

	Magazine Issues	Book Reviews	Collections	Feature Articles	Hall of Fame	Labels	Reviewers	Want Lists
	Composers & Works	Conductors	Ensembles & Orchestras	Instrumentalists	Performers	Singers		
	Instruments	Vocal Roles	Voices	Advanced Audio	Jazz	Soundtracks, Shows & Pop	Videos	

Review by Huntley Dent, Interview by David DeBoor Canfield

A. E. COHEN *Partita for Chamber Orchestra*¹. *Inner Temple*, "Sacred Triptych"²; "Sacred Diptych"³. *Prophecies*: Series 4⁴, Series 5⁵. *String Quartet*, "Three Tableaux Noir"⁶. *Querying the Silence for Oboe and Cello*⁷. *Querying the Silence for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, and Piano*⁸. 1,2,4-6 Marissa Licata,^{2,6} Melissa Bull,^{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);² Jerry Sabatini (tpt); Timur Rubinshteyn, (^{2,4} timp, ¹ tambour, ¹ tambourine);^{1,4,5} Thomas Schmidt,² Matt Sharrock (mmb);^{1,4,5} Eric Huber,² Aaron Trant (vib);^{3,4,6} Alla Elana Cohen (pn) • RAVELLO 8017 (2 CDs: 85:12)

Catching up with Composer Alla Elana Cohen

By David DeBoor Canfield

In my third interview with my friend Alla Elana Cohen (the two earlier of which may be found in 40:6 and 41:4), I have gone a bit further afield in exploring her philosophy of composition and related matters, given that I have already explored certain fundamental aspects of her style and technique in the earlier interviews. As much as I admire her music, I feel a bit guilty to take any time away from her time to compose, but nevertheless, I imposed on her schedule to engage in the following exchange in September of 2019. Given her sense of the Divine, which I appreciate as one who also attempts to be in tune this way, I began this latest interview in regard to her convictions in this area.

Alla, it's good to be back in touch, not only with you personally, but in conjunction with the recent two-disc set of your music that I and others review below. Let me begin by asking you, as someone who believes in a Supreme Deity, why music exists? Could you conceive of a universe without it? Do you have a philosophy of composition?

David, thank you for interviewing me. In my opinion, music is a Covenant of the Almighty with humankind, a Divine language, which was sent from Above to us humans, so that we would be able to directly communicate with the Divine. Music is the Code, the carrier of the most important information, in which all the patterns, paradigms, and formulas of the cosmos- universe, or of human societal structures, and even of all scientific discoveries, are encoded. In music, these have often been

anticipated centuries before they were actually discovered. For instance, the tonal harmonic system was, in my opinion, crystallized as a reflection of the societal order—the absolute monarchy—of that time. Thus, the tonic triad functioned as the monarch, and the other hierarchical functions within the tonal system represented the social layers beneath the monarch. When the tonal system with its highly structured pitch organization disintegrated, this musical movement anticipated the advent of democratic societies and other political movements of the 20th century. When asked what he thought the Universe was, Albert Einstein responded that it was a layered cake! But isn't a fugue also a "layered cake," a paradigm of the Universe?! I am sure that each great musical composition, no matter in what century it was or may be written, will one day in the future be decoded in this way, such that the layers of information hidden there would be extracted from under what I call the "embellishing layer" or "cover." The proportion in which these two layers are present in the works of the great masters differs greatly. I would say generally for J. S. Bach, the "code" constitutes 80 percent and the "cover" 20 percent, but in other composers it would be quite different. Handel and Haydn might be 50/50, Mozart 75/25, Beethoven 80/20, Chopin 35/65, Rachmaninoff 20/80. The thinner the layer of "code," the more accessible the music for a general audience. Popular music lacks any coded layer, in my opinion. Even the "code" itself has many layers of coded information within each layer, differing from composer to composer and work to work.

To answer your other questions: I couldn't imagine a universe without music any more than I could imagine a universe without a Supreme Being! I can express my philosophy of composition as follows: Music is the highest form of prayer, the surest and fastest means of connecting with the Divine. I approach the process of composition with utmost humility. I actually consider that we in reality never compose anything, but rather simply channel and fix on paper what has been sent to us from Above. I am convinced that every musical composition already exists, fully and completely, in the mind of the Almighty, and we receive it from Him with greater or lesser distortion and sometimes almost without any. This may be accomplished fully and completely or in bits, by a single flash of inspiration, or slowly. The speed may depend on the composer's musical talent, or his or her state

of spirit and belief!

Do you see evidence of the Divine also in the way music is constructed? I'm thinking, for example, of the fact that in virtually every culture, if someone hears two pitches whose sound waves vibrate respectively at 220 and 440 cycles per second (or in any other 1:2 mathematical relationship), that person perceives these sounds as fundamentally the same note?

Yes, absolutely! There is evidence of the Divine in everything that pertains to all the aspects of music: in the sphere of musical pitch; in all the ways musical compositions are shaped; in principles of symmetry, proportion, and extrapolation; in the placement of climax point in the point of Golden Ratio—in the third quarter of the form (at least in truly high quality compositions!); in the proportions of sections within the musical forms; in the spheres of rhythm and meter, *ad infinitum*! Music is based on mathematical concepts, i.e., on numbers; and numbers and other abstract mathematical concepts are aspects of that same Divine language which logical arrangement of musical pitches—what we call *music*—represents! As we know, music was studied always at the mathematical departments of medieval universities, and what can be more Divine than mathematics?!

How does your sense of the Almighty come through in your own music? I note your efforts in this direction particularly in the present recording of Inner Temple (Volume 2 Series 4) "Sacred Triptych," which explores the relationship of humanity to the Divine. How did you work out a concept of such complexity in this and your other works?

It is never a result of any conscious "effort," but I am simply constantly tuned into those ideas, concepts, etc. every moment of every day of my life. My musical thoughts always go in this direction, and besides, I am of an opinion that music can reflect nothing less nor more than our relationship with the Divine! Also, in a real sense, I don't "compose"; I am merely a channel through which something is sent. I believe this of every composer, even if he or she doesn't acknowledge it! I never try to put musical pitches together, deciding pre-compositionally that it should mean this or that. Rather I view any composition as something given to me from Above; ideas of a certain character and musical idiom are always given according

to the kind of music a composer always craves and thinks about. So, when I write in program notes that I have attempted to convey the complexity of the human relationship with the Divine, it is because I think about this relationship every day of my life, and all my musical thoughts are always directed toward that end, no matter what I compose. When I receive certain musical ideas, and know their meaning, it is because this knowledge has been imprinted upon me, and the recurrence of those ideas causes consistent elements in my musical style.

Are there many other composers currently active in which you sense a spiritual presence or influence?

If you speak of spiritual presence or influence on a certain subconscious level, there are many. No matter what a composer himself or herself wants to express in music, even if he or she is an atheist, music remains always the language of the Divine. Especially in cases where a composer has a considerable talent, it is often a picture of the story of Balaam (Numbers 22:21–39), who had ultimately to speak what the Almighty put in his mouth. (This may not be the case where a composer completely discards musical pitches and uses only noises as the sole material for his works!) But if you are speaking about spiritual presence in terms of conscious connection with the Divine, and the desire to express this connection in music, being a believer—unfortunately, there are not many! In a way, to have this conscious spiritual presence in one’s music is a calling, perhaps not unlike the calling to becoming a priest.

Having said that, I believe the secularism of our society (and atheism, as its inevitable satellite) has its pervasive influence upon every sphere of art. It takes a considerable amount of courage to swim against the tide, and to dare to do what so many others are not doing. So many composers simply don’t dare to compose (or at least don’t dare to display) any music which would announce to the world that they are Believers; today in America to write such music is to be a musical dissident, just as it was in the Soviet Union, from which I fled more than 30 years ago! But still there are some composers (rarely of the younger generation) who cannot forego their convictions and compose anything opposed to them. These are not afraid of any reaction of secular society to their music, having the Almighty as their mainstay and refuge. This conscious connection of their music to the Divine

gives their music depth and significance, which is absent in music which in its essence is completely secular.

Well, as you know, I agree essentially with what you state above, although I might phrase some things a bit differently. In some of your works, such as the set's opening Partita, it appears to me that you are using trills as a structural device. Is this the way you would view it?

I don't consider trills as a structural device in my Partita, but rather just an embellishment, that enhances brilliance. As we know, embellishments played a great role in the music of the Baroque era. In considering my own style, I also often use various kinds of embellishments, not only trills, but grace notes, turns, and so on. In the first movement of Partita, rather than trills, I use stepwise motion as the structural device, a kind of gesture of connection to Baroque music, which was based primarily on stepwise motion with only occasional leaps. Trills, as rapid alternation between neighboring pitches, easily derive from stepwise motion! In other pieces, I often use this "bending" of a pitch as uneven vibrato, which goes a quarter tone above and below the written pitch.

The Partita, paying homage to the Baroque era as it does, seems to be going in a rather different direction from the other works I've heard by you. For one thing, I hear a good bit of humor in it. I wonder, though, how you see this work fitting in among the other works in your canon.

Yes, my Partita does have a good bit of humor! And I have quite a number of humorous pieces, or works with humorous movements which alternate with different kind of movements, like my *Johannes Kreisler-Cat Murr Quintet*, or my three mini-operas *buffa*. (Both the *Quintet* and one of the operas, *The Cunning Housekeeper*, may be found on YouTube). My style is capacious enough to allow many kinds of musical imagery in various works of mine.

The mock seriousness of its third movement reminds me of the similar effect Prokofiev achieved in the final movement, "Death of Kije," of his Lieutenant Kije Suite. Were you perhaps thinking of this work as you composed your Partita?

I didn't think of Prokofiev or any other composer when writing this "sarabande," I simply used in it certain rhythmic formulas, such as dotted rhythms in a slow tempo, typical of the sarabandes of Baroque times. Also employed were melodic

gestures of that time, such as the descending interval of the second, which is a gesture of lament. If I thought of anything with mock seriousness, it was the fourth movement of my *Johannes Kreisler-Cat Murr Quintet*!

You've mentioned previously that special techniques, for example Bartók pizzicato, are "spices" that should not be overused. How does one tell when such things have been overused in a piece of music? Is such overuse a temptation for your students such that you have to reign in when you're guiding them in their writing?

Well, it is the same as we consider the overuse of spices in any culinary dish: Too much of some spice is immediately tasted and we could never eat an entire plate full of nothing but spices, but which are present in modest amounts to complement the main ingredient. The same is true with a piece of music. I immediately sense overuse when any extended technique becomes the only ingredient in the piece, or when the piece turns into display of all possible extended techniques, regardless of its main ingredients, which are pitch and rhythmic aspects. If I encounter this in the work of a student, where the piece has become simply a demonstration of what he knows about extended techniques, I would do my best to help him see that he has vitiated the musical contents of the piece. The trap of over-dependency on extended technique has made certain composers become super-predictable, similar to the mass production of, say, shirts, or socks. All pieces of such composers sound the same, as indistinguishable from each other as those shirts from the factory production line!

Some of my students listen and heed my warnings about such overuse immediately, but for some it takes time for them to agree to it, as this is a temptingly easy, if shallow, way to write music and "solve" compositional problems.

What exactly do you mean by your statement, "All is said, but nothing revealed?" Is this analogous to the statement given in Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the LORD, but the things revealed belong to you and your sons that you might follow all the words of this law," in which we are told that God reserves certain unknowable things to Himself?

I hadn't thought about it along the lines of this excellent analogy. I simply meant

that the prophecy wasn't clear in its complexity and allows many interpretations. *With works of this complexity and difficulty, I am amazed to see no conductor listed for any of them! Did you act as an uncredited conductor in some capacity? How much rehearsal time did these works require before they were ready to record? Had some or all of them been performed in live recital before the recording took place?*

I never conducted even a single measure of these pieces. The amazing performers who recorded these works of mine know my style very well; consequently, we had only three rehearsals (with no conductor) before we recorded these compositions! They had not been performed in concert before the recording.