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MaestroSteve



September 25, 2019

[New Music for Chamber Orchestra and Ensembles by Alla Elana Cohen](#)

Alla Elana Cohen: *Quaestiones et Responsa* New Works for Chamber Orchestra & Chamber Ensembles

(for a complete list of performers see Ravello's website)

Ravello Records 8017

Disc One: Total Time: 43:54

Disc Two: Total Time: 41:22

Recording: ****/****

Performance: ****/****

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A couple of years ago, Ravello released a collection of chamber music by the Russian-born composer Alla Elana Cohen. Cohen teaches at the Berklee College of Music and is known for her explorations of sounds and combinations. She likes to revisit material in new instrumentation allowing for a different aural experience of the music, much like the way a painter might repaint the same image with different colors or perspective. To that end, the current two-disc set explores eight of her works with a couple of them similar in title, but different in instrumentation. One of these, *Inner Temple* appeared on that earlier album as a string quartet. Here it is transformed first into a work for chamber orchestra to close off disc one, and then a cello and piano work to close off disc two. In each of these cases though, the title is more a reference to the conceptualization of the backdrop upon which Cohen paints her musical materials.

Disc one opens with a nod to the Baroque in a six-movement *Partita* for chamber orchestra. The work eschews the more traditional movement structure but does include aspects of sarabande, courante, and gigue along with a narrative second movement featuring flute and cello, a pastorale section, and a colorful modernist "Preamble" to get things going. This helps set up the sense of irony and humorous play on these ancient forms that Cohen explores in the work.

The *String Quartet* ("Three Tableau Noir") features material from Cohen's opera *Inheritance*. The work is based on the writings of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. The three movements are taken from the opera's prologue and two scenes revolving around an old man and a boy, Nitay. The first movement gives the listener a sense of the tragic quality of the story. The music has interesting little trill ideas that flit across the texture with sinuous lyric ideas that pop in and out of the texture serving more as different viewpoints from the players of the story. The second movement provides two musical threads connected to first the old man, a more lumbering and reflective idea, and then Nitay, a more energetic and frantic idea. The music though has an overarching sense of impending disaster. The final movement comes from the final scene where the old man abandons Nitay in a vault and locks him in it. It has a more intense quality as it opens which perhaps gradually builds on the horrific aspects of the story. These movements end rather suddenly perhaps to further symbolize the brevity of Nitay's life.

Querying the Silence, Volume 1, series 9 is a two-movement work for oboe and cello. The piece explores the concept of musical echo effects both as counterpoint and as more traditional interaction between the two instruments of a particular motivic or thematic segment. The first movement focuses on descending phrases while the second also has this sense of lament with references to the first movement. The plaintive oboe is set in contrast to chilling cello effects as well as lyrical moments that seem to grasp at tonality. The piece demands quite a bit from its performers technically.

The first disc then closes with a chamber orchestra version of the "Inner Temple" title. Cohen's intent is to invite the listener to explore our human connections to the Divine. After a somewhat somber opening, the central movement gives us a glimpse of joy and love (a three-note motif becomes a unifying factor here) before we move into the final movement's seeking. The music has a modern atonal sensibility with often intricate textures that here separates out winds, brass and strings at first before they begin to blend into interesting combinations. Percussion adds extra emphasis. It is also interesting to see how these small cells of material are translated across the ensemble for dramatic effect.

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Two works titled *Prophecies* appear on disc two. The first of these is "Series 4, Questioned at Responsa." Both are four-movement works for chamber orchestra. Series 4 is a more visceral work with statements between strings and winds that seem to become more violent as we move from the first into the second movement. There are some rather gorgeous lyrical moments for flute which seems to play the role of the questioner but the responses tend to be intense clusters of strings. The cello somewhat serves this purpose in the first movement. Violins take on this role in the third movement and a clarinet does the same in the final movement. Marimba also adds some additional color and interplay in the work. The final movement has some references to the earlier ones in terms of texture as well. The work has an episodic character of back and forth in a somewhat call and response like manner. The Series 5 *Prophecies* follows a similar exploration again taking on new colors and overall a more serene interaction than its earlier counterpart.

The *Piano Quartet* features flute, oboe and clarinet in a three-movement work. As contrast to the opening piece on this disc, the music has a more upbeat quality. It continues along Cohen's path of exploration of color and textural interaction with echoes between the different lines to help highlight these subtleties across the piece. The final work on the album, *Inner Temple—Volume 2, Series 3* is for cello and piano. It bears a subtitle, "Sacred Diptych", which suggests a meditative mood of a spiritual nature. The opening has some of this same questioning attitude heard in the other pieces on this disc. A set of double variations informs the structure of the second movement. Cohen's notes state she intends to expand this into a double concerto which should prove another interesting work as well.

The present set is a great introduction to Cohen's music and its very dramatic and emotional style cast in intense harmonic writing. There are some contemporary compositional techniques that also find their way into the music further enhancing the dramatic thrust of the music. The orchestral pieces allow listeners to hear how Cohen's color palette is adapted as well. This becomes a key way to enter into her music and there is a lot here to explore. Certainly worth a look for those interested in contemporary music.

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