

## Review by Colin Clarke



**A. E. COHEN** *“Inner Temple” Volume 2 Series 1 “Brachot” for String Quartet*<sup>1</sup>. *Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano, “Red Lilies of Bells, Golden Lilies of Bells, White Lilies of Bells”*<sup>2</sup>. *Triptych for Chamber Orchestra*<sup>3</sup>. *“Inscriptions on a Bamboo Screen” Series 4 for Soprano and Viola*<sup>4</sup>. *“Inner Temple” Volume 1 Series 12 “Brachot” for Chamber Orchestra*<sup>5</sup>. *“Hoffmanniana” Series 3 for Solo Cello*<sup>6</sup> *“Inner Temple” Volume 1 Series 11 “Shabbat Nigunim”*<sup>7</sup> • <sup>1-3,5,7</sup> Marissa Licata, <sup>1,5,7</sup> Melissa Bull, <sup>3</sup> Ethan Wood (vn); <sup>1,3,4,5</sup> Alexander Vavilov, <sup>7</sup> Lauren Nelson (va); <sup>1-3,5-7</sup> Sebastian Baverstam (vc); Alla Elana Cohen (<sup>2,7</sup> pn, <sup>2</sup> nar, <sup>4</sup> cup gong); <sup>3,5,7</sup> Bianca Garcia (fl); <sup>3,5,7</sup> Izumi Sakamoto (ob); <sup>3,5</sup> Todd Brunel, <sup>1-3,5,7</sup> Alexis Lanz (cl); <sup>3,5,7</sup> Timur Rubinshteyn (kbd); <sup>3</sup> William Manley, <sup>5,7</sup> Aaron Trant (vib); <sup>3,5,7</sup> Matt Sharrock (mmb); <sup>4</sup> Rachel Schmiege (sop) • RAVELLO 7953 (73:55 )

Having moved from the Soviet Union to the United States in 1989, Alla Elana Cohen is currently based in Boston and is a professor at both the New England Conservatory and Berklee College of Music. For those who wish to sample her music prior to purchase, her web site includes links to a number of performances on YouTube, at [allacohen.com](http://allacohen.com).

The appeal here is that this music has intensity shot through it from



first to last. Cohen's clear purpose comes hand in hand with a highly developed compositional technique:

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As one listens it becomes increasingly apparent that this is very exactly imagined music. Not a note or dynamic is wasted: There is a Weberian sense of economy, even if the durations exceed those of that composer.

The disc comes in a cardboard slipcase: For detailed notes on the works, one is referred to Ravello's web site ([ravellorecords.com/catalog/tr7953/index.html](http://ravellorecords.com/catalog/tr7953/index.html)).

The disc begins with a three movement string quartet from Cohen's "Inner Temple" series of works. Harmonic intensity in particular is an important part of this movement (as, indeed, Cohen's output, on the evidence of this disc), and the players on this release refuse to let the tension drop even momentarily. High, otherworldly glissandos from the first violin offer commentary on the work's fragmentary universe. The pizzicato-dominated central panel offers a certain amount of repose, but there is the distinct impression the rest is felt through clenched teeth; perhaps the shadow of Shostakovich lurks over this movement. The subtitle of the piece, "Brachot," means blessings; one almost feels this movement is an interior search for those blessings. The finale ratchets up the intensity still further. There is no doubting the excellence of the performers (neither is there any indication as to whether they regularly play together as a quartet, although it certainly sounds like it); the recording is fabulous, not too rich and with the instruments perfectly placed.

For the Piano Trio, we hear initially a Russian recitation of Alla Elana Cohen's poem "Red Lilies of Bells, Golden Lilies of Bells, White Lilies of Bells"; afterwards, we hear it in English. The trio itself is almost exactly 10 minutes in duration, although the online booklet notes refer to the recitations as movements in their own right; indeed, there is a sing-song element to the recitations that, while following in the first instance the original Russian language, also has a musical importance in the experience as a whole. Bells, so important in Russian music, appear unmistakably, a vital and very alive part of the musical argument. Cello "breaks" seem almost like speeded up Russian liturgical chant, only to be interrupted by overlapping garlands of bell invocations. In contrast to this, Cohen is unafraid of the starkest textures, as this piece shows, with its bleak pizzicatos and chordal near-clusters. The final recitation is in English: I make that point as it is in the same musical, highly Russian-flavored mode of delivery and the ear takes a moment to adjust. The effect of the words is unbelievable beautiful; this is true spirituality in action, Nature as a hymn to Deity.

The *Triptych* for chamber orchestra, "Homage to Jean Cocteau and Jean Marais," is a highly evolved entity. Cohen seems to deliberately choose a more immediately beautiful soundscape here, somewhat analogous to Boulez's writing for tuned percussion. The music is mesmeric, complex yet never overloaded. Something of a similar language emerges in the first movement of "*Inner Temple*" *Volume One, Series 12* for chamber orchestra, only here this moves to a darker area. The

more rhythmic central panel weaves strands of melody only to have the music destabilize any equilibrium.

The intriguing addition of a “cup gong” in the sixth and final movement of *“Inscriptions on a Bamboo Screen”* lends an extra layer of fascination. The composer provides the words for this beautiful set of musical aphorisms (the sixth movement, at two minutes, is the longest; the rest hover around the one-minute mark.) Soprano Rachel Schmiede, a name new to me, is incredibly expressive. Her voice is infinitely pliable (it needs to be), the sound perfectly chosen for these elusive settings of Japanese classical poetry in Alla Elana Cohen’s English translation. There is something of the first movement of Berio’s *Folksongs* in the fifth movement, “Who is he? A stranger in the field abandoned” (the cycle is scored for soprano and viola); the intriguing, high-pitched and rather un-resonant cup gong for the final song is meant to represent a temple bell announcing the dawn, a beautiful effect, evocatively managed.

The suite for solo cello, *“Hoffmanniana,”* poses significant challenges to the soloist. Sebastian Baverstam has not only the technique, but also a beautiful, burnished sound and, on this evidence, a simply superb ear for intonation. The lyricism that informs Cohen’s music on a baseline level is here made manifest. The tricky third movement, the briefest of the four, uses its enigmatic nature to imply whispered secrets. There are some simply beautiful sounds from the cello in the finale; Baverstam’s control is exemplary.

There is too short a gap between *Hoffmanniana* and the final piece, *“Shabbat Nigunim”* from the “Inner Temple” series. The cello’s last gesture needs to resonate more in the listener’s psyche. That said, *“Shabbat Nigunim”* is a powerful work (“nigunim” is plural of “nigun” and refers a type of Jewish religious song). It is as if Cohen shoehorns the essence of her spirituality into this piece; the flavor of the religious melodies is there, but given in her characteristic language and with her compositional accent. There is a high degree of tenderness here, a delicacy born of heart-based love rather than reverence for reverence’s sake; passages of warmer-sounding harmonic plateaux seem to offer hope and release.

These are all works of a significant composer; the initial impulse after the disc finishes is to explore more of Cohen’s music. This does appear to be an ideal place to start: a trip over to [CDBaby.com](http://CDBaby.com) furnishes downloads and albums, including a chance to hear more of the “Inner Temple” series. This is not easy music, but it is rewarding. **Colin Clarke**



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