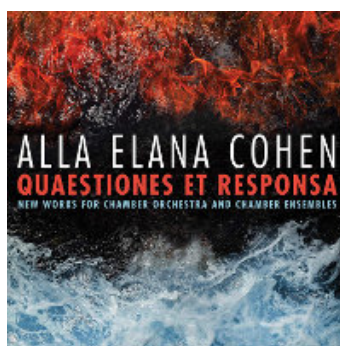


## Review by Henry Fogel

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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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I was immediately struck by the individuality of Alla Elana Cohen’s compositional voice in this new collection of chamber works for various forces. I had not previously encountered her music, so I did some research in the *Fanfare* Archive, where I found very positive reviews by Huntley Dent, David DeBoor Canfield, Mark Medwin, and Colin Clarke. All spoke of Cohen’s remarkable ear for color, her use of silence, and the pervasive quality of spirituality that runs throughout her work. Dent made a particularly insightful comment when he noted the music’s “ceremonial quality, often signaled by deep, rich chords, and its commitment.”

At different points in these two discs I was reminded of the music of Messiaen, Pärt, Kancheli, Górecki, and Gubaidulina, all of whom, in different ways, frequently express religious or spiritual feelings in their music. But in no case was Cohen merely copying, nor was she creating a pastiche. It may even be unfair to list those names as influences, but I am trying to give the reader unfamiliar with her music some indication of how it sounds. If any of those composers appeal to you, I think Cohen’s works will resonate with you.

Four of these pieces are scored for small chamber orchestra. Cohen’s incorporation of percussion instruments (vibraphone, tambourine, tambour, and marimba) adds an element of sparkle to the overall sonority of the music. Some of her work is rather specifically descriptive. For instance, the second movement of the *Partita for Chamber Orchestra* is, in her own words, “a fable for flute and cello in which the Rose is the cello ... and the Nightingale (the flute) tries to tell the arrogant and ruthless Rose about his love. The Rose, in a peremptory

way, orders him away, and the poor Nightingale expires from the grief of not being loved by her.” On the other hand, much of the music is less explicitly descriptive. Two works on the program are from a series she wrote, “Querying the Silence,” which the composer points out “are permeated with a restless spirit of futility of effort; to query the silence means only to listen to the echo of one’s own words and one’s own thoughts.”

The composer’s comments in the booklet accompanying these two discs are helpful in fully comprehending what lies behind the notes. I gave a first hearing before reading anything, which I try to do so I can estimate the music’s impact on me as pure music, and I was drawn into Cohen’s world from the first chords.

The performances are all excellent; these are highly accomplished musicians from Boston (Cohen is on the faculty of the Berklee College of Music). The elements of color, texture, and subtle variations of intensity are so crucial to these pieces that no mere note-reading will make an effect. Besides the chamber orchestra pieces, there is a string quartet and a quartet for woodwinds and piano, along with two duos, for oboe and cello and cello and piano. Throughout the performers seem completely inside the composer’s world, and many have appeared on prior recordings of her music. This is music that requires intense and unremitting concentration from the performers, and they all deliver. The recorded sound is just right for the material—clear and well balanced, but with a nice sense of ambiance. I can only add to the enthusiasm of earlier *Fanfare* reviewers by recommending this release to any listener willing to explore something new. **Henry Fogel**