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A tour de force on the idea of ideas

By Matthew Guerrieri Globe Correspondent

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MEDFORD — In the beginning was the word: an ironic foundation for what conductor Alan Pierson and composer Scott Johnson both called an “atheist oratorio,” though Johnson added that he enjoyed the irony of that traditionally religious musical form being used to dissect religion. The words came courtesy of philosopher Daniel Dennett, whose recorded voice undergirds “Mind Out of Matter,” Johnson’s 75-minute opus, performed by Alarm Will Sound on Friday at Tufts University, punctuating a daylong symposium on Dennett’s ideas.

The big idea was ideas — Dennett’s theory that ideas are Darwinian, adapting, competing, and proliferating (or not) the same way organisms do under natural selection. Religion, for Dennett, is no more or less than a successful adaptation, taking the human instinct to assign agency to every event (a reflex prone, as Dennett puts it, to “false positives”) and exploiting it, by way of repetition of advantageous tenets, into a dogmatic belief system.

Johnson’s method (which he has pursued since the 1980s) bends music around the spoken word. Dennett’s speech (derived from a lecture and an interview with Johnson) was teased apart, phrases and words looped and echoed, but otherwise left as-is; the music shadowed it precisely, rhythms matched exactly, the pitch level approximated to the nearest chromatic equivalent — or, in passages meant to be especially optimistic or stirring, filtered into Copland-like diatonic anthems. But Johnson also was pursuing another agenda, the re-integration of popular musics and vernacular influences into the concert hall. The piece regularly, pointedly settled into a stylized but overt backbeat.

The music was a maze of shifting gears, occasionally diffusing its impact, but just as often keeping the attention perpetually primed. At their best, the effects were uncanny and ingenious, and, in performance, virtuosic. Alarm Will Sound — 16 players strong — delivered a tour de force, hitting their marks, many juggling multiple instruments, giving dash to what is, by definition, a ruthlessly deterministic score. (For one movement, a subset of the players set their instruments down to sing a fairly tricky choral accompaniment, and even that was estimable.)

What was particularly fascinating about “Mind Out of Matter” was how the piece seemed to incorporate a critique of its own artistic program. The digitally-edited textual reiteration needed to make Dennett’s ideas into music — and, especially, the increased isolation and repetition of words and phrases necessary for the score’s most rock-inflected passages — incarnated the same processes that, in Dennett’s formulation, created religion itself. Dennett casts religion as, essentially, a not-always-benevolent conceptual earworm; “Mind Out of Matter” raised the question of whether actual earworms (including its own) are all that benign. The work’s most exuberant break — an explosion of Latin rhythms — riffed on an appropriate refrain: “you can’t get ’em out of your head.”

Alarm Will Sound; Alan Pierson, conductor

Scott Johnson: “Mind Out of Matter”