

A New Program of Works by Iconic Composer Alla Elana Cohen

BY DAVID DEBOOR CANFIELD

Alla Elana Cohen is no stranger to the pages of *Fanfare*. My previous interviews, as well as reviews (along with those of several colleagues) of three earlier CDs of her music have appeared in 40:6, 41:4, and 43:3, and her biographical details and musical aesthetic are covered therein. The following interview was given via email in September of 2023 and I eagerly seized the opportunity to cover more ground with this fascinating composer and her equally *sui generis* music.

Shalom, Alla! It's so nice to be able to interview you for a fourth time, and to receive, listen to, and review the latest disc of your music. Of the handful of CDs I own that contain your music, I have now 29 different commercially recorded works by you. About how much of a percentage of the music that you've written to date does this number represent?

Blessings, David! Thank you so much for interviewing me again! It is always my great pleasure to communicate with you.

It has never occurred to me to count or in any way to keep track of my creative output! For all my creative life, I have attempted to follow these wise words of the great, Nobel Prize Laureate and Russian poet, Boris Pasternak, who wrote, "it is unseemly to be famous, for this does not uplift you to the skies; no one should care about retaining manuscripts, or keeping archives...". Consequently, I never put any opus number on any of my works, and don't I generally bother to keep track of where I keep this or that manuscript. Indeed, I often destroy without the least vestige of regret, some work or another of mine, if I feel (and usually this is a very powerful feeling) that I distorted what was sent to me from Above! These destroyed pieces include all the 12-tone works I wrote during my tenure as a student at the famous Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory. At the time, it was mandatory there to write utilizing that technique, but I knew from the beginning that this was not my voice. Since I wanted to go my own way, as soon as I graduated from that institution, I gladly discarded scores of scores, so to say! In that same poem by Pasternak, he wrote, "the goal of Creativity is Self-giving...." Thus, for me self-giving was and remains the lodestar for my creativity.

I understand from Greg Fritze (whom I also know) that when he was formerly head of the composition department at Berkley he convinced you to record and issue some of your works on CD. What has the recording of your music meant to you?

I never really wanted to begin any sort of tumultuous non-musical activity in regard to my music, as it would distract my attention from composing. Additionally, since I earn my living by teaching, and that takes a lot of time and effort from me, I prefer to spend what time remains in composing more music instead of actively promoting what I have already composed. My sole goal in recording my music and issuing these CDs was and is simply to preserve some of my life's work, demonstrating my interpretation and the way I want my pieces to sound. This is especially the case since I myself participate as pianist in those that call for one, either as soloist or as a partner in various chamber works.

I have never thought of my CDs as the means of acquiring recognition, as it normally takes a good amount of time—perhaps even 50 or 100 years—for the value of the music of a composer with a pronounced original musical idiom and who doesn't (as in my case) belong to any trend or school of musical thought to become known to music lovers.

How much, if anything, in your music is autobiographical? I know from our somewhat frequent communication that your life—before and after your emigration from Russia—has had numerous challenges. Have you written any of these into your music?

In my opinion, a composer's music is always autobiographical, at least in the sense that it inevitably reflects everything about him or her, including the time in which the composer lives. Other factors, such as the place of birth or nationality, where the composer lived, the surrounding culture, religious convictions (or absence thereof) all make their mark on a composer's music. Of course, there's also the factor that one's music is influenced by who we are by temperament, character, views on life, art, tastes in visual art, literature, and so on. All of these factors also influence the way the listener perceives the music the composer writes, so the confluence of these gets extremely complex!

I can't imagine, say, Shostakovich' music outside the particular time and place in which he composed it. Likewise, I perceived it one way when I myself lived in that same place, but now at a later time and living in a much different place, I perceive it in a completely different way! Of course, I am Jewish, a religious person, and a person who lived many years of my life in the Soviet Union (a place I put only second after the Holocaust as the most inhuman experiment upon human beings in the history of humankind), therefore I compose music which always contains undercurrents of tragedy or often is directly and openly tragic or dramatic. My music always reflects my fervent search of the connection with the Divine, and also invariably reflects my fiery temperament, my preferences in the sphere of literature, and the fact that for all my life I have written poetry in addition to music. It also demonstrates my fascination for the scientific side of music, as Music is not only the most wonderful Art, it is also science. This fact causes me to use compositional techniques that are solely of my design!

We must also recall that concrete events in composers' lives might influence their music. Think about Mozart's masterpiece, his A Minor Piano Sonata, a work he wrote in response to the passing of his mother. Similarly, when my own beloved Mother passed away 21 years ago, I began to compose a series of compositions under the general title "Querying the Silence" in order to channel my sorrow.

Have things post-pandemic returned more-or-less to normal at Berklee? Are there some things there that have been permanently changed?

Yes, things are pretty much back to normal at Berklee, although we still have an option to have Directed Study lessons (individual composition lessons) and office hours online, and to participate in Department meetings online. We are now back to teaching all classes in-person. Some faculty (including myself) and students still wear masks, but many don't. I have had, just since the start of this semester, two students who tested positive for Covid, and we shall see what happens later this Fall...

Turning to specific works on this recital, it opens with your Johannes Kreisler-Cat Murr Quintet from your Hoffmanniana series. The writing of well-known 19th-century German author and composer E. T. A. Hoffmann has inspired not only the present quintet but a series of poems by you, each of which is connected to one movement of this six-movement work. You mention that these poems are "program notes" for the Quintet, but did you write the poetry first or the music? Are there other ways that the poems and movements of the work are intertwined?

The music came first, which is the reason I call these little poems "program notes," and in fact are also one more token of my homage to a masterpiece by E.T.A. Hoffmann! As the music of my *Quintet* has almost palpably concrete musical imagery (easy to formulate verbally), I thought it very appropriate to use poetry for that purpose. Often the subtitle of each movement tells a lot about its contents and the poem clarifies it even more.

Given the prominence of a tom cat in both your own poems and the work of Hoffmann that inspired you and other composers such as Schumann and Wagner, are you an ailurophile? If so, did you write any cat-like behavior into this Quintet? Cat-lovers such as I will want to know...

I do love cats! However, as I am allergic to them, I can't have a live cat at home and must settle for my collection of toy cats and even a stain-glass picture of a Cat Murr, made by the (now late) grandfather of my former student and dear friend Brian Buch. I call the small circle of my friends and students 'Cat Murr Society'. We once had a concert of pieces by my students and me, to which a live cat was brought to represent our chairman, Cat Murr! (Of course, I couldn't touch it!) Yes, in the second and fourth movements of my *Quintet* I tried to depict through musical means a cat's behavior. These included wailing of the cats, especially in the ironic funeral of the cat Mutius. The other four movements of this *Quintet* are, however, connected to a much more important personage, Johannes Kreisler, Kapellmeister and composer, and another protagonist of Hoffmann's masterpiece. Schumann's *Kreisleriana* is similarly connected, but only to Johann Kreisler and not to Cat Murr. Many great composers were fascinated by Hoffmann's brilliant prose. Wagner employed Hoffmann's stories *Martin the Barrel-Maker* and *The Singing Contest in Wartburg* as plots for operas. Tchaikovsky likewise based his ballet *The Nutcracker* on Hoffmann's fairy-tale, *The Nutcracker and the King of Mice* and Delibes based his ballet *Coppelia* on his story, *The Sandman*. The Hoffmann novel that inspired me has so many layers of content, and its structure is so unusual, I am sure that it will inspire many other composers and all will find in it something new to convey in their music.

I also have written a String Quartet in four movements as part of my *Hoffmanniana*, series 2. This work was performed in one of the concerts, but not the way I wanted it to go, so I didn't include it on this CD. I recall that when Mikhail Kazinik (a famous musicologist, the author of many books and films on music and culture, and the leading expert of the concert given in conjunction with the awarding of the Nobel Prize) made this *Quintet* the subject of a program broadcast on the all-Russian radio station Orpheus, it resulted in letters to the station wherein listeners wrote of the vivid picture of cats fighting, snorting, etc., that the music conjured up in their minds. I depicted cats in that work through various kinds of extended techniques to give it this pictorial quality of felines.

Well, I hope you'll accept me into your Cat Murr Society! The Sephardic Jews on the Iberian peninsula certainly had oppression, resulting in their expulsion from their homeland in the late 15th century. Could you specify the elements in your piano work devoted to this persecuted people that tie it to their plight? You also mention that after the Holocaust, only 10% of these remain. Where are most of them now located, if no longer on the Iberian peninsula?

As I've mentioned, my music always has a tragic undercurrent, so the pieces in this work constitute short, passionate, and somber narratives, all of them incorporating mysterious elements in them, but also, in the last movement, some lightness and lyricism. All of them have

something Spanish in their idiom, though I never quote any folk songs in them. But I never actually sought to convey in this particular work any concrete imagery connected with the plight of Sephardic Jews. Instead, I have attempted to convey the general character of their culture and art and its immortality, as the surviving Iberian (or Sephardic) Jews remain in Israel, and in various regions in diaspora.

In your work, Watercolors of the Master Who Is Accustomed to Paint Oils, your notes state that in this work you “seek to convey...what is ineffable, what is beyond any verbal definition.” Isn't this true also in your other music? I hear things in every one of your works that defy being put into words. This puts me in mind of (if I recall correctly) Mendelssohn's statement that if words could express what music does, he would have been a poet.

Of course, all music is inevitably about the ineffable. But in this particular album there are pieces, including the above-mentioned *Cat Murr Quintet*, which have very concrete musical imagery (as I wrote in the previous answer), so palpably concrete as to be easily formulated verbally. But the works written under the title *Watercolors of the Master Who Is Accustomed to Paint Oils* have such complex musical imagery that I find it almost impossible to express their contents in words.

As indeed, do I! Speaking of the concept of ineffability, your Inner Temple—The Day of Atonement would seem to treat a subject that is unknowable to the extreme, namely, the forgiveness of sin by the Almighty. Many non-Jews do not recognize that Yom Kippur (rather than the better-known—to non-Jews, at least—Hanukkah) is the most sacred day in Judaism. How can something such as forgiveness be represented in music?

It is impossible to express forgiveness in music, as it is impossible to express in music the concepts of sin, punishment, atonement, regret, remorse, reward, encouragement, and so on. But it is possible to consider that the timid ray of light coming at the end of my work, *The Day of Atonement*, as a token of forgiveness, as a musical gesture which combines in it expressiveness, symbolism, and pictoriality, not unlike the musical gestures from Johann Mattheson's *Theory of Affects*, in which sorrow had to imply stepwise downward motion by the tones of chromatic scale, and pride and arrogance by stepwise motion upwards in the notes of a diatonic scale..

I note that all of the recordings on the present CD was are live recordings (I presume) from recitals at Berklee....

Actually, not a single recording on this CD was made at Berklee but rather came from various halls of the New England Conservatory, where I taught from 1990 until quite recently, or from Old South Church in Boston or from Calderwood Pavilion, also in Boston. Berklee doesn't have a single decent hall for classical music concerts and the Berklee Performing Center is suitable only for jazz or rock concerts. Its David Friend Recital Hall has such awful acoustics that I would never want to record any of my pieces there.

Given the decline of American culture (as evidenced by the Cancel Culture and other movements), do you find it more difficult to write music considering the possibly that future generations may no longer value what composers are attempting to contribute to culture?

As I am not striving towards fame, and just prefer to be really good in what I am doing in music rather than famous, I am not worried what will happen with my music half a century or a century later! To be sure, what we call “art music” or “classical music” has never been something for the masses. Thus, even if such music achieves recognition, it is only a relative one, and can't

be compared—alas!—with the popularity of whomever the current rock star might be! But I am hopeful that there always will be at least a handful of people who have elevated thoughts and aesthetic and moral values akin to mine, or as the saying goes, “the manuscripts don't burn.” Regardless, then, of what is the prevalent cultural trend, the destiny of my creative work is in the Almighty's hands, and His Will Be Done!

ALLA ELANA COHEN *Hoffmanniana*, series 1, Johannes Kreisler-Cat Murr Quintet¹. *Sephardic Romancero*². *Querying the Silence*, series 8³. *Querying the Silence*, series 1⁴. *Watercolors of the Master Who is Accustomed to Paint Oils*⁵. *Inner Temple*, volume, 1, series 3, *The Day of Atonement*⁶ • ⁶Jennifer Slowik (ob); ^{1,3,5,6}Ethan Wood (vn); ^{1,3,6}Laura Krentzman (va), ^{1,3}Sebastian Baverstam, ⁶Phoebe Lin (vc); ⁶Aaron Trant (vib); ⁶Yuko Yoshikawa (mar); ^{1,3,6}Marissa Licata, ^{1,2,4-6}Alla Elana Cohen, ⁴Yoshiko Hiramatzu (pn) • CENTAUR 4044 (59:31)

The latest compact disc devoted to the seminal music of Russian-American composer Alla Elana Cohen continues to fill in additional works she's written in various series, including those entitled *Sephardic Romancero*, *Querying the Silence*, and *Inner Temple*. As an example of her creative catalog, the *Johannes Kreisler-Cat Murr Quintet* is part of a series entitled *Hoffmanniana*, other eponymous works in that series having been written for solo cello, and string quartet, the latter yet to be issued on CD. Thanks to Cohen's having sent me quite some time ago a link to the YouTube video of her Quintet, I was able to hear and appreciate this work in advance of the CD that arrived from our esteemed CEO. All of the hallmarks of Cohen's music that are well-known to me (and any readers who followed my exhortation to acquire her earlier discs), including her persuasive and unique tonal complexity, original voicing, and textural ingenuity, are to be heard here. The recordings presented all derive from live performances given between 2009 and 2012, so these works are not recent ones.

The *Quintet* itself is complemented by poetry by the composer, an art form that has been a life-long pursuit, both in reading and writing it. Indeed a previous CD of hers, *Red Lilies of Bells*, includes some of her poems both in the original Russian and in translation. The poems on the present disc form a sort of commentary on the music of the work, as they deal with the subjects of Johannes Kreisler and the Cat Murr. The opening of the work strikes a rather combative tone, pitting the piano against the members of the string quartet, and I hear more of a musical “quarrel” than a conversation. The string performers are given some of what Cohen terms “spices” in the form of pressure scratches and other non-traditional effects, but she takes care to use these judiciously, as she observes that no one would want to eat a meal comprised solely of spices.

The *Quintet*'s six movements include “Johannes Kreisler at the monastery,” which the composer describes as a “study in contrasts.” From the onset, one hears the tragedy that Cohen writes into her works. Her accompanying poem for this movement speaks of the pealing of bells at the monastery, describing the musical effects therein. This movement is followed by “Cat Murr's Scherzo,” portraying the “genius tom-cat Murr” in his roles as the best philosopher, the most poetic soul, and most dashing rake. The third represents Kreisler's talk with his guitar, and the fourth describes, “Funerals of the valiant tom-cat Mutius.” The music of this piece contains a pronounced funereal character, the dark undercurrents found in all of Cohen's music coming to

the fore here. Indeed, I perceive the wailing of cats in the downward glissandos in the strings. The liveliest movement of the work is the fifth, a scherzo entitled “Johannes Kreisler: Inner turmoil and frantic gallop of time,” and the *Quintet* closes with a rather dark and doleful return of “Johannes Kreisler at the monastery: Ave Maris Stella.” This masterwork, brilliantly performed by Cohen (on piano) and her colleagues constitutes a major addition to the piano quintet literature.

Sephardic Romancero, series 2 for solo piano (again exquisitely and authoritatively rendered by the composer who is a superb pianist) exudes a pronounced Jewish atmosphere, with subtle hints of the venue (Iberia) that these ancient Jews inhabited until they were unceremoniously kicked out of the homeland that had been theirs from at least the first century. The Spanish influence, cited by the composer, comes to my ears mostly in rhythmic figuration, rather than any sort of Spanish-flavored harmonies or turns of melody. The three-movement, contains a good number of really dramatic figures as well as forcefully executed single notes in the bass register of the piano, possibly suggesting the forced expulsion of this people from their homeland. Also particularly intriguing are some quick gestures in the (mostly) upper register of the piano in the third movement.

Querying the Silence is another work in a series that the composer began in 2002 to express in music the sorrow she felt from the loss of her mother that year. Other works in this series were scored for cello and piano, or an ensemble of flute, oboe, cello, and piano. In the one presented here, there are four movements in which extreme virtuosity and almost superhuman sequences of pitches that characterize the first are contrasted with a more regularly flowing rhythm (often in pizzicato) in the second, unsettling—sometimes almost ghostly—figuration (especially in the cello) in the third, and the restless, driving character of the finale. There is one section in which Bartók pizzicato is prominently featured that I find one of the most stunning passages in all of the voluminous literature for string quartet. The composer has actually developed a new kind of effect here that she calls the “Cohen pizzicato” which involves the hitting of the back of the cello while simultaneously striking the open strings with the palm of the hand. This effect can be modified in various ways, and in her work *Sefer-HaShirim* turns the cello into a rather tabla-like instrument. In short, Cohen’s music, as I’ve probably mentioned in previous reviews, is miles away from being “easy listening,” but demands the full attention of the listener. There is a good bit of music I can listen to as background music while I’m engaged in something else, but this music must be heard only when one is able to fully concentrate on what its composer is communicating to the listener.

The second work in the *Querying the Silence* series is one scored for two pianos. Its first movement is comparatively simply constructed—at least, by the standards of this composer—and its textures are relatively light, even to the point that one would not immediately grasp just from listening that there are two pianists involved. A main reason for this perception is that Cohen engages the two performers in a kind of dialog such that the second piano echoes what has just been heard in the first, a device intended to represent the echoing of the thoughts of a person in his mind. The second movement, “The Gossamer of Shining Threads,” retains the light texture of the first, but in the remaining movements, the pianists do largely play together to produce a rich tapestry of sounds. A feature of this work that I do not recall hearing in most of the composer’s other music is a significant use of quickly repeated notes.

In the violin and piano work, *Watercolors of the Master Who is Accustomed to Paint Oils*, I hear the most obvious use of imitative counterpoint I can recall in any of the more than two dozen works of Cohen that I know. From the onset, one hears a line in the solo violin that is reiterated almost identically in the piano. The work's texture does eventually increase in density from the simplicity of its opening, but remains a good bit less complex than most of the composer's music. Both performers are given some really virtuosic flights in the final movement but largely in non-overlapping fashion. All four of the movements in this very effective suite are two minutes or less. As a (retired) violinist, I especially loved this work, and hope and believe that other violinists would take it up were they to become aware of this exceedingly masterful work.

The program closes with a work for the largest forces required of any presented. Here, the *Inner Temple*, volume 1 series 3, *The Day of Atonement* comprises a chamber ensemble of oboe, clarinet, string quartet, timpani, vibraphone, marimba, and piano. Neither the subject portrayed (the atonement of sin on *Yom Kippur*) nor the music portraying it could be more serious and somber than what the listener hears, but the work contains a few lighter moments that suggest the forgiveness of sin by God. In the second movement, particularly, I hear gestures and figuration redolent of those in Jewish music around the world, but inflected with Cohen's highly individualistic and original style.

If the adventurous reader has not yet sampled the innovative and highly satisfying music of Alla Elana Cohen, this superbly presented and performed half-dozen works by a master composer of our era is as good a place to begin as anywhere. I commend it to you as an essential acquisition for your music library regardless of its size. **David DeBoor Canfield**

Five stars: Brilliant works by a most important composer of our time, superbly performed.