

Travelogue-Vilnius, August 2005: Machunas
Operamane are wont to circle the globe in search of the perfect bel canto tenor or *Ring* Cycle production. I do not share that wanderlust, not least because, however much the blend of music and theater – and (if we want to get into *Gesamtkunstwerk*) poetry and dance and art – might thrill me, I am no operamane. But late this past summer I, too, went halfway ‘round the world for an opera. Well, its creators call it a “performance oratorio,” to distinguish its unorthodox means and format from opera’s 500-year-old stage tradition. But I’m no performance-oratorimane either. What provoked my ferocious curiosity was the subject of this work and, to some extent, its librettist.

Machunas is the brainchild of Italian-American painter-photographer-writer-theorist Lucio Pozzi, whose work I followed as assiduously as possible when we were both active in New York in the 1970s and ‘80s, but with whom, and which, I have been out of touch since moving to Los Angeles. Had I simply desired a reunion with my old art buddy, I needed to go no farther than New York. Traveling all the way to Vilnius required something else: the premier of a music-theater piece that Pozzi had been working on for a decade and a half – a piece based on the life of another New Yorker, known personally to both of us, but whose artistic legacy, colorful persona and early death have rendered him a legend.

Those even passing familiar with Fluxus will recognize the name of the movement’s founder, rephonicized, in that of Pozzi’s “performance oratorio.” And those familiar with Fluxus – and especially with George Maciunas himself – will wonder how a sensibility so spare and “monogestural” could lend itself to a hybrid form that, from its very rubric, bespeaks the baroque (including what Maciunas dismissed as the “neo-baroque” of happenings and performance art). In fact, *Machunas* has practically nothing to do with Fluxus (which the libretto mentions exactly once) – and everything to do with the movement’s creator. Pozzi alit on Maciunas as an eccentric figure more tragic than comic, and the accounts of those who knew him and/or have striven to maintain his legacy through documentation – available to Pozzi in print or derived in interview – only emphasized this reading. Pozzi ultimately conceived *Machunas* as a *vita drammatica Maciuniae*, a portrait of a dreamer and émigré who cultivated and derived inspiration from his own alienation. The performance-oratorio has, to repeat, nothing to do with Fluxus – even less than does Pozzi’s own piquant but painterly artistic sensibility (sampled, handily enough, in a concurrent microerspective at Vilnius’ largest commercial gallery).

Rather, it limns a stylized psychological portrait.

The stylization may be the one aspect of the work that could have pleased its subject: its four sections are associated with colors (yellow, green, red, and blue by turns), and in the premiere staging at the Contemporary Arts Centre, each section was performed in a different space, bathed in the appropriate color. The libretto itself is poetic, ritualistic, and choreographic by turns, often moving and just as often opaque. The all-Lithuanian cast, directed by Oskaras Korsunovas, brought different levels of English diction to their realizations (further complicating the comprehensibility of the text), but their singing voices were always more than adequate, as was the playing of the St. Christopher Chamber Ensemble under the direction of Donatus Katkus, Lithuania’s leading conductor of new music. (Look for his recordings especially of modern Lithuanian music – the one most readily available in the States being the Naxos recording of Osvaldas Balakauskas’ moving *Requiem*.)

Ah yes, the music. Six years ago, after a working relationship with another musician fell apart, Pozzi was introduced to Frank Oteri, a New York-born, Columbia-trained composer about half his age. Oteri is best known to his musical colleagues as editor of the American Music Society’s on-line newsletter and as a passionate archivist of American music; but – or perhaps as a result – his own music is appealing and flexible, even ingratiating. When he is not experimenting with microtonal composition, Oteri writes (more or less) tonally, with a certain debt to the minimalism of Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and John Adams, and also to the neo-classicism of the inter-war American school (Copland, Harris, Schuman, even Bernstein). Spiced especially with a taste for tangy sonorities (especially those provided by unusual instruments), Oteri’s style is supple and self-effacing yet still distinctive. He writes sensitively for the voice and for the theater, and, with his command of idioms as diverse as rock, ragtime, and *Lieder*, knows how to animate an evening sonically. His music – and to a lesser extent the animated but, again, stylized staging and choreography – gave *Machunas* its vivacity and presence; Pozzi’s idea for the piece is eminently workable, but his actual libretto, on occasion as impractical as the man it describes, depends on music and movement to lift it off the page.

Then, most libretti do. The whole was greater, finally, than the sum of its parts – even as distinct as the parts actually were from one another. Thanks to this (knowingly) incomplete integration, to the incantatory aspects of Pozzi’s writing and Edita Stundyte’s choreography, and the multi-room, multimedia staging

that incorporated film, video, and elaborate sound and lighting, this “performance-oratorio” felt, and sounded, like one of those post-happening music-theater pieces staged with some frequency in the early years of post-modernism (i.e., the late 1960s). Indeed, the musical eclecticism Oteri has contributed to *Machunas* echoes the controlled schizophrenia of such composers then active as Stanley Silverman, Eric Salzman, Michael Sahl, and William Bolcom – musicians who were liberated by John Cage much as Maciunas and his fellow Fluxists were, but who applied their license to the reordering rather than the redefining of musical and theatrical experience.

In this sense, *Machunas* was a multimedial – and to some extent intermedial – manifestation appropriate more to the era than to the spirit of its subject. As such, the performance-oratorio is likely to annoy purists, intrigue historians, and entertain more casual (but still discerning) audiences. Were I a Fluxus partisan, as opposed to fellow traveler, I’d probably have taken umbrage at such flattening of Maciunas into myth and the decorous fuss with which *Machunas* does so. But all forms of multiartistic integration interest me, whether on the monogestural level of Fluxus, the polygestural level of the Happening, or the omnigestural level of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; and in its ambitions towards the latter, *Machunas* proved more than a little engaging. With any luck, discussions about remounting it in Germany and over here will come to fruition.

A word about Vilnius itself, and the country it serves as capital. The town is establishing itself as an active outpost for contemporary art, and its museums and art foundations seem to be proliferating and flourishing as former exiles move back and a whole new generation emerges. Indeed, it was hard to believe that the city and the country were run by *apparatchiks* as recently as a decade and a half ago, and that their struggle for re-independence was a rough one. Somehow, Lithuania was never refashioned into much of a workers’ paradise; the klutzy, rusty apartment buildings from the Communist era seem mostly confined to the Vilnian periphery, and the town’s center is gently haunted by its 18th century ghosts. That is to say, the heart of Vilnius is not a well-preserved historical theme park like, say, Prague’s Old City, but the footprint of its pre-industrial past – including the two ghettos that, at their zenith, comprised the cultural locus of northern European Judaism – does define the shape and flow of the entire city center.

As interesting, Kaunas, Lithuania’s second largest city, has its own character – more modern, but no less distinctive. My last day in Lithuania I took the hour and a half bus ride west to Maciunas’ birthplace, not to

locate the Maciunas family manse (which I’m not even sure still stands) but to the museum devoted to Lithuania’s national artist *and* national composer, Mikhailis Čiurlionis. The short-lived turn-of-the-last-century painter-pianist was a dyed-in-the-silk symbolist in both sound and image, taking up where, variously, Alexander Scriabin and Odilon Redon left off. The museum documents Čiurlionis in exhaustive (but not exhausting) detail, and also takes one through the country’s modernist-era art. The contemporary art museum down the road was closed by the time I got there (alas, as it features a Fluxus collection given it by several of the movement’s participants); but the real Kaunian revelation had already begun. As I hiked through Kaunas back to the bus station, I realized I was walking amidst elegant, and often quite distinctive, Art Deco buildings. During Lithuania’s last bout of self-rule (1922-1940), Kaunas, not Vilnius, was its national capital. (Vilnius had been annexed by Poland – annexed *back*, some Poles might aver. Don’t get me started on the history of the region, least of all on the cultural elbowing the Lithuanians and Poles engage in constantly.) Art Deco was the fashionable architecture for a “new capital” circa 1928, and a lot of it has survived the intervening miseries.

Cultural tourism in Vilnius itself, as indicated, is modest but promising. There is a contemporary sculpture park out the north end of town (near the purported “geographic center” of Europe), but – despite the bucolic setting and the participation of such as Dennis Oppenheim and Magdalena Abakanovic – it’s not really worth the shlep. More engaging is the Kazys Varnelis House Museum, practically around the corner from the Contemporary Arts Centre. The museum, housed in a fifteenth-century building, houses the personal collection of the geometric painter Kazys Varnelis, who worked in Chicago, and then western Massachusetts, for about a half century before returning to his native land in 1998. Varnelis brought with him an impressive collection of art and artifacts, including many impressive Asian objects, an engrossing collection of maps particularly of Lithuania and environs, and even American items (e.g. a Remington bronze). Varnelis’ own work from the 1960s edges on Op Art, anticipates Pattern Painting, and at its best bridges quasi-architectural tendencies in Midwestern and eastern European abstraction.

In Massachusetts, Varnelis lived only a few miles from George Maciunas’ last residence. Evidently, they never met. And, to my regret, Varnelis and I did not meet, either. Nor, to my greater regret, did I get to meet Vytautas Landsbergis, re-independent Lithuania’s first president. And the leading authority on Čiurlionis. And Fluxus’ one representative in the USSR, back in the day. And Maciunas’ high-school chum. Now a Lithuanian delegate to the European Union Congress in Brussels, Landsbergis was not in Vilnius at the time of *Machunas*’ premiere. I wonder what his reception of the performance-oratorio would have been – or will be, if he’s able to catch up with it in one of its future avatars. With any luck, I’ll be there as well; the staging of *Machunas* is ripe for evolution, depending on who’s mounting it and where.

– Peter Frank