

**QUAESTIONES ET RESPONSA** • <sup>1,5,7</sup>Elzbieta Brandys, <sup>4,6</sup>Bianca Garcia (fl); <sup>1,3,4,5,6,7</sup>Izumi Sakamoto (ob); <sup>1,4,5,6,7</sup>Alexis Lanz (cl); <sup>1,5,7</sup>Eric Huber, <sup>4</sup>Aaron Trant (vib); <sup>1,4,5</sup>Timur Rubinshteyn (perc & timp); <sup>1,5,7</sup>Thomas Schmidt, <sup>4</sup>Matt Sharrock (mar); <sup>1,2,4,5,7</sup>Marissa Licata, <sup>2,4</sup>Melissa Bull, <sup>1,5,7</sup>Emily Rome (vn); <sup>1,2,4,5,7</sup>Ervin Dede (va); <sup>1,2,3,4,5,7,8</sup>Sebastian Bäverstam (vc); <sup>4</sup>Jerry Sabatini(tpt); <sup>6,7,8</sup>Alla Elana Cohen(pn) • RAVELLO RECORDS RR8017 (2CDs: 85:00)

**COHEN** *Partita for Chamber Orchestra*<sup>1</sup>. *String Quartet “Three Tableau Noir”*<sup>2</sup>. *“Querying the Silence” for Oboe & Cello*<sup>3</sup>. *“Inner Temple” for Chamber Orchestra*<sup>4</sup>. *“Prophecies,” Series 4 for Chamber Orchestra*<sup>5</sup>. *Quartet for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet and Piano “Querying the Silence”*<sup>6</sup>. *“Prophecies,” Series 5 for Chamber Orchestra*<sup>7</sup>. *“Inner Temple” for Cello and Piano*<sup>8</sup>

There is music that moves even in moments of repose, as with much of Neoclassical Stravinsky, and, by contrast, there is music that somehow remains static even at the height of motion. Alla Elana Cohen’s work often falls into the second category. She’ll sustain a pitch, trill on it, lead up to and away from it or otherwise emphasize it in ways that impede motion, but to suggest that her pauses and references to the familiar constitute empty rhetorical devices; far from it! Even when playful, this is music of extraordinary depth, astonishing clarity of expression, and, above all, stunning beauty.

While Cohen’s music often displays a rich density, a good way in might be “Nightingale and Rose,” the second movement of her *Partita for Chamber Orchestra*. This duet for flute and cello is expertly performed by flautist Elzbieta Brandys and cellist Sebastian Bäverstam. In her remarkably extensive accompanying notes—and how nice to have the composer’s perspective—Cohen states that the nightingale is rebuffed by the arrogant rose, expiring at the poignant miniature’s conclusion. Brandys’ fluttered final exhalation is perfectly judged, as is the scorn of Bäverstam’s growled sendoffs, but listen to the components comprising each motive and phrase! Conventional conceptions of major, minor and mode fail to capture the Protean shifts and dynamic declamations in each instrument’s harmonic language. Ascents and descents, repeats and huge leaps are all shot through with inflections that conjure and dispel nearly recognizable sonorities in rapid succession. When the two forces combine in counterpoint, the magical effect increases exponentially. This effective balancing of stasis and motion in symbiosis informs every movement, especially the playful Gigue. No matter how many clusters of tone and timbre vie for prominence, often jostling each other at lightning speed with orchestration uncannily similar to Messiaen’s with all of that percussion, speed never usurps clarity and separation as even those clouds of notes drift rather than storm by. E and A serve as pitch anchors, or rather they are objects to be continually revisited but never completely established as tonal centers.

The titular piece, again for chamber orchestra but with four movements, is aptly chosen. Cohen describes elements of the baroque concerto under superimposition of a all-encompassing rondo form, attesting to a historical knowledge bolstering her unique approach to composition. As with Berg’s *Wozzeck*, the overall form and structural elements may be less important to follow on initial listening than to simply allow immersion in the work’s drama, and there is plenty! Certainly, the string writing, often solo or in paired pizzicato, does evoke the baroque, but the orchestral context is just as often indicative of Ligeti or Penderecki, brimming with

swoops and slides that attain sonoric resolution. Such moments of achievement imbue Cohen's music on a regular basis. Hearing the opening movement's final open fifths engenders a kind of backward listening that gives the movement a completely different trajectory in hindsight. They pave the way for the nearly canonic repetition of the fourth movement. The series from which this four-part suite hails is called *Prophecies*, and the two installments on offer here make me very curious to hear those not yet recorded.

In rereading my opening comments, I have done Cohen's music inadvertent disservice. I have cast it in dualistic terms, but it really redefines and defies them. This is perfumed music, jasmine scented music, like Scriabin, or even Sorabji, but it also has tinges of Medtner's organic unity in flux. There is absolutely no way to do this double disc set justice in a review. Despite informative annotations, each gesture is worthy of analysis, so unpredictable but emotionally resonant are Cohen's conceptions. Listen to the timbrally inclusive *Sacred Triptych* to hear how skillfully Cohen manages color in context, or the final movement of her string quartet for a fascinating take on recitative. Though I singled out two soloists for mention above, there is not a lackluster performance here, and everyone deserves any plaudits received. My only complaint is with a somewhat distant recording, certainly more than just adequate, but a closer perspective would have afforded that last ounce of detail about which Cohen is so particular. Grumbling aside, this set is a wonderful tribute to Cohen's thirty years here in the United States. May there be many more! **Marc Medwin**

Five stars: Chamber music of power, majesty and reflection