exposition is a major second mordent (A-G-A). The exposition explores this motif through various toccata-like sections morphing the simple motif into a variety of different themes. Dramatically, the soloist is struggling with memories of his old favorite repertoire, hence the allusions to great piano concertos of the past (Ravel, Bach, Prokofiev, Lutoslawski, and Ligeti in the first movement). As the exposition progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the afterlife (the pianist) and our world (the orchestra) cannot fully synchronize and are bound to clash. The clash is followed by an Adagio (first soft, then passionate, and soft again) in which the soloist and orchestra are both expressive but are still disjointed rhythmically. (iii) The opening ‘Séance motif’ signals the beginning of the development which explores various polymetric, polytonal, and polyrhythmic combinations of the various motifs of the movement. (iv) In the recapitulation, the motifs of the entire movement collide more aggressively. The highest point of complexity resolves to four octaves of the note D in the piano and strings. (v) The coda is the catharsis of the first movement resolving its harmonic, rhythmic, and emotional conflict.

2nd movement – in modified Rondo Form: A, B, A’, B’, A’’, C, A&B. The ritornellos (A sections) in the orchestra are of an otherworldly nature alluding to the ‘Séance motif’. The solo (B) sections are very simple and reminiscent of some of the earliest keyboard music we know (like that of the Swedish composer Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck). The solo (B) sections represent the pianist’s ‘return engagement.’ After a short third ritornello (A’’) a mischievous scherzo (with hints of Messiaen) in the piano and some percussion leads back to the ‘Séance motif’, now appearing in the woodwinds and not as ghostly as before. The final ritornello combines the A and B sections in a solemn coda in C major. At the very end of the second movement ‘Séance motif’ appears for the last time summoning the last, and most evil, spirit in the concerto.

3rd movement – in A A B form – is an exorcism scene. The last soul conjured will not leave the stage. The orchestra performs an exorcism ritual (in changing meters but mostly in 13/16 meter) to vanquish it. The piano fights back (now mostly in 7/8 meter) and does not show signs of fatigue. The orchestra splits up and the different sections of the orchestra attempt to exorcise the spirit separately. As the sections join forces again, they finally manage to defeat the demon.