

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 7, 2021, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Mario Davidovsky was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

MARIO DAVIDOVSKY

BORN: March 4, 1934

DIED: August 23, 2019

Mario Davidovsky, Fanny P. Mason Professor of Music at Harvard from 1994 until his retirement in 2004, was a highly respected composer, a pioneer of electronic music, and a beloved teacher and mentor. Friends and colleagues remember his warm and ebullient personality, his humor, laced with multilingual puns, and his high-intensity phone calls—which never lasted less than an hour. His artistic work was deeply informed by a strong ethical and moral core, based on his lifelong exploration of Jewish spirituality.

Davidovsky was born on March 4, 1934, in Médanos, Argentina, the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. He continued his studies at the University of Buenos Aires, where he studied composition and theory. He studied piano with a German immigrant named Theodore Fuchs; Davidovsky recounted arriving an hour early for his lessons so that he could hear the pupil before him, the 12-year-old future concert pianist Martha Argerich.

Davidovsky first came to the United States in the summer of 1958 to attend the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood on the invitation of Aaron Copland. Two years later, Davidovsky was invited to come to New York to work at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center (CPEMC), the first electronic music studio in the United States. Davidovsky accepted the invitation and moved to the U.S. for good, serving first as Associate Director of the CPEMC and later, from 1981 to 1993, as Director.

Under Davidovsky's direction, the CPEMC became a nexus for international creative exchange. There he developed the techniques he would use in his own "tape music," as it was called at the time. The technology was quite new; in a 1996 interview with his former student Eric Chasalow, Davidovsky compared being in that studio to "finding yourself in the desert with a knife and a jug of water and having to find your way out." He made a special effort to host composers from Latin America, many of whom returned home and opened their own studios.

Also close to Davidovsky's heart was the Composers Conference, an annual summer gathering of composers and performers of contemporary music in Vermont (and later at Wellesley College). In 1968, Davidovsky was invited to serve as a guest composer and continued as artistic director for the next fifty years. There Davidovsky and his colleagues created an environment of trust and challenge, in which composers and professional musicians could exchange ideas, create and learn new music, and achieve the highest standards of performance. "It was all about the music making," he said in an interview. "Your ethical and moral rules come from the book of counterpoint—the way of making music was also the way people interacted with each other." The Composers Conference has been tremendously influential for the course of contemporary classical music in the United States. It continues today, hosted by Brandeis University.

Davidovsky created path-breaking musical works that redefined space, timbre, and time. His international reputation was first established as a composer of works that combine live instruments with electronic sounds. Davidovsky's twelve *Synchronisms* for solo instruments and electronics are among his most often performed pieces. Here the electronics are not just a backdrop to the acoustic instruments; nor do they try to imitate sounds of the real world. Rather, Davidovsky's works create dialogue, the co-expression of musical ideas across and between the two forms of media.

After 1974, Davidovsky turned increasingly to composition for traditional ensembles, with sharpened ears and an aesthetic informed by his experience in electronic music. During the 1980s and 1990s, he wrote a series of important pieces for orchestra, chamber ensembles, and voice without electronics. Works such as *Concertante* for string quartet and orchestra, written for the Guarneri Quartet and the Philadelphia Orchestra, exhibit an acute awareness of what "conventional" instruments are capable of, along with a humane spontaneity and impeccable craftsmanship. His vocal music often drew on Jewish themes, such as his song cycle, *Sefarad: Four Spanish-Ladino Folkscenes*, composed in 2004. Whether electronic or acoustic, or both, Davidovsky's acute ear for sound and timbre resulted in music that is rich in tone colors and shaped with an infallible sense of formal elegance.

Davidovsky taught at the Manhattan School of Music, Yale University, the City College of New York, the Mannes School of Music, and Columbia University, where he was appointed the Edward MacDowell Professor of Composition in 1981. He left Columbia in 1993 and, in January 1994, came to Harvard as Professor of Music, serving as Fanny P. Mason Professor of Music from July 1994 until his retirement in 2004.

He was a beloved teacher, spending hours with students in the Harvard Computer Music Center, which he founded, as well as outside of it. He had an acute ability to see inside the student's composition, zeroing in on its essential qualities and prompting the student to bring this essence to light. Students recall his and his wife, Elaine's, generous hospitality, which

included offering clothing advice for Latin American students unaccustomed to harsh Northern winters.

Among Davidovsky's hundreds of students are the noted composers Eric Chasalow, Tan Dun, Michelle Ezikian, Laura Kaminsky, José Luis Hurtado, Lei Liang, Zhou Long, Pablo Ortiz, Julie Rohwein, Joan Tower, Ken Ueno, Alida Vásquez, Nicholas Vines, and Chen Yi.

Davidovsky's pioneering compositions were recognized by virtually every major award and prize given in contemporary composition during his lifetime. In 1971, he received the Pulitzer Prize in Music for his "Synchronisms #6" for piano and electronic sounds. Other awards include his appointment to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, the prize from the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation in Munich, and fellowships from the Guggenheim, Koussevitzky, and Rockefeller Foundations.

Mario Davidovsky passed away on August 23, 2019, in New York City, predeceased by his wife of over 55 years, Elaine, who died in 2017. He is survived by his daughter, Adriana Davidovsky; his son, Matias Davidovsky; Matias's wife, Gila Cohen Davidovsky; and three grandchildren, Talia, Ari, and Ilan Davidovsky.

Respectfully submitted,

Hans Tutschku
Christoph Wolff
Anne Shreffler, Chair