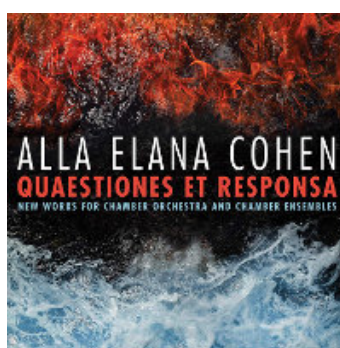


Review by David DeBoor Canfield

A. E. COHEN *Partita for Chamber Orchestra* ¹. *Inner Temple*, “Sacred Triptych” ²; “Sacred Diptych” ³. *Prophecies*: Series 4 ⁴, Series 5 ⁵. *String Quartet*, “Three Tableau Noir” ⁶. *Querying the Silence for Oboe and Cello* ⁷. *Querying the Silence for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, and Piano* ⁸.
^{1,2,4-6} Marissa Licata, ^{2,6} Melissa Bull, ^{1,4,5} Emily Rome (vn); ^{1,2,4-6} Ervin Dede (va); ¹⁻⁷ Sebastian Bäverstam (vc); ^{1,4,5} Elzbieta Brandys, ^{2,8} Bianca Garcia (fl); ^{1,2,4,5,8} Alexis Lanz (cl); ^{1,2,4,5,7,8} Izumi Sakamoto (ob); ² Jerry Sabatini (tpt); Timur Rubinshteyn, (^{2,4} timp, ¹ tambour, ¹ tambourine); ^{1,4,5} Thomas Schmidt, ² Matt Sharrock (mmb); ^{1,4,5} Eric Huber, ² Aaron Trant (vib); ^{3,4,8} Alla Elana Cohen (pn) • RAVELLO 8017 (2 CDs: 85:12)



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The distinctive and gripping compositional voice of composer Alla Elana Cohen comes through splendidly once again in this third release of hers that I’ve been fortunate enough to have been sent to review. Despite some stylistic differences from some of her other works, the voice that comes through each one of them is clearly that of the same composer of the music on those earlier CDs.

The program commences with the *Partita for Chamber Orchestra*, a light-hearted six-movement suite that the composer intends as a tribute to the Baroque era. Her tribute does not come through her imitating the musical language of that era—far from it, as the musical language remains firmly Cohen’s own. Rather, she draws upon some of the forms (including the sarabande, courante, and gigue) typically used by Baroque composers. Trills infuse the first two movements, “Preamble,” a jubilant and majestic piece, and “Nightingale and Rose,” a duet between cello in its highest register (the “rose”), and flute (the “nightingale”) in a dialogue suggesting arrogance and rejection, concepts portrayed quite humorously by the music. The third movement, “Stumbling Sarabande,” constitutes a humorous epitaph to the nightingale who expired of a broken heart in the previous movement. It is mock serious much in the same way that Lieutenant Kije is portrayed in the final movement of Prokofiev’s suite, although Cohen disavows that she’d been thinking of Prokofiev or any other composer here. The light-hearted spirit of the piece continues in “Crazy Courante,” “Eclogue,” and “Gigue.” This delightful work displays another side of Cohen’s craft, and could by itself win her many admirers. Perhaps the *Partita*’s

most direct tie-in to the Baroque era is the echo technique, wherein fragments of its musical ideas are repeated *pianissimo*.

Quite a darker mood is evoked in Cohen's String Quartet, suitably subtitled "Three Tableau Noir." The work is based upon her chamber opera *Inheritance*, with the libretto by the composer herself based on a short story by the Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore. Tragedy and turbulence is in the forefront here in this story involving an insane old man who entombs a young boy in the vault of an old temple. In this quartet, the horrific story is wordlessly suggested initially by melancholy phrases and gestures in all instruments, as well as through downward swooping parallel glissandos and melodic lines on artificial harmonics in the cello, along with other devices. The second movement is even more unsettled than the first, its moments of turgidity depicting the "twisted and doomed" childhood of the boy Nitay. The tragic mood continues to intensify in the third movement through the means of a pressure scratch in the lower range of the cello and a number of virtuosic flights on the instrument. The work ends very abruptly to suggest the abrupt ending of the short life of the helpless boy. No matter how many string quartets you may have heard, I can assure you that you've never heard one like this, as it contains some of the most profound musical thoughts I can recall in any piece of music I've encountered. This work alone will insure that Cohen's music will be heard as long as there are human beings around to hear.

Querying the Silence (Volume 1, Series 9) explores the sonic possibilities of the oboe and cello. Cohen has an uncanny ability to make a single instrument or pair of instruments sound as though there are more players involved than there actually are. That is certainly the case here, as the inattentive listener could easily be fooled into thinking there were at least three or four performers engaged in producing the sounds he is hearing. The composer achieves this effect by note-filled gestures, trills, varying articulation, double-stopping, and general busy-ness of texture. The piece was written for oboist Izumi Sakamoto and cellist Sebastian Bäverstam, who perform it as well, I am convinced, as humanly possible.

The first CD concludes with *Inner Temple* (Volume 2, Series 4), a work for one of Cohen's favorite mediums, a chamber orchestra employing single winds, solo strings, and percussion. The piece presents the listener with a mesmerizing array of instrumental colors and effects, but its composer never uses these except as means to a musical end. The complexity of the music suggests the complexity of the subject treated, namely mankind's relationship with the Divine. Moods created by the composer herein include a somber and dramatic majesty, bittersweet expressions, humility in one's love for the Divine, and a quiet resignation in the acceptance of one's destiny.

A cello solo opens the second disc in *Prophecies* (Series 4) "Quaestiones et Responsa." Indeed, the cello is the only instrument heard in every work in this set except one, not surprising given that Cohen has stated that the instrument is her favorite for which to compose. In this work in four movements, trills are also prominent, and other instruments, including the marimba which has some important lines, also get opportunities to bask in the limelight. The "questions" of the subtitle of the piece are represented by a refrain (thus producing the rondo form of the piece) which reappears several times in each movement. This *idée fixe* alternates with other episodes that function as the "responses," whose character, sometimes soothing and consoling, and at other times forceful or enigmatic, varies from movement to movement. The listener need not know all of what is going on in the work, however, to appreciate its beauty and imagination.

Cohen's Quartet for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, and Piano, "Querying the Silence," (Volume 1, Series 8) (a title that is just about as complex as is her music!) forms a three-movement essay skillfully woven from idioms that are sometimes serene and peaceful, and at other times playful and energetic. The piece is lighter in texture and spirit than many of this composer's works, although I find it quite different from the Partita discussed above. Here, the aural effect strikes me as something analogous to sunlight reflecting off of a gently rippling pond. I particularly was intrigued by her use of a flute effect I call the "jet whistle" (I do not know what flutists themselves call this effect, but it is produced by blowing a fast stream of air into the instrument to produce little specific pitch). Next heard is a second work entitled *Prophecies*. Like its eponymous predecessor, it is written for chamber orchestra and imbued with an atmosphere of mystery and ritualistic fervor. The composer describes the unsettled character of this (and her other works) as, "Once again, all is said, but nothing revealed." I queried her as to her meaning about this in my interview.

The program concludes with another work in the *Inner Temple* series (Volume 2, Series 3), this one subtitled “Sacred Diptych,” and scored for Cohen’s favored chamber duo of cello and piano. Here, along with the third and fourth works on the recital, the composer is heard in masterful fashion on the piano in a truly collaborative experience with her musical partner Sebastian Bäverstam, who in my book plays as well as any cellist currently active. Like much of Cohen’s music, this work has a devotional mood, and its two movements, totaling more than 11 minutes, are the largest in scale, not only because of their length (double the length of most of the other movements found on this pair of discs), but because of the character of the music, which runs the gamut of emotions from sorrow and resignation to assertive questioning. The listening experience of the piece puts the auditor on an emotional roller coaster, but the ride is most exhilarating.

Every one of the performers on this concert is a master of his or her instrument to the extent that these recordings will likely be considered definitive from this point forward. Whether or not you have discovered the awe-inspiring music of Alla Elana Cohen, this CD is a must; if indeed, you have not heard her work, you owe it to yourself to acquire this set as expeditiously as possible. If you have, you need no kudos from me, although I certainly do give it my highest possible recommendation. **David DeBoor Canfield**