

Review by: Huntley Dent



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

By a kind of historical anomaly, the avant-garde in Russia featured some advanced composers who were also religious, in contrast to other countries where an establishment value like religion was the opposite of what the avant-garde stood for. But the repression of the Soviet state and its official atheism created this anomaly, which is why Sofia Gubaidulina and Alfred Schnittke could be fierce Modernists and creators of sacred music at the same



time. Boston-based composer Alla Elana Cohen, who emigrated to the USA from Russia in 1989, refers to her music as a continual prayer to the Almighty and herself as “God’s flute,” yet her forceful, direct, and highly personal idiom incorporates strong modern gestures. Here in her latest CD, following seven previous ones, there are many references, both direct and indirect, to her sacred mission—the image of bells is recurrent, for example, and the last work on the program, “Shabbat Nigunim” (“Sabbath melodies” in Hebrew) brings its spiritual intent to the fore.

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What remains the most Russian about Cohen’s chamber music is its ceremonial quality, often signaled by deep, rich chords, and its commitment. (She notes that her composition teacher at the Moscow Conservatory drove the point home that a composer is responsible for every note written on the page, an ethos Cohen conveys to students in her own classes at the Berklee College of Music and New England Conservatory.) As different as these seven works are, there’s not a speck of frivolity. Cohen deftly uses instrumental color in alluring ways, and I was reminded of Giya Kancheli by strong blocks of sound that give an air of absolute conviction and unwavering emotional directness.

These recordings derive from Old South Church in Boston, some of the pieces being studio recorded in 2015, the rest from a concert in 2014—the recorded sound is exemplary (with one small reservation) and the performers quite expert. Any contemporary composer would be grateful to hear such enthusiastic, technically assured readings; as we know, Boston boasts a wealth of musical talent at every level. Cohen is also a pianist of note and performs here. Among the many fine participants, one constant is the excellent cellist Sebastian Bäverstam, a longtime duo partner of Cohen’s.

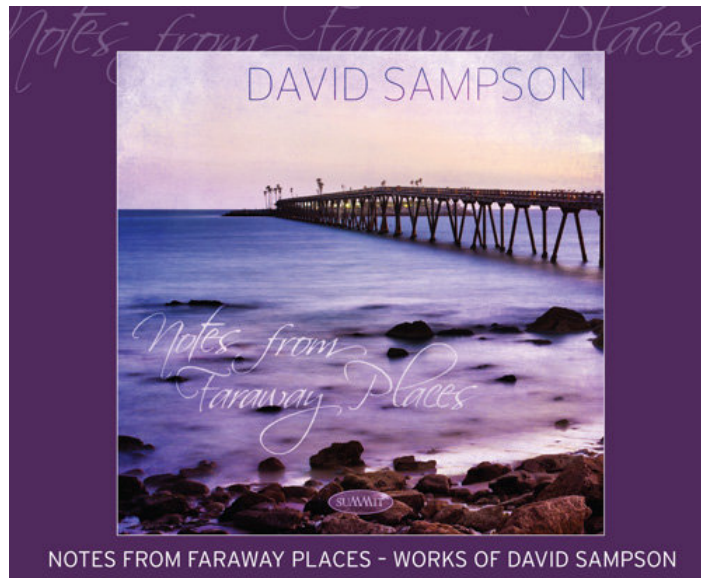
Cohen keeps imagery in mind when she composes and uses programmatic titles. Just to get our bearings, each piece here is founded on traditional familiar ensemble formats. “Brachot” (Blessings) is a string quartet; “Red Lilies of Bells, Golden Lilies of Bells, White Lilies of Bells” is a piano trio, with the composer reciting the poem that gives the work its title, first in Russian, later in English; “Hoffmaniana” is a suite for solo cello; “Inscriptions on a Bamboo Screen” is a set of six songs for soprano and viola taken from Japanese texts; and the largest works, for chamber orchestra with a string quartet or piano quintet at its core, are “Homage to Jean Cocteau and Jean Marais,” a second “Brachot,” and “Shabbat Nigunim,” with the composer reciting her poem.

I’ll take a risk and give my general impression of Cohen’s compositional techniques, because as varied as these seven pieces sound, she has a strong voice that comes through with some consistency. It’s rare for her music to set a theme-with-accompaniment and maintain it. Instead, she prefers mottos and motifs, often passed from instrument to instrument using canon, echo, and other mirroring devices. Development isn’t in sonata or rondo form, but grows organically from what each voice is saying. Therefore the music often feels conversational or dialogue based, emphasizing each instrument’s freedom of expression. In string writing Cohen

likes chains of trills, foundation chords, and slides or glissandos. Talking about these separate elements doesn't really communicate how Cohen's music actually sounds, but I've tried to give a sense of its ceremonial weight, its seriousness, and its family resemblance to other Russian modern composers with religious underpinnings. Listeners will come away with an impression of power not dissimilar (despite many musical differences) from Messiaen, and in fact Cohen likes bird sounds, too.

I was especially struck by the Japanese settings for soprano and viola, an unusual combination that Cohen employs with striking imagination in a shivery, moonlit mood where we encounter a forest cuckoo, the wind, and croaking frogs. Each is a metaphor for spiritual intimations in Nature. Soprano Rachele Schmiege gives a sensitive performance and possesses a clear, lovely tone, but she has been miked a bit too far away (the one reservation I mentioned about the recorded sound); following along with the enclosed translation is effortless. In the larger ensembles the use of marimba and vibraphone creates a shimmering effect against the strings, and Cohen is adept at contrasting this with more percussive accents and the rumble of timpani. Her own recitation is in a rich Russian alto that's very effective in the "Lilies" piece. The finale of the cello suite begins with very impressive, resonant multiple stops from Bäverstam, leading by the end to whistling high harmonics that he handles impeccably.

This CD provided an engrossing listen, and if you are attuned to the Russian sacred world or to that culture's deep emotional expression, Cohen's music is likely to have a powerful impact on you. Her personal voice is always striking and memorable. Slimline cardboard packaging; no program notes on the music. **Huntley Dent**



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