

SYNTHESIS

Nathan Avakian

With *Synthesis* Nathan Avakian shows us the future of keeping interest in the theatre pipe organ alive. For some period of time Wurlitzer identified their organs as Unit Orchestras. In his latest release Nathan is not merely the organist but rather conductor of both a *unit* orchestra and *virtual* orchestra—more about that later.

Synthesis is not for the faint of heart. You are not going to hear much that reminisces George Wright or Jesse Crawford and their sacred tibias and voxes. You are not going to hear any wild harmonies ala John Seng, Billy Nalle, or Dan Bellomy; you are not in Kansas anymore! *Synthesis* is high-energy theatre pipe organ pop music at its finest.

Generally speaking Nathan's registrations are not overly dependent on tibias. Why would they be, with 70-plus ranks just a fingertip away? Nathan's approach to the organ registration would make him perfectly at home playing early-opus Wurlitzers where the Tibia Clausa and big leather-lipped Diaphonic Diapason only contributed power, not color.

As a teenage nerd and since, I never have been a fan of most popular songs or pop performers—especially the last 21 years. What is so significant about 21 years? Well, 21 years ago the Organ Grinder closed. That crushing event made me an old emitter of noxious gas so trying to make intelligent commentary about many of Nathan's selections is difficult. So I won't. I don't need to. Let's just say they all are skillfully played and sound terrific.

The Clint Eastwood movie *Jersey Boys* is the story of four friends who formed the singing group that came to be known as *The Four*

Seasons. Nathan constructs a medley from three of their many hits, "December 1963 (Oh, What a Night)," "Who Loves You" and "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You." Of the three, "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You" is the only title I recognize, and that is only because George Wright played it at one of his several Portland concert appearances.

The opening track, "King of New York," was written by Alan Menkin, so you know it has to be good, and it kicks off *Synthesis* with an energetic, brassy big band sound.

Nathan balances *Synthesis*' fireworks with three heartfelt ballads. "Somewhere in Time" is absolutely gorgeous featuring the Nethercutt Collection's magnificent Bösendorfer Imperial grand piano. Also making good use of the Bösendorfer is "The Luckiest" where Nathan adds his own vocal talents. The third ballad, and final track, is John Lennon's "Imagine" and features a vocal duet by Nathan and his sister Claire.

Speaking of Claire, wait until you hear her sing "Orange Colored Sky" with her brother's Nelson Riddle-like accompaniment. I first heard Claire at the 2010 Seattle ATOS Convention and was not particularly impressed. Now, seven years later, all I can say is WOW! Broadway, your next musical theatre star is waiting at the stage door.

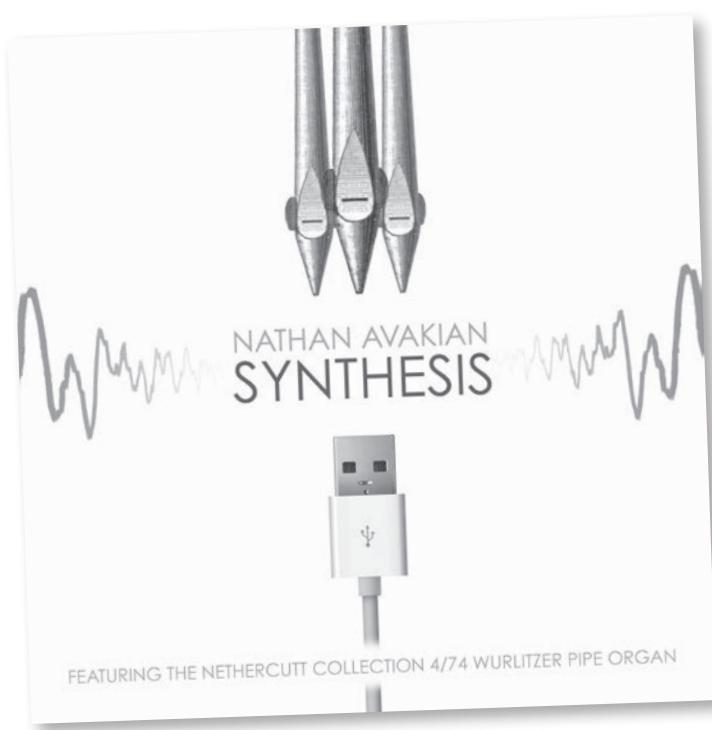
Not surprising, another title unrecognizable to me is a catchy little tune by the Madden Brothers, "We are Done." Finding it on YouTube I discovered its accompaniment is what made it so interesting to me. Comparing it to Nathan's performance I realized he duplicated that quirky accompaniment spot-on right down to the live whistler.

From the baroque period comes a popular encore piece titled "Rondo in G." Usually attributed to John Bull—but more likely composed by, or at least freely arranged by, Richard Ellsasser from some obscure John Bull tune. Researching *New Groves Dictionary of Music*, there is no mention of any rondo by John Bull. I found one sheet-music source describing it as "joyful" and states it should be played "bright and loud and as fast as possible." I have heard it played faster than Nathan's rendition (by no less than Ellsasser himself) but never more spritely and joyous.

The 11:29 *Queen Tribute* medley has only one title I recognize: "We Are the Champions." It is not important that I am not familiar with the other titles, "Fat Bottomed Girls," "Crazy Little Thing Called Love," "Don't Stop Me Now," "Killer Queen," "Somebody to Love" and "Bohemian Rhapsody." All are pleasant listening.

If you like your music really smoking—habanero chili pepper hot—Nathan has just the thing for you with Charlie Daniels Band's "The Devil Went Down to Georgia." I worked up a sweat just tapping my feet to it.

Now, about Nathan's virtual orchestra: Most theatre pipe organs are recorded by placing a pair of microphones in some optimal location, then pressing the record button giving you two-track stereo. In the pre-stereo monaural days Mercury Records made great recordings of 100-piece symphony orchestras with only one



perfectly placed Telefunken microphone capturing the ideal balance between orchestra presence and hall ambience. Mercury called their technique “Living Presence.” For many years now symphony orchestras and every other variety of musical ensemble, whether recorded live on location or in-studio, use a multitude and variety of microphones. This often means each instrument and each vocalist is assigned their own microphone channel or track. For instance, a drum kit has many drums, cymbals and miscellaneous other things to strike. Each of those drums and cymbals can be thought of as individual instruments, each given their own designated channel or track.

We are all familiar with digital sampling in organs pioneered by Allen Organs. Instead of synthesizing the sound of organ pipes (not a good solution), select pipes in a given rank are recorded in close proximity for several seconds and stored in memory for future recall and processing. The same can be done with every other instrument, including the human voice.

Several libraries are available containing hundreds if not thousands of sampled instruments and miscellaneous sounds. Now acting as arranger, Nathan can import whatever instrumentation or effect he wants into a desktop workstation, each with its own track, and score them as he wishes. He can make minute volume changes in any instrument/track to get just the right intra-instrumental balance for his virtual orchestra.

With a Uniflex-controlled organ he can record all the takes he wants or needs of every tune, and choose the best for the final inter-instrumental mix—and, voilá, the real unit orchestra becomes one with the virtual unit orchestra—and *Synthesis* comes to life.

Nathan’s most extensive use of virtual instruments is evident in the Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* medley. Comprised of “Latika’s Theme,” “Mausam & Escape” and “Jai Ho,” he uses 37 tracks of virtual instrumentation plus three more for the Nethercutt Collection’s 74-rank Wurlitzer and Bösendorfer.

You may have noticed I have not formally referred to this artist as “Mr. Avakian.” It has always been the less formal “Nathan.” Sure, he is a personal friend and some might think my high praise is too personal and therefore illegitimate. But it is not. I have played a small part in launching Nathan’s career, recording and editing his first soundtrack compositions for the International Youth Silent Film Festival and his first CD album, *Out of the Box*, but I assure you my comments are totally professional.

In 2011 I gave Charlie Balogh’s *Maestro* five stars describing it as a “landmark effort” in making the theatre organ viable in the 21st century. Having said that, I think Nathan Avakian’s *Synthesis* is outstanding in every respect and has elevated pipes and digital chip collaborations to the next level.

For this album’s purposes the Nethercutt Collection’s organ is ideal because the space that it speaks into is essentially non-reverberant. This means the organ and virtual instruments sound like they are all playing together in the same acoustic space, unlike

what usually happens when a theatre organ and anything else are recorded together—the organ sounds distant and the digital augmentations are in your face.

The way this organ was recorded is flawless. Nathan’s keyboard technique is pin-point accurate. His understanding of virtual instrumentation is complete and his artistic imagination is transcendent. I cannot recommend *Synthesis* highly enough and award it five super nova stars.

Synthesis is available as a download from iTunes or on CD for \$20.00 from www.avakianmusic.com/product-page/Synthesis.

—Dennis Hedberg

(EDITOR’S NOTE: Our policy for reviewing precludes anyone who (1) was involved in the production of a CD, (2) is a current performing artist, or (3) has an ongoing personal or professional relationship with the artist from reviewing any particular CD. The third restriction is often the most difficult to adhere to, simply because the theatre organ world is a small world indeed, and pretty much everybody knows everybody else.

We made a conscious decision to ask Dennis to review *Synthesis* for three reasons: first, he understands perhaps better than anyone else what it takes to make a successful marriage of old and new technology as demonstrated on *Synthesis*; second, he has a direct point for comparison with his previous review of Charlie Balogh’s *Maestro*; and third (and perhaps most importantly) we have absolute faith in his ability to put his personal relationship with Nathan aside and produce a totally objective review.

Some may cry foul, and that is a risk we knew we would run. But we believe that Dennis totally met our expectations of objectivity. In editing this review, if we had been left with any sense that his comments were influenced by his—and our—friendship with the artist, you would not be reading this review.)



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