

## Chamber Multimedia

# Small, Medium, and Colossal

The temptation to fuse the visible and the sonic has become irresistible, not only to composers but to some enterprising ensembles as well. **by Randy Nordschow**

Looking for something to spruce up next year's season? How about incorporating video into your program? Okay, wait. Before you dismiss this as some gimmicky ploy to boost your group's hip quotient, keep in mind that music has always been intrinsically tied to movement and dance, and has been virtually married to the moving image since the advent of motion pictures. In fact, today's widespread digital technologies are spurring a renaissance of chamber musicians and composers eagerly taking the video plunge.

**"It's about taking whatever your idea is about the music... and really marrying that to what the idea of the film is."**

—Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum



Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum, above.  
Below: A performance of Milica Paranosic's *Crni Oci* ("Dark Eyes"), with *VisionIntoArt*'s Pablo Rieppi (percussion), Erik Carlson (violin), Nadia Sirota (viola), Richard Mannoia (clarinet), Jeffrey Zeigler and Wendy Law (cellos).

Last year, when composer Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum was approached by cellist André Emelianoff to create an homage to Robert Schumann, her thoughts quickly turned visual. Yes, the cello quartet she composed for Emelianoff (for one live and three pre-recorded cellos) incorporates fragments from Schumann's *Five Pieces*. But she wanted to say more, to suggest "the characters Schumann created in his mind and on paper.

"Instead of just being a concept confined to program notes and the actual notes in the score, I wanted the audience to have a visual representation of the multiple perceptions of self through a lens of [Schumann's] mental illness."

A recent Juilliard graduate who is founder and co-director (with composer Paola Prestini) of the New York-based interdisciplinary collective known as *VisionIntoArt*, Kroll-Rosenbaum is herself well versed in visual media. Nevertheless, she turned to filmmaker and fellow *VIA* member Chase Palmer to

facilitate the visual component of her new composition. Titled *Vis-à-vis*, the collaboration is a performance with three-channel video/sound installation. Video projections show three life-size background images of Emelianoff playing three different parts of the score, as he simultaneously plays the fourth part live. Synchrony was not a goal. Kroll-Rosenbaum had planned from the outset to record each part independently, without any reference to the others, so that the listener never hears the full line of a Schumann theme, but an interplay of elements. By sticking to her conceptual guns ("It made sense that the images and sounds were all out of synch"), she ended up with a product that, among other things, didn't require up-to-the-minute circuitry.

"It's about taking whatever your idea is about the music," adds Kroll-Rosenbaum, "not anybody else's, just your idea and



Richard Carrick (right) with Peter Nigrini and a video still from *Cosmicomics*.



**“The visuals and the music combined create a new type of intermodal experience.”**

—Richard Carrick

really marrying that to what the idea of the film is. And the film can be just as supportive to the music as the music is to the film.”

Is this kind of project too expensive for just any ensemble to undertake? According to Kroll-Rosenbaum, a typical VisionIntoArt production costs \$5,000 to \$35,000. “It depends on who we’re performing for and where. It depends on if we’re taking it on tour.” She adds, “But the truth in all of this is that you can get away with technology pretty inexpensively, especially if you’re not dealing with film. If you’re projecting a DVD,” as was the case for *Vis-à-vis*, “you can do it for nothing.”

Another VisionIntoArt presentation, scheduled for spring 2006, is a somewhat more straightforward fusion of music and visuals. It will feature the group’s instrumental ensemble playing music for clarinet and string quartet by Israeli composer Betty Olivero in a staged performance of the 1920 German Expressionist silent film *The Golem*. (The movie, a newly restored print, tells the story of a 16th-century Czech rabbi who creates a clay giant that saves the Jews from persecution.) “We’re going to really work with the way in which the music is staged against the backdrop of the film—or, vice versa, how the film is staged against the backdrop of the live music—to really make it a more integrated live experience,” Kroll-Rosenbaum explains. Two interdisciplinary short films created by VIA will accompany the 85-minute film, addressing the relevance of its tale to contemporary society.

Like most multimedia practitioners, Kroll-Rosenbaum harbors trepidations about musicians’ falling prey to the eye-candy phenomenon. As she puts it, superficial combinations of visuals with music send the message: “Here’s a lollipop, now listen to a string quartet. That’s fine, but it’s no different than printing the program on ninety-pound paper.”

**R**ichard Carrick, another composer working in multimedia, certainly isn’t interested in merely coupling music with visual elements. In fact, he considers his multimedia work to rise to the level of a completely different genre. The composer explains that “the visuals and the music combined create a new type of intermodal experience.” He treats the relationship between the intersecting media as a form of counterpoint, open to compositional exploration. He usually creates both the music and the visuals, making him something of a rare breed in this emerging field. Carrick’s video explorations began when he became “a bit frustrated after completing my master’s in music, where I felt compelled to compose this type of piece or another, so I decided to take some time off and move to Holland, where I quickly gave up composing.” He spent all of his time improvising with players and ensembles. The school had a video camera that they lent out which wasn’t used much, so he began experimenting with video, finding ways “to create short video exercises that somehow made sense.”

Nearly a decade later, Carrick has poured forth a long stream of multimedia chamber works. For his latest project, the composer decided it was finally time to collaborate, enlisting the expertise of theater designer Peter Nigrini. Together they created *Cosmicomics*. It is based on the Italo Calvino 1966 novella of the same name,

in which the main character experiences cosmic phenomena—such as the curvature of time/space or the universe before the big bang—in his daily life. The 26-minute work is a rumination on the vastness of the universe, scored for chamber ensemble (flute, oboe, clarinet, trombone, percussion, violin, viola, cello), electronics, narrator, and multichannel video. Freed from the burden of shooting the video, and finer points such as lighting design, stage layout, and projector placement (which breaks down into infinitesimal details such as calculating the throw distance to achieve the desired image size, correcting the keystone, figuring out the contrast ratio and lumens required to create a sharp image in the performance space), Carrick was able to concentrate on composing while overseeing the combined musical/visual blueprint of the piece. The composer’s ample experience and proficiency with new digital technologies, such as the real-time interactive video software package Max/Jitter, proved an asset for the New York-based Sequitur Ensemble, which premiered the work in New York in January 2005. Carrick’s computer-driven video interface does away with a hierarchy in which one medium leads the other. Instead, conductor and musicians control each transition and the overall pacing of the piece, while maintaining synchrony between the music and video. The playback setup, calling for the same kind of sensitivity to other participants required in all chamber music performance, requires a lot of technical knowledge and planning. The video footage must accommodate flexible durations, with seamless edit points that make the video amenable to being cut to the next clip with the smoothest of transitions. Since the video in Carrick’s piece is “controlled live”—that is, edited, mixed, and superimposed in real time

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## How to Get Started

**M**ultimedia? We’ve all heard horror stories, or witnessed some disastrous technical difficulties firsthand. Indeed, even the slightest malfunction has the potential to cast a shadow of doom over the entire concert. Especially for a community traditionally grounded in the realm of the unplugged, the mere idea of relying on anything connected to a wall socket sounds more than a little risky.

**I**’ve been combining chamber music and video for more than a decade now, and have the battle scars to prove it. Back in the pre-digital era, matters such as synchronization and multi-channel video were prohibitively costly for most musicians, and any cheapo alternative e-solutions, no matter how creative, usually yielded botched results. Thankfully, the forward march of technology has rendered problems like these completely obsolete—and technology has become a useful creative tool rather than an obstacle.

**For starters, why not try experimenting with some of the software programs—such as iMovie and MovieMaker—that come standard with every new computer?** Whether or not you discover your inner *auteur*, at least the basic concepts behind video editing will soak in, and you’ll probably learn a bunch of useful acronyms to boot. (If this suggestion incites any technophobic tendencies, maybe reading a book about film art will get your visually creative juices pumping.)

**Keep in mind that a high level of tech savvy does not automatically translate into a successful piece.** Creating a strong musical/visual concept is paramount. Consider the nature of the music you plan to present and how it might be best served visually, and vice versa. If you’re an improvising ensemble, you may want to explore real-time video creation that is digitally processed on the fly. If you’re interested in creating a distinct narrative devoid of abstraction, tightly synchronized images may best serve your vision.

**Avoid falling into a chicken/egg trap—i.e., don’t let the technology drive or discourage your ideas.** The how-to is something to cope with separately, after your initial brainstorming. The more time you devote to honing your concept—articulating it to other music professionals and artists from

different backgrounds—the better off you’ll be further down the road. More likely than not, the technology to realize your ideas will be available. Of course there is a price.

**Give yourself lots of extra time.** Aside from the dollar amount spent on things such as software, LCD projectors, a DV camera, lighting equipment, technicians, etc., always be sure to factor in the learning curve. They say time is money, and acclimating to your new multimedia surroundings will take both.

**Be flexible.** No matter how solid your initial ideas are, allow room for them to expand and develop. Carefully consider any collaborators you bring on board. Think about the different ways in which they can contribute, then grant them enough creative freedom to shape the project.

**Be realistic about your identity.** If a hi-tech shadow puppet extravaganza seems to conflict with your ensemble’s current career trajectory, you may want to scrap the idea. Or fully embrace it, if unpredictable whimsy happens to be your shtick.

**Start small.** Try accompanying silent film as a hands-on trial run; the experience will intimately acquaint you with some of the challenges involved in producing live multimedia. I’m not suggesting that you enlist yourself as the umpteenth ensemble in town that’s finally getting around to tackle that certain Eisenstein classic. Instead, peruse the catalogs of film distributors, such as Canyon Cinema, dedicated to contemporary art film. Choose a short film by the likes of Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, or Warren Sonbert and discover how certain pieces in your repertoire fit within the visual framework. Experiment with various combinations and observe the results. This is a wonderful way to get familiar with the multifaceted nature of the medium. Of course, the conventions will change considerably when music no longer takes a subservient role. When music and visuals are treated equally, a more complex milieu arises.—R.N.

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from a library of videos stored inside the laptop—the technician running the interface had to rehearse the piece with the musicians as much as possible before the premiere.

Introducing video elements into chamber music—or the reverse— isn't necessarily overwhelming, but it can certainly turn out that way. For instance, when the Montreal-based Gryphon Trio (violinist Annalee Patipatanakoon, cellist Roman Borys, and pianist Jamie Parker) decided to commission a 15-minute piece from the Greek-Canadian composer Christos Hatzis, neither party realized that it was embarking on a five-year journey that would culminate in the music theater work *Constantinople*. So how did a modest commission snowball into an 85-minute, state-of-the-art blitzkrieg of video projection, complex lighting design, and surround-sound electronics, combined with all the intimacy of chamber music and a wide range of traditional singing? The trio's cellist, Roman Borys, simply says that "the piece just continued growing. Hatzis introduced the idea of having one singer of Arabic music and then to balance things out, a Western singer." It didn't take long for the show's concept to blossom into a full-fledged multimedia production that attempts to make a major statement on the meeting point (Constantinople,

*The Gryphon Trio, with singers Maryem Hassan Tollar and Patricia O'Callaghan, in Constantinople.*



literally and figuratively) of Western and Middle Eastern cultures. "After the music was completed," continues Borys, "we were left with the task of figuring out how to create the theatrical component that we wanted—how to fund it, and how to put together the right group of collaborators. Initially we tried to do things ourselves and soon discovered that we needed to start building an administration around ourselves." Eventually, the group forged partnerships with the Banff Centre, Music Toronto, Tapestry New Opera Works, and the multidisciplinary production company Ex Machina.

Borys describes *Constantinople* as "a sort of concept album, like Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, but performed live in an immersive environment" Giant scrimms and video projection create the illusion of ancient architecture and other fantastical environments. Different angles and layers are used to create depth and movement, suggesting smoking incense or the simmering refraction of water. The idea was developed through a network of collaborations and workshops, where

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—Roman Borys

feedback from a cross-section of artists from various media drove the piece into new territories. As the project developed, the musicians leaned to integrate the use of click tracks (to synchronize with the surround sound electronic component, as well as the video) and wireless in-ear monitors into the expressive fabric of chamber music performance. They also had to cope with executing extremely virtuosic passages while moving gracefully across the stage—a little more difficult than walking while chewing gum. Undaunted, Borys (who ultimately became one of the project's executive producers) insists that "one of the great things about a project like this is the massive, massive learning curve, which at times is overwhelming."

Before undertaking the project, the Gryphon Trio had only perfunctory experiences with multimedia, nothing approaching the technical sophistication of *Constantinople*. Borys mentioned a few electroacoustic compositions, as well as a piece the group performed years ago incorporating slide projections, but he insists that "multimedia was something that we were always interested in doing." With a price tag of nearly \$500,000 Canadian dollars to produce (support was obtained through public and private fund-raising), *Constantinople* was a big gamble that is beginning to pay off. It has definitely help put the trio on the map. "It's one of those projects that really helped define who we are to the general public," affirms Borys.

But not every chamber music foray into multimedia has to be a *Constantinople*. Marrying sound and image does take a lot of planning, but artful results can arise without landing you in the poorhouse. Just round up a laptop and an LCD projector—and voilà, you're practically ready for action. Before long, you can be on your way to achieving a cultivated, artistic approach to live multimedia performance, which can turn out to be an exhilarating experience for everyone involved. With such a breadth of possibilities waiting to be explored, perhaps it's time to create your own multimedia success story.

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