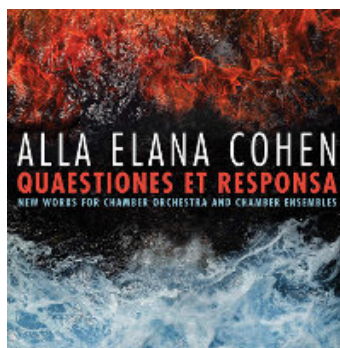


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## Review by Colin Clarke

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



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The music of Alla Elana Cohen is consistently impressive; each and every one of my previous experiences of her music has been a joy. This twofer, with music just too long for a single disc, offers another window into Cohen’s mind. The Partita for Chamber Orchestra is her tribute to the Baroque form, but cast in her own language. Scored for a trio of winds (flute, clarinet, bassoon), string quartet, and some percussion (tambourine and tambour, vibraphone, marimba), one can very much hear and enjoy Cohen’s various experiments. The stately opening to the first movement, “Preamble,” has something of a feel of Handelian grandiosity about it, but couched in Cohen’s languages of harmonics and color. Trills shine; gestures seem remarkably playful, with the players here reveling in the joy of discipline; ensemble is remarkably tight. Instead of an Allemande, we get “Nightingale and Rose,” a “fable” for flute and cello of unrequited love. The flute of Elzbieta Brandys might well have one wondering, as I did, what she might do with, say, *Syrinx*, or even *Density 21.5*. For the next two movements, the dance names make it into the movement titles themselves: “Stumbling Sarabande” is an epitaph to the nightingale of the previous movement (Cohen swaps the traditional order of Allemande and Courante) and includes some lovely, silvery scoring, followed by the “Crazy Courante,” which exhibits a penchant for vibraphone colorings and offers a fine complement. An “Eclogue” provides further contrast before a vibrant Gigue really brings Cohen’s deft wit to the forefront. There is even a moment when the music threatens to spiral into a sailor’s hornpipe.

The String Quartet, “Three Tableaux Noir,” follows with only the briefest of breaks. Perhaps more of a respite could have been afforded the listener, although this minimal space between selections seems to be constant and so may well be intended to emphasize the juxtapositions. The musical material is derived from Cohen’s chamber opera *Inheritance* (on a short story by Tagore). The first movement is derived from the opera’s Prologue and takes us to a very different world from that of the Partita, being more concentrated. The contrasting elements of the second movements relate to two characters in the opera, a young boy and an old man. It opens like a slow movement, representing the old man’s pensive demeanor (the material relates to the old man’s aria); but the animation of the youth soon infiltrates in gestures that are almost dance-like. The dramatic situation that emerges in the opera is reflected in the finale, where “flashes of horror in the mind of the doomed child” meet the old man’s prayers. The sudden endings of the quartet’s latter two movements are reflective of the boy’s sudden end.

The piece for oboe and cello, *Querying the Silence*, refers in its title to listening “to the echo of one’s own words and one’s own thoughts.” Lamentation permeates the first movement, a somewhat desperate cry of dolor that involves the perilous upper territory of the cello. Some consolation comes with the beautiful, fuller harmonies of the second movement (achieved through the cello’s stopping), but all is not as serene as it might seem; Cohen’s long, sinewy lines imply there are still thorny matters afoot as far as the instruments’ dialogue is concerned. The performance is astonishing: There is such control of the instruments from both players.

Cohen’s devotional aspect comes to the fore in the “Sacred Triptych,” part of *Inner Temple*. The ambiguous nature of the first movement (“balancing between trepidation and hope,” as the composer puts it) leads to a “bittersweet Hallelujah,” the dissonant harmonies of which are perhaps reminiscent of Stravinsky in acerbic Neoclassical mode. All the more surprisingly, then, the music hints at moving towards dance, just for a second, before regaining its straight-backed composure. Cohen’s consistency of harmonic structures is aurally clear here; her music is perfectly constructed. In the light of this, one wonders about her pre-compositional techniques. The finale is still austere and ceremonial but more questing, the upwardly moving gestures seeming to stretch to an unnamed Other that may or may not exist.

The twofer takes its title from the next piece in the *Prophecies* series, “Quaestiones et Responsa.” There is cleverness afoot here in terms of the programming of this release: Just as the first piece was a tribute to the Baroque suite, here a rondo is superimposed over the four-movements, while alternation of instrumental groups references the Baroque concerto (concertino/ripieno). To cap all of this, the idea of the antiphon is active, with a refrain, acting like a question, that is similar in material for each movement. The objective woodwind sound at the opening of the third movement, pitted against pizzicato strings, is most effective, offering a more ceremonial aspect returns for the finale.

It’s lovely to have the contrast of the quartet for flute, oboe, clarinet and piano, also titled *Querying the Silence*, where a breath of fresh air blows through the scoring (even if there is an underlying existential disquiet). It’s nice, too, to hear the composer’s own sensitive piano contribution, sometimes notably witty in execution. The finale has a sense of contentment about it, an indication of just how flexible Cohen’s harmonic/melodic materials can be.

There is a sense of deliberate enigma to *Prophecies*, Series Five for chamber orchestra. If the first movement has pretensions of calm, there are intimations of something awry, something sinister, both in the harmonies used and in the odd gestures (such as the descending string pizzicato). The second movement seems to my ears to imply Ives, with a simultaneous juxtaposition of seemingly independent voices; the resultant pitch structures seem, at least initially, to echo Ives as well. The contrasts of the third movement cede to a feeling of resignation in the finale, with parallel motion chords being beautifully phrased.

Finally, there comes a “Sacred Diptych” for cello and piano from *Inner Temple*. Fittingly, it is the composer who gets the last word, participating as pianist as well as creatrix; Sebastian Bäverstam is the fine cellist. Both players project the fractured utterances of the first movement to perfection, what the composer herself calls a “sorrowful musing on the human condition.” The second movement is cast as a set of double variations. It asserts a sense of space; nothing is hurried. The movement paints Faith-based hope (I use the composer’s own capitalization there). How fitting, though, that it ends with a question mark within that hope. Cohen is not one to give us an unambiguous happy ending, as for her there will always be mysteries. Intriguingly, she has in her

mind an orchestral version of this piece, a double concerto for cello and piano with orchestra—a mouth-watering prospect.

The performances throughout demonstrate both great expertise and the utmost devotion to Cohen's music, while the recording is beautifully done. **Colin Clarke**

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