

## Interview and Review by David DeBoor Canfield

### A Second Interview with Alla Elana Cohen By David DeBoor Canfield



Alla Elana Cohen: Jupiter Duo  
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There are some people that you feel as though you've known your entire lives once you've met them, and Alla Elana Cohen for me is precisely such a person. We connected immediately in my previous interview of her in 40:6, not only as fellow composers, but as individuals with a very similar philosophy of music and its purpose in the Universe. Consequently, I was eager to interview her a second time to follow up on some of the discussion that we began during her first interview, as well as to audition a second disc of her music. I was glad to be afforded this opportunity in July and August of 2017. I refer the reader to the earlier interview for discussion of her background; here, I have taken the opportunity to probe her in several complementary areas.

*Alla, in your previous interview you mentioned virtuosity as a characteristic of your style of composition—and that it certainly is, as is also obvious on the CD under review here—but I'm wondering if you ever have felt the need to write a work that does not require a top virtuoso to bring off adequately. Is there a place for relatively simple music in your compositional output?*

My secret in writing virtuosic music: The effect which the difficulty produces upon the listener should be greater than the difficulty itself! Additionally, I think music written for professionals should contain some technical challenges. Nowadays, the average technical level of all professional performers is very high, even in very young instrumentalists. Children even of the tender ages of 13, 14, or 15 cope effortlessly with the most difficult pieces, which 60 or 70 years ago were not possible to play by any but top performers. I've been amazed by children such as

Ivan Bessonov, Eva Gevorgyan, George Harliono, and others. I don't actually make a deliberate effort to write virtuosic music; rather, it is an imminent, integral part of my style. In many cases, especially in my slow movements, the difficulties are primarily interpretational, and not purely technical, merely concerned with velocity, dexterity of fingers, lips, and so forth.

The question of what constitutes a "simple" piece of music, as opposed to a "difficult" one, is itself actually difficult to answer. Is, for example, Chopin's A-Major Prelude from his 24 Preludes, a "simple" piece? I think that despite the fact that it is very short and doesn't require finger velocity, it nevertheless requires a very high level of pianism in its aspects of tone production, articulation, use of pedal, and (of course) interpretation. Therefore this prelude is anything but simple! Thus, in my music, depending on a work's instrumentation, there are many layers and aspects involved in what is required from the performers beyond mere velocity or dexterity. I myself consider my music first and foremost *interpretatively* rather than *technically* challenging.

*Sebastian Beverstam is one of the most amazing cellists I've ever heard! Nothing would seem to be beyond his technical and musical abilities. I understand you began playing in recital with him shortly after he had turned 12. How did you become aware of or acquainted with this young artist?*

Sebastian was a student at Preparatory School of New England Conservatory (NEC), where I had been teaching since 1990. I first heard his magnificent playing at a students' concert there when he was only nine years old, and was amazed by his incredible talent and skill. When he was 10, I invited him to play cello pieces by my composition students, which he did at various concerts and festivals at NEC, and at the ASCAP Morton Gould Awards ceremony, where my students were awarded and recognized. Sebastian always presented these works wonderfully, displaying also a precocious dedication and commitment. So, when he turned 12, I decided to invite him to play one of my pieces at a concert of my music, the *Book of Prayers* Volume 1, Series 7 that many years later we recorded at Jordan Hall of NEC for my CD "Jupiter Duo." Our collaboration continues!

*Has anything—beyond Sebastian's artistic gifts—drawn you to writing so many works for the cello?*

The cello is my favorite instrument to write for (although piano is my favorite instrument to play). I love the timbre of the cello and, as a composer, I intuitively feel the specific characteristics of this instrument; thus, writing for it comes very naturally for me.

*Do you approach the composition of a work for solo cello any differently from how you would conceive a work for cello with piano accompaniment?*

Of course, writing for solo bowed string instrument has its unique specific challenges—there is no second instrument to complement and support it and to

bring timbral variety and contrast. Consequently, a composer needs to draw upon all the resources of the cello to achieve a modicum of timbral variety. In the 21st century, we are fortunate to have a variety of extended techniques to help in this, so we composers have to use all of the devices in our arsenal, which includes various extended techniques, harmonics, double- and triple-stops, and many other things. This is quite different from writing a duo for cello and piano, wherein the latter instrument immediately brings timbral variety and harmonic support, and the possibility of counterpoint. In all of my works for cello and piano, the latter instrument is always granted an equal role, forming a true partnership with the cello.

*Does the present CD, along with your Hoffmanniana heard on the previous disc of your music, contain your complete music for solo cello, with or without piano?*

I have written many more works for cello and piano duo and for solo cello besides these pieces that are recorded on the CD *Jupiter Duo*. Many of them you will find in the catalog of my pieces on my website [allacohen.com](http://allacohen.com). Recently Sebastian and I have recorded my new piece for cello and piano, *Sacred Diptych*.

*In your previous interview, I asked you, in light of several works you've written entitled Brachot (Blessings) if you felt blessed; I'll rephrase that question here: Given that two of the works heard here deal with prayer, are you convinced of the power of prayer? Do you pray before or during the composition of a work?*

Yes, of course! I, like many, am convinced in the power of prayer, first and foremost in its uplifting, supporting, redeeming, strengthening, and consoling power. The process of prayer on a constant basis supports and consoles the unhappy and lonely; redeems and cleanses those who transgress; strengthens the weak and sickly; uplifts the fallen and straightens the bent. In speaking about receiving power from prayer, I share the belief of many that we can receive something through prayer only if *what* we ask for and *the timing* of our request correspond to the plan of the Almighty for us. Likewise, we should ask in a spirit of gratitude for what we already have and are, no matter what it may be, realizing that every circumstance we might be in could be even worse. Sometimes we receive what we prayed for only years after we prayed for it, as only the Almighty knows our situation intimately and completely. As Mother Teresa famously said, "God didn't give me what I wanted, but gave me all that I needed."

I pray only before the start of the work, saying a general kind of prayer, such as the "Shema." I don't pray during the process of composing, since prayer for me is much more a re-affirmation of my hope of connection with the Divine, rather than a means of obtaining something through prayer.

*Two of the works on the present disc are inspired by films. Have you drawn frequently upon this medium for inspiration? Have you ever composed an actual score for a film?*

I was not so much inspired by the films *per se*, speaking about the piano pieces on this CD, but more by a person, Ran Blake, chair of the Contemporary Composition Department at New England Conservatory. He invited me to participate in the concerts there at which these films were shown. I was drawn by artistic challenge this request presented; for me it was a novelty, as I had never done anything like it previously. This is the reason that I composed three pieces for each of these films instead of just one for the episode from the film allotted to me that was to be used during the concert. On only one other occasion have I composed something connected to cinematic art, and that was my *Triptych* “Homage to Jean Cocteau and Jean Marais.” In this case, the literary merits of the script Cocteau wrote for the film *Orpheus*, attracted me even before I had seen the film. I have never written an actual film score.

*For many years, you have successfully combined careers in composing and pedagogy. Given your own unique style of composition, do you have composition students who try to emulate your style?*

Yes I can speak about a school of musical thought that has its genesis in the style of my music. I have cultivated this style, and I share with my students a lot of my own special compositional “secrets” and technical tricks. Consequently, many of my students are influenced by my music, and attempt (according to their talent) to follow my style, such that my fingerprints sometimes appear in their music.

**A. E. COHEN** *Book of Prayers*, Volume 1, Series 7; Volume 1, Series 2. *Querying the Silence*, Volume 2, Series 4. *Three Film Noir Pieces. Third Vigil* (Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, arr. vc/pn). *Spiral Staircase. Sephardic Romancero*, Series 2. • Alla Elana Cohen (pn); Sebastian Baverstam (vc) •RAVELLO 7978 (74:46)



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This second disc of the music of Alla Elana Cohen that has crossed my desk has further cemented my opinion that she is one of the most distinctive and original (not to mention most inspired) composers presently writing music. The only other music I can accurately compare it to is that found on her previous CD. Her originality flows from the heart and not the mind, however, given that originality, *per se*, is not difficult to accomplish if one is (as Cohen certainly is not) willing to sacrifice musical values. The present CD focuses upon Cohen's works for piano, and cello with and without piano collaboration (accompaniment is not the appropriate word here), and also affords the listener an opportunity to hear the composer perform her own music. I may say immediately that she is as gifted a pianist as she is a composer, but then, I'm getting ahead of myself.

The recital launches with her *Book of Prayers* Volume 1, Series 7, a three-movement work full of drama and pathos. Unbelievably, this incredibly demanding work was premiered by the present cellist shortly after he turned 12 years old, and Cohen told me that he learned the part in a mere 10 days. The cello part would seem to portray prayer in its most agonizing aspects, as (for example) the psalmist David, when he cries out to the Lord in the opening of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This is "difficult" music, and not for the timid or for a person who wants background music to accompany his working out the latest New York Times crossword puzzle. Rather, this is music that demands the listener's full attention in order to appreciate its complexities, subtleties, and heartfelt expression, and will reward the listener that will give it such scrutiny with a most satisfying musical experience. After the anguish of the first two movements, however, the third movement assumes a lighter mood, where optimism and even joy peeps through the texture.

*Querying the Silence*, Volume 1, Series 2, is a four-movement continuation of Cohen's exploration of color and texture in both cello and piano. The title refers to questions—whether spoken or unspoken—resonating (echoing) in the silence, and this idea came as the result of the passing of Cohen's beloved mother in 2002. If anything, the figuration in the cello part is even more virtuosic than that of the preceding work, and there is a greater emphasis upon effects (such as trills) in this work. In many places, I perceive the piano part as sort of a commentary and extrapolation of the solo cello lines. There are numerous bird-like interjections in the piano that create quite a different effect from those found in the music of Messiaen, and I must say that I prefer the way Cohen handles these to that of the iconic French composer. The third movement opens with an exquisitely beautiful solo line in the cello that includes numerous double-stops, played perfectly in tune by Baverstam. Cohen also employs Bartók pizzicato to good effect in this movement.

Baverstam gets a rest in Cohen's *Three Film Noir Pieces* which are composed for solo piano. The first movement of this work was written for a showing of the film *The Curse of Cat People* at the New England Conservatory. Consequently, this piece portrays the running away of the main character therein; the other two movements are written in a dark and despairing style to complement that of the first.

*Third Vigil* was originally written as a concerto for cello and orchestra, but after the composer arranged it with piano accompaniment, she came to prefer that version (I would nevertheless love to hear the orchestral version someday). The work, like much of Cohen's music, draws from a deep well of emotional pathos. The title is taken from the ancient custom of stationing guards through the night, specifically their third shift, undertaken while it is still dark, but near to the dawn. According to the composer, the music represents the "rustle of thoughts and ideas in the head of a philosopher or poet," but may be appreciated on its own terms. The second movement bears a Hebrew subtitle of *bat col*, or "echo": This is intended to suggest that the physical world in which we all live represents analogically a greater reality, the World Above, much in the manner in which philosopher and theologian St. Thomas Aquinas sought to describe analogically the Deity through understandable words and concepts common to our everyday lives. Accordingly, the principle of *echo* plays a major role in this movement, with virtuosic flourishes in both instruments intended to represent bursts of light.

Like *Three Film Noir Pieces*, *Spiral Staircases* emanated from the world of film. The eponymous film upon which the third movement of the three-movement work is based depicts a dream in which the protagonist who is mute (but not deaf) is tortured by not being able to say "I do" during her wedding, bringing to her mind a swirl of thoughts about her pitiful condition. Other movements depict other events from the film, including a scene in which, in her attempt to draw attention to her condition, she hurls furniture at the window. The music is dark, dense, and turgid, with only momentary respite from these moods.

*Sephardic Romancero* is another three-movement work, this time for solo cello. Every cellistic trick in the book is utilized to stunning effect, even including glissandos on artificial harmonics, and the piece must be one of the most difficult in the cello repertory. Think "Kodály Solo Cello Sonata on steroids," and you'll have a pretty good idea of the challenges of the work.

The wandering solo line evocatively suggests the Sephardic Jews of Spain, who were forced into exile when they were expelled from their homeland in the late 15th century.

The program concludes with another in Cohen's series of *Book of Prayers*, this one comprising Volume 2, Series 4. As I confirmed in the above interview, her works based on prayer, forming bookends to the concert, reflect Cohen's life and attitude

towards God. The composer shared a quote with me, “When we play music, no matter what we play, we always pray,” which sheds light on her opinion of prayer. Regardless, this work, like the opening one yields a full complement of emotional impact upon the auditor—and likely also upon the performers.

The playing of Sebastian Bevarstam, a former child prodigy, must be heard to be believed. I have seldom heard playing of this depth and musicality by any cellist, no matter how famous. Cohen herself is a world-class pianist, and both performers toss off these works of formidable difficulty with aplomb and seeming ease. This CD consequently transcends such phrases as “must own” or “not-to-be-missed” that a reviewer might be tempted to use. I’ll simply state that this is one of the most important CDs that I have ever had the privilege of reviewing during my six-year tenure at *Fanfare*. **David Deboor Canfield**