

Detroit's New Smorgasbord of a Symphony

By George Loomis, *MusicalAmerica.com*

November 23, 2015



DETROIT—This city is riding high in self-esteem these days, which, together with a \$350,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, made it a likely subject for Tod Machover's *Symphony in D*. The work had its world premiere over the weekend (heard November 21) at Orchestra Hall.

Like Machover's previous urban outings, which include works written for Toronto and three European cities, *Symphony in D* draws not only on the full resources of a symphony orchestra but also on sounds captured by Machover and submitted by city residents. In remarks prior to the performance, Machover described the mobile app he designed to facilitate collecting and transmitting them. He ended up with 15,000 sound files, or 100 hours of audio. Machover, director of the MIT Media Lab, is known for inventing new technologies for music, sometimes of an esoteric nature. It is refreshing to find his achievements channeled into something that—given the enthusiastic reception *Symphony in D* received—a normal concert audience could respond to and appreciate.

Titles of the five movements of the 35-minute work hint at the kinds of sounds they involve, yet whether you actually could discern them depended a lot on your imagination. I can't say for certain that the sounds of a factory were embedded in the first movement, designated "Rhythm and Bolts," though I did hear a lot of sputtering from disparate orchestral instruments—and possibly from the big speakers mounted above the stage—as the movement gradually stirred to life. Those sounds eventually supported a broadly phrased legato theme that unfolded in the violins, yet they continued to grow in complexity, eventually helping to create the sense that several different things were going on once, from which you could choose what to focus on.

Other movements followed suit, often amassing big, aural smorgasbords that invariably proved exhilarating, even if specific strains were unrecognizable. From the title of the second movement, "Black Bottom Bass," a dance named after a Detroit neighborhood, it was more obvious what Machover was driving at. With snare drum and cymbals as a constant presence, the movement climaxed in a stunning barrage of jazzy rhythms.

Symphony in D is apparently the first of Machover's "city symphonies" to incorporate live speakers. These showed up in the fourth movement, "Memories and Dreams," and ranged from succinct expressions from school children of their hopes for the city to eloquent contributions with poetic flair by two African-American women, Marsha Music and Tonya Matthews, that touched on instances of racial tension, including the riots of the late 1960s. Other voices were heard speaking fondly of Detroit's long gone streetcars and excursion steamers known as the Bob-Lo boats. Too bad we couldn't have heard the actual sounds of these relics.

The spoken contributions clearly stirred feelings of civic consciousness, yet they interrupted the continuity of the work and seemed peripheral to its artistic mission. It was thus welcome when *Symphony in D* soldiered on with a fittingly expansive final movement, which, in recognition of

Detroit's significant Middle Eastern population, included the participation of the Saint Joseph Chaldean Catholic Church Choir. The movement also reinforced the presence of the tonality of D, which had been prominent earlier as well, sometimes as a kind of pedal point beneath other musical activity. Thus, although *Symphony in D* is by no means a tonal work, its title connotes something akin to its traditional meaning. Constant repetition of a rising scale pattern pushed the work on to its resounding conclusion.

Earlier, the orchestra's music director, Leonard Slatkin, who deftly coordinated the vast and highly capable forces assembled for *Symphony in D*, led the orchestra in Dvorák's Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in B minor, with Wei Yu as soloist. Yu, who joined the orchestra in January as principal cello after seven years with the New York Philharmonic, gave a reflective and warmly played performance that was especially fine in the concerto's lyrical moments. The outer movements, however, could have benefited from greater intensity, especially in the initial statements of their principal themes.

[Tod Machover (pictured) is Musical America's 2016 Composer of the Year.]

Copyright © 2016, Musical America