

“Educating international composers: The Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center”

**Robert J. Gluck, University at Albany
gluckr@albany.edu**

The role of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center as the first educational and creative institution of its kind in the United States is well known. The Center was established in 1959 by founding director Vladimir Ussachevsky in association with Otto Luening, Milton Babbitt and Roger Sessions. Funding support was provided by the Rockefeller Foundation. The Center’s illustrious student body included such notables in a single year, 1965-1966, as Charles Dodge, Jon Appleton, Alcides Lanza and Alice Shields, who later became associate director. Less widely known is the centrality of The Center in training composers hailing from outside the United States, including several South American countries, Israel, Turkey, Japan, Spain, South Korea, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Ghana. Former Associate Director, Pril Smiley, refers to the international training offered by the Center as “the best part of our personality in those early days.”

The international composition of The Center’s roster was clearly represented in its first public concert, on May 9-10, 1961 (works from the program were released on Columbia Records MS6566/ML5966), which included music by Halim El-Dabh (Egypt), Mario Davidovsky (Argentina), and Bülent Arel (Turkey), and by Ussachevsky, Luening, Babbitt and Charles Wuorinen. A second recording of music from The Center (Turnabout TV34004S) included works by İlhan Mimaroglu (Turkey), Tzvi Avni (Israel) and Andres Lewin-Richter (Spain).

Davidovsky, Arel and El-Dabh blazed a path followed by a host of international composers who subsequently worked and studied at the Center, often supported by Guggenheim Foundation fellowships. Those who followed included Alcides Lanza (1965-1971), Carlos Rausch (1973) and Francisco Kröpfl (1977) from Argentina, İlhan Mimaroglu from Turkey (1962, continuing through the 1980s), Michiko Toyama (1959), Makoto Shinohara (1961-1963), Kenjiro Ezaki (1966-1967) and Kinue Uchibori (Japan, 1971–1972) from Japan, Tzvi Avni (1963-1964), Ami Maayani (1965) and Menahem Zur (1972-1975) from Israel, Alfredo del Monaco (1969-1974) from Venezuela, Edgar Valcarcel (1967-1968) and Enrique Pinilla (1967) from Peru, Sergio Cervetti from Uruguay (1970-1971, 1977), Héctor Quintanar (1975), Alida Vazquez (1977–1984?) and Manuel Enriquez (1972) from Mexico, Marlos Nobre from Brazil, Dariush Dolat-Shahi (1976-1981; continued composing at Columbia until 1987), Massoud Pourfarrokhi (1977-1978) and Ahmad Pejman from Iran (1977-1978), Rajko Maksimovic (1965) and Alexander Obradovic (1968) from Yugoslavia, Steven Agbenyega (1977) from Ghana, Gheorghe Costinescu (1970–1972) from Romania, and Kilsung Oak (1971–1977) from South Korea.

Staff members Arel and Davidovsky (originally a student and Ussachevsky’s successor as Center director), along with Alice Shields and Pril Smiley, are cited by numerous composers at the Center as pivotal to their creative development. Arel providing hands-on instruction and technical assistance in the classical tape music Studio 106 located in McMillan Theatre, supplementing Ussachevsky’s lectures, a role that Lanza later played. Arel also collaborated with Edgard Varèse on the electronic sounds for Varèse’s ‘Déserts’. Davidovsky taught the second year lecture class.

Ussachevsky was a champion of international composers. Alice Shields recalls: “He always made a point of inviting composers from all over the world to come to the Center, and when they arrived, he arranged studio time and technical assistance for them ... the amount of time given to these many visiting composers was usually quite substantial.” Davidovsky’s outreach proved significant to composers from South America, as did that of Lanza. Davidovsky recalls being “a ferocious advocate of Latin American composers who applied to come to the Center. For many years, I did my best to open up the studio, with great support from Vladimir Ussachevsky, to people from Chile, Venezuela.”

International composers came to The Center for a host of reasons, but often because

studios, equipment or expertise were unavailable in their own countries. Sometimes political pressures, governmental or within the musical establishment, were a motivating factor. alcides lanza recalls that in Argentina, “there were few resources, no money and, periodically, tyrannical governments ... With Mario, in the late 50's, we used to dream of how to get out of Argentina.” Columbia-Princeton provided an excellent opportunity, “like a dream.”

Some former students and staff at CPEMC later founded institutions in their home countries. Andres Lewin-Richter opened a studio in Barcelona, Spain and Tzvi Avni created the second electronic music studio in Israel. Anecdotally, it was a 1958 meeting with Milton Babbitt at The Center that pointed Josef Tal to the technology he needed to found the first electronic music studio in Israel. While Bülent Arel was unsuccessful in establishing a studio in Ankara, Turkey, he subsequently designed, installed and directed the Yale University Electronic Music Studio and in 1971, founded the Electronic Music Studios at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. alcides lanza, Menahem Zur, Gheorghe Costinescu, and Sergio Cervetti became directors of existing studios. Costinescu subsequently founded a second studio. Mario Davidovsky succeeded Ussachevsky as director of the CPEMC, continuing until its reorganization in 1994 as the Columbia University Computer Music Center.

While not all composers at CPEMC later continue their efforts in electronic music, the Center inspired ongoing activities among many. Work at The Center spurred a lifetime of creative electronic compositions by Mario Davidovsky, alcides lanza, Bülent Arel, İlhan Mimaroglu, Dariush Dolat-Shahi and Sergio Cervetti, all of whom remained in North America, and by Avni, who returned to Israel. El-Dabh, who returned to Africa and later, the United States, recently resumed electronic music composition. Some, like Alfredo del Monaco, found that their later instrumental music would be profoundly influenced by their experience at CPEMC.

Composers of electronic music from outside of North America and Europe have studied in several institutions of international reputation, among them in Paris, Cologne and Utrecht. The role of The CPEMC during its period of operation was notably influential. International composers at CPEMC composed a total of approximately 170 works, nearly 55 of them by composers from South America and approximately 40 composed for instruments and tape. Student work at The Center often led to lifetime careers in the field and inspired the creation of pioneering studios in countries where little previously existed. The Center influenced its students to train and encourage others to do the same. The Center was also an institution that supported work by some of the first women composers in the field. The legacy of The Center as an international training institution is thus of inestimable value.

Additional resources:

A more extensive version of this presentation, including a comprehensive list of composers and their works completed at CPEMC, is available in print:

Robert Gluck, “The Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center: Educating International Composers,” *Computer Music Journal* 31:2, 20-38, Summer 2007.

An exploration of the avant-garde Arts festival in Iran which provided exposure to electronic music and avant-garde arts to young Iranian composers, some of whom subsequently studied at CPEMC is also available:

Robert Gluck, “The Shiraz Arts Festival: Western Avant-Garde Arts in 1970s Iran,” *Leonardo* 20.1 20–28, 2007.

And on the web for free download at MIT Press:

<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/leon/40/1>

Several interviews with faculty, staff and students of the CPEMC, conducted by Robert

Gluck, may be found at the EMF Institute, on the web:

http://www.emfinstitute.emf.org/cgi-bin/ireading_search.pl?keywords=articlesmaterials.