Ice Cream Time: The Raunchy and the Rigorous

"I can think of no one else whose music combines the raunchy and the rigorous, the tender and the hyper, or the intricate and the intense with quite this passionate persuasiveness."

—Fred Frith, Prologue to *Skin*

Nick Didkovsky is an accomplished composer, virtuoso guitarist, and computer programmer who works on the cusp between the concert hall and the rock-and-roll club—territory that is only now beginning to be taken seriously. In his book *American Music in the Twentieth Century* Kyle Gann has written that "Nick Didkovsky is one of the most unusual composers of his generation, with a computer-generated complexity to his ensemble music that goes beyond totalism."[1] Didkovsky's compositions are rigorously conceived, yet leave plenty of room for spontaneous input. He freely combines intuition with meticulous systematic techniques. He has tapped into what one might describe as a typically American way of making music—iconoclastic and formalist without being overly uptight. Combining complex rhythms, harmonies, and textures with the visceral energy of rock music he creates work that is cutting-edge (albeit more Downtown than Uptown), rigorous, and subversive. His employment of asymmetrical meters, gratuitous dissonance, and tonally ambiguous harmonies rubs against the pop sensibility implied by the compositional forms and instrumentation with which he works. The aspects of directness or accessibility inherent in his work refuse to kowtow to Romantic notions of beauty, or a bankrupt Postmodernist pastiche. The sense of compositional and technological inventiveness in Didkovsky's music bears resemblance to that of other maverick composer-hacker-performers such as Salvatore Martirano, Larry Polansky, David Rosenboom, and George Lewis.

Didkovsky was born in New York City in 1958. After spending his first six years in the Bronx he moved to a small rural town in Connecticut. During these early formative years he received a gift of a reel-to-reel tape recorder that the manufacturer branded as a "sound camera." Being able to manipulate the pacing and direction of musical time had a profound and lasting impact on him. The young Didkovsky discovered how to thread the tape to play in reverse. He recalls this experience as "an early abstraction of sound as well as a concretization of it: being able to hold tape in my hands and make time go backwards."[2]

Fast forwarding to the next decade, we find Didkovsky studying with Christian Wolff at Dartmouth College, Gerald Shapiro at Brown University, and then with Dave Holland and Pauline Oliveros at the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York. During the 1970s and early 1980s the Creative Music Studio fostered a communal hotbed of musical activity comparable to Black Mountain College in the early 1950s. According to Robert E. Sweet, "there has never been another school, or instructional musical offering of any type, that has brought together so many of the world's leading improvising or contemporary classical (or simply uncategorizable) musicians."[3] In addition to Oliveros and Holland the long and distinguished list of teachers included well-known composers and improvisers such as Carla Bley, Anthony Braxton, John Cage, Alvin Curran, and John Zorn. Karl Berger, the guiding force behind the Creative Music Studio, encouraged students to develop a highly disciplined sense of self-expression, fueled by a precision of detail. The year he spent at the Creative Music Studio was a very formative experience for Didkovsky. With Oliveros he honed various experimental approaches to composition and improvisation, through participation in reflective listening exercises, reaction exercises, and using compact sets of rules to initiate musical processes. Additionally, the impetus to form Doctor Nerve, a New York City–based avant-garde chamber rock band, was developed during his stay in Woodstock.

Since 1983 Didkovsky's primary compositional focus has been on works for Doctor Nerve. These works feature repetitive asymmetrical computer-generated pulse patterns, improvisation, and washes of noise.[4] His computer-generated melodies and rhythms twist and turn in unpredictable ways, referencing musical tokens from the works of Igor Stravinsky and Bela Bartók, but also Alice Cooper and Led Zeppelin. Didkovsky utilizes extreme forms of expression such as complex beat subdivisions, leaping, angular melodies, and off-balance ensemble coordination. Additionally, he mixes or juxtaposes different styles within a given piece, often resulting in convoluted humor. The shadow of Frank Zappa looms large behind this music, as it also does behind almost all avant-garde chamber rock bands. From the early 1960s on Zappa experimented with sound-mass timbres (taking his cue from his favorite composer, Edgard Varèse), asymmetrical time signatures, conducted improvisation, and musical parody. Comparing Doctor Nerve with similar bands from Europe such as Henry Cow, Univers Zero, Present, and Samlas Mammas Manna, we find some more typically American characteristics. Didkovsky's music for Doctor Nerve generally avoids long dramatic forms, or the use of dissonance for its associative power. As in jazz, improvised solos play major roles after the initial introduction of thematic materials, as do clear-cut structural forms.

From Oliveros,[5] Didkovsky found out about Polansky, Rosenboom, and Phil Burk, creators of the Hierarchical Music Specification Language (HMSL) at the Mills Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College in Oakland, California. HMSL was a general-purpose music programming language for the Commodore Amiga and Apple Macintosh computers. Didkovsky quickly became one of the most important contributors to the HMSL user community. He produced not only a body of code, but also pieces such as *Lottery* that employed a sonic realization of Douglas R. Hofstadter's model for a unified rational strategy for cooperation in a competitive society, exploiting HMSL's shape-driven, interpolative processes to do so. After the death of the Amiga (Didkovsky's computer of choice at the time) he sought to extend and broaden HMSL by creating a program that was flexible, stylistically neutral, and portable between different machines and operating systems. The result was JMSL (Java Music Specification Language), which he co-authored with Burk. JMSL is an experimental music composition language written in the Java programming language. Didkovsky has used JMSL in much of his recent work, and has given several papers about it at annual conferences of the International Computer Music Association. JMSL was used to compose almost all of *Ice Cream Time*.

In 2001 Sascha Armbruster of the ARTE Quartett approached Didkovsky with an idea for commissioning an evening-length work for saxophone quartet and electric guitar. Didkovsky responded with *Ice Cream Time*, a multi-movement piece scored for saxophone quartet, electric guitar, and live electronics. The piece received its premiere in April of 2003 at the Theatre Palazzo in Liestal, Switzerland. As might be expected, *Ice Cream Time* embraces, or engages with, a wide range of influences and material contrasts. Nine of the movements feature live sampling by Thomas Dimuzio, whose job was to capture and process the saxophone and guitar sounds in real time, using his Kurzweil K2600RS. Because the unaltered signals are also heard, a rich and subtle texture was produced.

Overall, *Ice Cream Time*'s large-scale form loosely resembles a kind of theme and variations. Actually there are two themes that glue this piece together. The first is a raw, eleven-second answering machine recording[6] of a child's voice informally reciting a short text by Didkovsky. This initial recording is brought back in several subsequent movements as processed samples. For example, in "Seltzer Session I" the output from the guitar is driving a wave shaper loaded with the answering machine soundfile. The result is short bursts of the guitar mixed with garbled segments of the sampled vocal. It is worth noting that this real-time sampling process is recursive and interactive. The performers being sampled also interact and respond to the sounds that are played back to them. The second theme is a quirky, four measure melody first heard in "Meteoric Ice Pie Menace" and then again in "Ice Cream Time Tango" and "Waiting." For this melody Didkovsky employs offbeat accents, triplets and ties, set against an ostinato bass line, to produce an unpredictable off- balance effect.

After the introductory vocal, *Ice Cream Time* kicks off with the "Ice Cream Time Fanfare," a satirical, drunken revelry of blaring saxophones, loose heterophony, and the kind of rhythmic imprecision one might encounter upon attempting to walk a straight line when inebriated. Didkovsky's score instructions ask the performers to play this movement "sloppily, drunkenly, celebrational, with ad lib interjections, glisses between notes, improv, repeat until cue." To achieve this the ARTE Quartett brilliantly employs flaccid embouchures, split tones, and intentional squeaks. One moment they sound like rank beginners, the next an accomplished, professional saxophone quartet. The "Ice Cream Time Fanfare" presents an Ivesian sense of musical realism (one might imagine sheet cake, party hats, and horns) that returns during the subsequent tenor saxophone solos. Toward the end of this movement the baritone saxophone begins to play the ostinato bass line that serves as a link between the first two movements.

The rhythmic precision and contrapuntal identity in the next movement, "Meteoric Ice Pie Menace" is in marked contrast to the "Ice Cream Time Fanfare," underscoring the principal dialectic between intuitively derived materials and those produced with computer assistance. Didkovsky's infatuation with sonic reversal is also in evidence. After presenting the second theme the soprano saxophone and guitar essentially play the same line, but at different speeds. Combined with the live processing and envelope manipulation, a sense of tape, or soundfile, reversal is marvelously conjured—acoustic means to achieve electronic effects.

One of the most unusual and powerful aspects of *Ice Cream Time* is Didkovsky's use of long, static textures from unedited algorithmic output produced by JMSL. "Fall," "Calm" and "Rise" each address the principle of stasis in a different way. All three involve computer-generated trajectories of musical states. Didkovsky set by hand the values from twelve parameters (such as pitch mean and harmonic complexity) for the beginning and end of the movement. He then selected interpolator shapes to guide how each parameter changes and evolves over the movement's duration. In "Fall" the sense of evolution is palpable. An initial panoply of tuplet subdivisions[7] (cast within a muddy timbral palette of tenor saxophone and three baritone saxophones) takes a largely linear path from beginning to end. The number of attacks per measure

lessens as the textural density thins. In "Calm" the sense of evolution is less obvious, as if a flat shape had been used to govern the transformations. The effect here is poignantly ambient, with the consistently thick texture marked by pitch-class duplications and overlapping sustains. This is probably the closest Didkovsky will come to traditional notions of beauty. "Rise" is a fourteen-minute algorithmic *tour de force*. Throughout this movement Didkovsky performs an octave drone using an EBow. The two notes periodically pass in and out of phase. Meanwhile, the saxophone quartet begins in a three-octave spread. Slowly, additional pitches are added leading to increased chromatic dissonance. Finally, the saxophones drop out leaving the guitar and sampler to end the piece with a three-minute, paranormal fade.

Didkovsky's music reflects current trends and practices including the use of live, interactive computer-assistance, genre jumping, and blurring the distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow. Although the accoutrements of Western tonality are never far off, his musical sensibility allows for some radical departures from the stock-and-trade of tonality. Didkovsky is attracted to the ambiguous boundaries between human-generated and software-generated materials. Whether generated with algorithms, improvisation, and/or audio processing *Ice Cream Time* is a sweet ride.

—*Ross Feller*

Ross Feller is an Assistant Professor of Composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and co-founder of the avant-garde chamber-rock group Dot Dot Dot. Information about Feller and his work is available at www.rossfeller.com.

Endnotes:

1. Gann, p. 380.
2. Correspondence with the author.
3. From the introduction to *Music Universe, Music Mind: Revisiting the Creative Music Studio, Woodstock, New York,"* by Robert E. Sweet. Ann Arbor: Arborvillle Publishing, 1996.
4. See Feller 2000.
5. Oliveros recommended that he contact Polansky after Didkovsky sent her a letter in which he described a simultaneously cooperative and competitive social model he wanted to compositionally replicate.
6. Didkovsky often re-uses material from previous projects. This eleven-second recording first appeared on a compact disc titled *Binky Boy,* introducing a thirty-second demented funk tune called "Bubenwagen."
7. In fact the subdivisions within, and between, beats are so complex that the overall effect is chaotic, and paradoxically improvisatory.

Composer's note

We are performing the final moments of *Ice Cream Time*'s premiere at the Theatre Palazzo in Liestal, Switzerland. The theater is near the train station, and during our rehearsals we'd sometimes feel the theater rumbling. It occurred to me during these rehearsals that when the music got quiet enough we'd probably hear the trains during our performance as well. Now the last movement is disappearing and we descend into "Rise"'s final long fade. At one moment I am not sure if I am really hearing the sound any more or if I am imagining it. A train goes by and its rumble throws a blanket over us, and for maybe half a minute we've lost the fading sound. Now the train is gone and we find everyone in the theater is still listening, with ears bigger than before, straining to hear what is left before it is completely covered by silence. We cross the threshold from external to internal listening, and when the latter no longer convinces us that it is real, the performance is over and the spell passes.

Listen with care.

—Nick Didkovsky
August 1, 2007, New York City

Nick Didkovsky (born 1958) is a guitarist, composer, and software programmer. In 1983, he founded the avant-rock septet Doctor Nerve. He presently resides in New York City, where he composes, creates music software, and teaches computer music composition at New York University and Columbia University. He has composed music for Bang on a Can All-Stars, Meridian Arts Ensemble, Fred Frith Guitar Quartet, California EAR Unit, New Century Players, Ethel String Quartet, Electric Kompany, ARTE Quartett, and other ensembles.

Didkovsky's work with Doctor Nerve joins the furious energy of rock with intricate composition, some of which finds its origins in rich software systems of his own design. His non-didactic approach to combining human and machine creativity is his unique fingerprint in a musical world that pushes the boundaries of rock music, algorithmic composition, and contemporary music.

Didkovsky is a member of the Fred Frith Guitar Quartet, which to date has released two CDs, *Ayaya Moses* and *Upbeat* (Ambiances Magnetiques). Didkovsky has contributed twelve compositions to the ensemble. His trio, Bone, with bassist Hugh Hopper (ex-Soft Machine) and drummer John Roulat released their first record on Cuneiform Records.

With Phil Burk, Didkovsky created Java Music Specification Language (JMSL), a language for computer music composition written in the Java programming language. JMSL was premiered at Circuits: The Governor's Conference on Arts and Technology, in Palisades, New York, in March 1998. In 2003, Minnesota Public Radio commissioned Didkovsky to design a JMSL version of the Rhythmicon, an electronic musical instrument originally designed by Henry Cowell and Leon Theremin in 1930. It is hosted at www.musicmavericks.org/rhythmicon and was featured on *The Art of the Virtual Rhythmicon* (Innova). Didkovsky has presented papers on JMSL at three International Computer Music Conferences (2001, 2004, 2006), and the JavaOne Conference (2003).

Didkovsky has received commissioning grants from The Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, Meet the Composer's Commissioning/Music USA, the Jerome Foundation, and numerous privately funded initiatives. He has received recording grants from The Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust and The Aaron Copland Fund. He was awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts Computer Arts Fellowship to support his work in computer music composition and performance.

The **ARTE Quartett** was founded in 1993 by saxophonists Beat Hofstetter, Sascha Armbruster, Andrea Formenti, and Beat Kappeler. The musicians have a classical background yet they are stylistically open-minded, as demonstrated by their intense cooperation with musicians and composers of various styles. The ARTE Quartett is mainly committed to contemporary music and its various aspects. Since the foundation of the quartet, ARTE has collaborated closely with many composers, which has permitted the group to be involved in the actual compositional process. ARTE has premiered a large number of commissions. Part of the concept is a clearly structured and well-reasoned programming as well as working repeatedly on larger projects. During past years ARTE's projects have included concerts with Terry Riley, Tim Berne, Urs Leimgruber, Fred Frith, Pierre Favre, Nick Didkovsky, Nik Bärtsch, Lucas Niggli, and Nadir Vassena. The quartet tours regularly and plays in various festivals and concert series and has recorded a wide number of new pieces with various national broadcast companies.
www.arte-quartett.com

Thomas Dimuzio is a composer, musician, mastering engineer, and label proprietor based in San Francisco. Long regarded as a musical pioneer for his innovative use of live sampling and studio techniques to create consistently compelling works, Dimuzio has earned a deserved reputation worldwide as an avant-garde sound artist in touch with the aesthetic pulse of time and technology. A true sonic alchemist who can seemingly create music events out of almost anything, Dimuzio's listed sound sources on his various CDs include everything from "modified 10-speed bicycle" and "resonating water pipe" to short-wave radios, loops, feedback, samplers, and even normal instruments such as clarinet and trumpet. Effortlessly moving from electroacoustic and noise to glitch, dark ambient, improv, and drone, Dimuzio's eclecticism bespeaks a career equally informed by profound dedication to his craft and collaborations with friends, artists, and technologists alike. Thomas Dimuzio's recordings have been released by ReR Megacorp, Asphodel, RRRecords, Sonoris, Korm Plastics, Gench, and other independent labels. Among his frequent collaborators are Chris Cutler, Fred Frith, Dan Burke, Joseph Hammer, David Lee Myers, 5uu's, Due Process, Matmos, Wobbly, and Negativland. Forthcoming releases include projects with Dimmer (Melon Expander), Dan Burke (No Fun Records), and Poptastic Noise Productions (Seeland). www.thomasdimuzio.com

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Amalia's Secret. Included on Bang on a Can All-Stars, *Classics.* Cantaloupe Music CA 21010.

The Art of the Virtual Rhythmicon. Works made using the online instrument created by Nick Didkovsky for <musicmavericks.org> after an idea by Henry Cowell and Leon Theremin. Various artists. Innova 120.

Binky Boy. Nick Didkovsky, electric guitar; with guests Fred Frith, Rene Lussier, Mark Howell, and Mark Stewart. Punos Music PM0003.

Brink. Meridian Arts Ensemble. Channel Classics 23206 SACD.

Ereia. Doctor Nerve and Sirius String Quartet. Cuneiform, Rune 126.

Skin. Doctor Nerve. Cuneiform, Rune 70.

Swim This. Nick Didkovsky, tabletop guitar and homebrew software; Michael Lytle, bass and contrabass clarinet, prerecorded tape; Gerry Hemingway, drums, voice with occasional processing. Punos Music PM0006.

Tube Mouth Bow String: Music for electric guitar, string quartet, computer, and live electronics. Sirius String Quartet, Nick Didkovsky, Barbara Benary. Pogus Productions 21042-2.

Upbeat. Fred Frith Guitar Quartet. Includes Didkovsky's *Antaeus, To Laugh Uncleanly at the Nurse,* and *Out To Bomb Fresh Kings.* Ambiances Magnetiques AM 063 CD.

Uses Wrist Grab. Bone: Hugh Hopper, electric bass; John Roulat, drums and percussion; Nick Didkovsky, guitar. Cuneiform, Rune 176.

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Gann, Kyle. *American Music in the Twentieth Century.* New York: Schirmer Books, 1997.

Polansky, Larry. Introduction to the score for *Skin.* New York: Punos Music, 1995.

Web sites

Ice Cream Time page: www.punosmusic.com/pages/icecreamtime

Didkovsky's compositions and interactive software instruments available at: www.punosmusic.com

Software for live audio processing: www.punosmusic.com/pages/musicforhotspots

Doctor Nerve's Homepage: www.doctornerve.org

Didkovsky demonstrates algorithmic composition to an audience of children: www.youtube.com/watch?v=huX_P34xv50&feature=PlayList&p=2174BD9A35DF9216&index=4

Producer: Nick Didkovsky

Engineer: Ron Kurz

Mastered by Thomas Dimuzio

Mixing and post production by Nick Didkovsky and Thomas Dimuzio at Gench Studios, San Francisco.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions, NYC

Recorded September 23 and 24, 2006 at SRG (Swiss National Radio) Studio 2, Zurich, Switzerland.

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

Ice Cream Time was commissioned by the ARTE Quartett. All tracks composed by Nick Didkovsky except "Ice Cream Time Song" by Didkovsky & Booli Selmayr, and "Seltzer Sessions I and II" by Didkovsky & Dimuzio.

Thanks to Peter Bürli, Booli Selmayr, Phil Burk, Charles Ames, Susanne Schneider Formenti, Gabi Mächler, Wendy Roberts, Karin Dornbusch and Dr. Biit.

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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NICK DIDKOVSKY (b. 1958)
ICE CREAM TIME
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Ice Cream Time (2003) 57:19

1. Ice Cream Time Song	:11
2. Ice Cream Time Fanfare	1:06
3. Meteoric Ice Pie Menace	4:20
4. Seltzer Session I	:20
5. Ice Cream Time Tango	4:10
6. Fall	7:54
7. Seltzer Session II	7:26
8. I Cheer Pet Eater	5:12
9. Trades	1:20
10. Calm	5:39
11. Waiting	5:34
12. Rise	14:00

Nick Didkovsky, electric guitar, laptop; Thomas Dimuzio, sampling, live sampling, and processing; ARTE Quartett: Beat Hofstetter, soprano and baritone saxophone; Sascha Armbruster, alto and baritone saxophone; Andrea Formenti, tenor saxophone; Beat Kappeler, baritone saxophone

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