Remembrance

Martin Brody

Who else could so keenly see what would be needed to lead the young into the rarified world of musical modernism?

I first met Mario in 1977, on the campus of Johnston State College in Northern Vermont, where the Composers Conference was then held. In this rustic place, he led hundreds of young composers through a portal into a new world: a world of musical creativity expressed in its fiercest and most glorious forms. Mario stamped his personality on every nook and cranny of the Conference. By sheer force of charisma, he inspired a cadre of spectacularly gifted and already legendary performing musicians to make the pilgrimage up to Johnston each summer. There, they enacted a grueling ritual. This involved a vortex of rehearsals, recordings, and concerts, reams of new music to learn, orchestral repertory to read, chamber music to coach—and at the end of the day, viciously competitive volleyball games, always featuring the merciless Bob Miller (namesake of the Miller Theatre), spiking the net. Throughout the two-week ordeal: lousy food and relentless pranking. The latter was often directed at an acerbic but lovable character, the bassoonist, Lester Cantor.

This was a Fellini-esque utopia, with equally heavy doses of the sacred and profane, the sublime and the absurd, high purpose and focused play, self-awareness and theatricality. Presiding over it all was Mario, with his lifelong friend, the clarinetist and conductor, Efrain Guigui at his side—the two incessantly debating in a rapid-fire, lyrical mix of English, Spanish and Yiddish.

Now more than four decades later, this scene is still incandescently bright in my mind. But over the years, my memories of this life-reorienting encounter have also been colored by many things Mario has said, especially about his Argentinian hometown. A few years ago, Anne Shreffler and I interviewed Mario. One of the things he told us about his childhood home was this: “You know, the government was moving whole villages from Italy, Lithuania, Russia, Germany, Russian Jews, Russian Orthodox, you name it—to populate a countryside where there was no one living. The village was a strange mix, but it became a complete community. People would get together on the national day to play the national march. My dad played the clarinet. It was mostly a Jewish town, there were genuine Jewish gauchos, Jewish cowboys.” I now wonder how much Mario saw the Composers Conference as a place to build a second complete community from another disparate mix of people, a multi-generation community of performers and composers.

Mario’s playful turn of phrase, “genuine Jewish gauchos, Jewish cowboys” also says a lot. He and Efrain Guigui, an orphan who had been taken in as a small child by the Davidovskiy family, both grew up to become cosmopolitan cowboys, well-equipped for the multiple dislocations and contingencies of migration; but they also became urban cowboys, primed to span continents and flourish in big cities. Who else could so keenly see what would be needed to lead the young into the rarified world of musical modernism?

Mario liked to say that our ethical rules come from the book of counterpoint. But what exactly does that mean? Here is what I think: I think it means that we are given a few commandments, a lot of norms, and a sliver of freedom. The commandments must never be broken. The norms should be questioned but respected. And the sliver of freedom must be ruthlessly enlarged.
When listening to Mario’s music, I feel that the tilt of the earth’s axis is subtly shifting. This was the first music that seemed oracular to me. It provoked (and still provokes) a quiet, but ineluctable shift in consciousness. The philosopher, Giorgio Agamben recalls a pertinent teaching in his aptly titled essay, “The Coming Community”: “The Hassidim,” he says, “tell a story about the Messianic world to come. Everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too she will sleep in the other world….Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.” So it is with Mario’s music. It concentrates our awareness—and then everything is as it was…just a little different.

Over the years, the Composers Conference gradually came to seem less glamorous to me, but the individual at its heart remained forever astonishing. As the point-person for the conference onsite, after it moved to Wellesley College, I was able to spend time with Mario, and often Elaine and Adriana, almost every summer for more than 35 years—and I got to see Mattias too, mostly in New York. Mario and I spoke often. The conversation was rarely broken for long over the years. Mario was, of course, a master of the epically long phone call. Looking back on our marathon conversations, I now feel that there was a common element running through all of them. Our deliberations might feel sublime, thrilling, irreverent, funny, or tense. Or all of the above, and a lot more, depending on the business at hand; but I never once lost the sense that I was talking to a prophet. Whatever else was going on, I always felt that Mario was setting a singularly high standard: that he was showing me (as he did so many others) how to prepare for the long-anticipated coming of the Messiah—the epiphanic shift in consciousness, whereby everything will be as it is now…just a little different.

Remembrance

Susan Blaustein

Mario, I can hear your voice.
I deeply miss our conversations, and
I miss you, we ALL miss you, so very much.

Mario was so important to so many young composers – over decades, for Harvard, Columbia, and City College students and for Composers Conference fellows -- he would see us, he could see where we were aiming, he could see where we fell short, and he could always -- sometimes very obliquely, mind you, with a joke, with a parable, sometimes quoting Kabbalah – he could always help us find a way to get there.

Mario was never officially my “teacher” – he was more like my mentor, my guru, my rabbi. I met him for the first time at The Composers Conference, where he had accepted me as a fellow; eight years later, after he helped hire me for my first fulltime academic teaching job at Columbia, he was also my boss.

But always, and most of all, Mario was my friend. Like so many other composers, young and old, we would call each other and talk – never for less than an hour, mind you! – about the state of the art, about other musicians and composers -- mutual friends, Mar-teen-0, See-moore, Ell-ee-yott, Meel-
tone – I’d listen to him rail on about this or that assault by the barbarians and philistines, on those he believed were pursuing a sacred quest, the life of the mind. He’d ask how things were going with my boyfriend or family, or in my graduate program at The Yale School of Music (where I’m sure he thought I was dwelling among the philistines!), or about my latest piece, and usually, he’d tell me about his current struggles with whatever piece he was working on, which was always a bit like learning that Artur Rubenstein also had to practice, or, more subversively, having the chance to eavesdrop for a moment on a shrink appointment of the person you most admire.

One time, when I was here at Harvard as a Junior Fellow, I was really struggling to finish several commissions and under a lot of pressure. I was all backed up, still finishing a cello concerto for the Library of Congress, and I had another piece to write, and then a chamber orchestra cantata on the Song of Songs that I had to get done for the American Composers Orchestra, for a specific date.

I told Mario how nervous I was about even finding time to THINK about that piece. I knew he’d written a magnificent treatment of The Song of Songs, which is one of my very favorite pieces of his, and I knew that the Canticles were very, very meaningful for him, that he had written the piece in memory of his beloved sister. I knew Mario had studied every ounce of those sumptuous poems, that he’d read them in multiple translations in Hebrew and Aramaic and had literally loved and overthought each line, as he infused them with life and with sound.

At that point, I’d spent a lot of time writing really dense, lush, tough music, fussing over each sonority and voice, and I told him I was worried I couldn’t do these sacred texts justice. Mario told me not to worry -- “You know, you just peek your almond, and your raisin,” he told me, “and you walk into the desert weeth them, and you weel find your way.”

And he was right. Those few words just changed everything for me – it was so clear, what he said: it was so lean – it was so true. I found my nuggets, if you will – my almond and raisin, or the core DNA of my piece – and those few precious bits took me into the desert, and all the way home, and my Song of Songs is one of the pieces that speaks most clearly and of which I’m most proud.

As a composer, Mario always found his almond and his raisin. He wrestled against the dark to find them sometimes – but once he found them, once he carved them out of the stone or marble that served as his musical clay, they sparkled like gems. Mario’s music is indeed gemlike – each piece stands like a sculptural object, glinting as it somehow turns in the sunlight, always revealing different facets to its listeners.

As we hear again this afternoon, in that lovely performance, his music is magical: it transports you into different lights and different realms, even as it makes time stand still.

That’s what a conversation with Mario was like for me, and for so many of us --

Mario, I can hear your voice.
I deeply miss our conversations, and
I miss you, we ALL miss you, so very much.

But you gave us your music – to make sound shimmer, and to make us all think -- to put us in touch with the tradition, and in dialogue with our forebears, to challenge our every supposition, and to
subvert the very medium *itself* by somehow making time stand still, long enough for us all to think we’ve somehow caught it, in our ear.