

A. E. COHEN *Partita for Chamber Orchestra*¹. *Inner Temple*, “Sacred Triptych”²; “Sacred Diptych”³. *Prophecies*: Series 4⁴, Series 5⁵. *String Quartet*, “Three Tableau Noir”⁶. *Querying the Silence for Oboe and Cello*⁷. *Querying the Silence for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, and Piano*⁸ • ^{2,6}Melissa Bull, ^{1,2,4–6}Marissa Licata, ^{1,4,5}Emily Rome (vn); ^{1,2,4–6}Ervin Dede (va); ^{1–7}Sebastian Bäverstam (vc); ^{1,4,5}Elzbieta Brandys, ^{2,8}Bianca Garcia (fl); ^{1,2,4,5,8}Alexis Lanz (cl); ^{1,2,4,5,7,8}Izumi Sakamoto (ob); ²Jerry Sabatini (tpt); Timur Rubinshteyn (^{2,4}timp, ¹tambour, ¹tambourine); ^{1,4,5}Thomas Schmidt, ²Matt Sharrock (mmb); ^{1,4,5}Eric Huber, ²Aaron Trant (vib); ^{3,4,8}Alla Elana Cohen (pn) • RAVELLO 8017 (2 CDs: 85:12)

Readers who have followed *Fanfare*'s coverage of Alla Elena Cohen will know that the critical reception has always been positive and respectful. Having emigrated from Russia three decades ago, Cohen serves as an envoy from not only a country but a musical culture. She writes articulately about her compositions, and describing an oboe-cello duo titled “Querying the Silence,” which is an installment in a long-running series under the same name, she says, “All my pieces under this title are permeated with a restless spirit of [the] futility of effort.” On the surface this sounds as if Cohen is referring to the pointlessness of composing music, but if one goes back as far as Shostakovich up to the breakthrough generation of Schnittke, Denisov, Kancheli, and Gubaidulina, the paradox of Soviet repression was that it became their creative spark, even their reason for becoming artists. Struggle against the regime inevitably led to periods of exhaustion and futility, and yet in the silence that Cohen queries, one hears faint echoes, and then with the first new vibration, music emerges afresh. (Not just music. Struggle, exhaustion, and defiance are the hallmarks of great Soviet-era writers like Akhmatova, Mandelstam, and Solzhenitsyn.)

Cohen has a masterful compositional technique, combined with a great ear and an original imagination. Without belonging to the Orthodox Christian strain that runs through a sizable portion of late-Soviet and post-Soviet composers, she often imbues her music with spiritual intent, “balancing between trepidation and hope,” as she puts it. Russian expatriates have often found to their dismay that after leaving authoritarian oppression, the West deprived them of their deepest motivation, which seems inevitable when there is nothing to hurl your defiance against anymore. But Cohen, like Charles Ives, is in constant pursuit of the unanswered question—the title of this new 2-CD collection of chamber works is *Quaestiones et Responsa*. The questions are unceasing, the responses forever provisional.

Of the eight works here, one is a string quartet (*Three Tableau Noir*) and four are written for sizable chamber ensembles with a string quartet inside: *Partita*, *Inner Temple* “*Sacred Triptych*,” and *Prophecies* Series 3 and 4, the latter with a subtitle that gives the album its name. A century after Schoenberg liberated the dissonance, the harmonic syntax for contemporary composers is bewildering in its vastness—there are literally no boundaries—while the general audience remains restricted to diatonic music as its preference.

Cohen bridges this mismatch quite successfully using her gift for mood and instrumental color. The moods are typically dark and eerie here, and “horror” or “tragic” is a term that Cohen as annotator falls back on more than once. Horror is especially appropriate for the string quartet, which employs material taken from her opera *Inheritance*, based on a tale by Rabindranath Tagore that has stuck with Cohen since childhood. Like Poe's “The Cask of Amontillado,” which terrified me as a child, the story climaxes with the victim being walled in and left to die, in

this case an innocent boy. Cohen's imagination finds many ingenious musical gestures to communicate horror. I was reminded of Schoenberg's equally harrowing *Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene*.

Another direction Soviet composers took was biting dark humor, and Cohen gives us an entertaining example in her pastiche of Baroque music, the six-movement *Partita*. This is a vein richly mined by Schnittke in his Concerto Grossos, but even they fall short of the zany, giddy humor that Cohen delivers in movements like "Stumbling Sarabande" and "Crazy Courante." Schnittke achieved a rare popular success with his parody *MoZArt*, and here, exploiting every color from string quartet, woodwinds, marimba, vibraphone, and tambourine, *Partita* is just as cleverly diverting. The central episode of a nightingale wooing a rose (unsuccessfully) evokes a Cohen signature of imitating birdsong, but not like Messiaen by transcribing their actual notes. Boston, where Cohen is a professor at the Berklee College of Music, is a musical city, and she is fortunate that the performers here are of top professional caliber—they gleam with technical polish. She and the young cellist Sebastian Bäverstam have a fruitful musical partnership. His virtuosity is exploited in the duo with oboe mentioned above, where both players are dazzling. Bäverstam performs in all the works featuring a string quartet as well as a duet, *Inner Temple* "Sacred Diptych," with Cohen as the accomplished pianist. The piece is Schnittke-like in using the cello as an epic instrument—Cohen says that she considers this duet the most monumental in character of anything in the collection.

Bäverstam and Cohen perform with the intensity of "passionate rebellion" that can be heard in so much of her music. I cannot really imagine the inner life that preoccupies her with querying, hope, and trepidation, which are a cultural inheritance from Soviet Russia. Yet the music produced out of her imagination is gripping, often thrilling, and for all its tragic implications, surprisingly beautiful.

Huntley Dent

Five stars: Exceptional chamber music imbued with passionate intensity