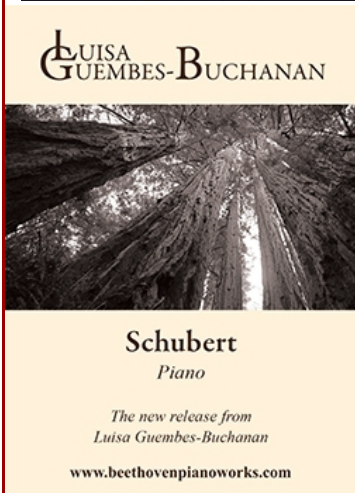




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Interview & Review by David Deboor Canfield

Marching to Her Own Drummer: The *Sui Generis* Music of Alla Elana Cohen By David Deboor Canfield

Alla Elana Cohen wears many hats, being a distinguished composer, pianist, music theorist, and educator. Having emigrated from Russia in 1989, she now teaches at Berklee College of Music. As a composer, she works in all genres of music, and her extensive catalog of compositions includes orchestral, chamber, operatic, and solo works for a wide variety of instruments. She is often found as the pianist in her works as well, and has been featured in video and radio broadcasts. I caught up with her via email in March of 2017 to query her on her music and music-related activities.

To begin, I think Fanfare readers would like to learn something about your life and training in Russia, which even in 1989 when you emigrated, was still part of the Soviet Union. What got you interested in music, and who were your teachers?

I got interested in music very early, completely by myself, as my parents were not musicians and couldn't play any instruments at all. But I was fascinated by the sounds of piano, which I have heard on TV and radio, and on numerous recordings of classical music that my parents had and often listened to. I asked my parents to buy me a piano, and they did so when I was five and a half. From that age I begin to study music, beginning to compose a year later. Among my teachers at the Moscow Conservatory were many truly outstanding and amazing musicians. I remember in particular my professor of composition, Alexey Nikolaev, my piano professors, Nathan Fishman and Ilya Klyachko, my harmony professor, Stepan Grigoriev, my professor of formal analysis, Yuri Kholopov, and my professor of score reading, Evgeniy Botyarov.

The Moscow Conservatory is widely considered one of the top few places in the world for musical training. What unique opportunities and perspectives do you feel that studying in this institution afforded you?

The Moscow Conservatory offered me the possibility to study in-depth a number of musical subjects, in a way impossible in Western conservatories, wherein students have to pay for each class taken. My teachers had an extraordinary level of talent and knowledge, and the way we were taught—with relentless

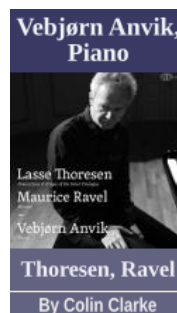
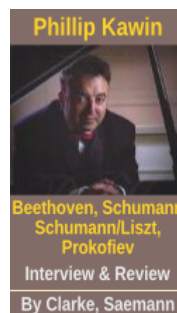
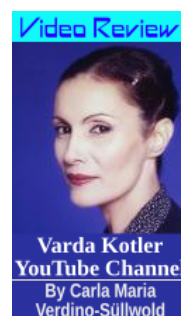


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demands made on our natural abilities and on the level of skills and knowledge we had to display—was also unmatched in its thoroughness and depth. Many things I learned help me in my present work with my students. For example, I designed and teach at Berklee a course, The Russian Art of Modulation, based upon a unique system of modulation that we were taught at the Moscow Conservatory. There were also certain aspects of counterpoint taught there that are not at all taught here.

Why did you emigrate from Russia to the United States?

The political regime in the Soviet Union was repulsive!

Do you teach piano and music theory at Berklee, as well as composition?

At Berklee I teach composition, where one-on-one lessons are referred to as Directed Studies. I also teach Tonal Harmony, levels 1 and 2; The Art of Counterpoint, level 2; Advanced Counterpoint; Techniques of Tonal Writing; Contemporary Techniques in Composition, levels 1 and 2; and The Russian Art of Modulation. Among my composition students there have been more than 300 winners of composers' competitions at state, division, national, and international levels.

Do you feel that entering composition contests can assist in the comprehensive training of composition students?

Well, it would seem that they are the only way for a composition student to achieve a career in this field. Also, the preparation for a contest will help insure that the student is doing his best!

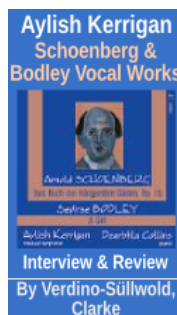
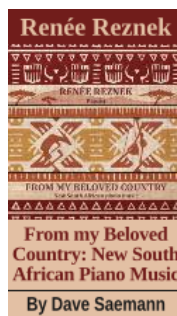
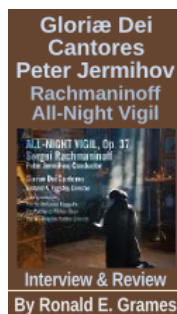
Turning to your music—I'm curious as to the significance of the portion of the titles of several pieces on this CD that would appear to be some sort of a cataloging description (e.g., Volume 2 Series 1). What is the significance of these?

I often unite my compositions in big cycles under one and the same general title, such that 12 pieces under the same title form a volume, with each piece receiving also at least a number in the series, but often also a subtitle, such as "Inner Temple" volume 2 series 1 "Brachot" ("Blessings").

One thing that amazes me about your music is that I cannot say, "Well, this piece shows influences by X, Y, and Z." Are there composers who you would say actually have influenced your style, and if so, how?

I am very happy that you emphasized the point that I actually have my own distinctive, individual musical style, and that it is not indicative of any influence of any music. Yes, it is true that I am my own musician, and all my life—even in the earliest pieces from my childhood—I stubbornly wanted to do everything in music my own way!

I can't name any composer who really *influenced* me—that is, whose works made me eager to follow that path. Of course, music is not composed in a vacuum, but I have never intentionally wanted to imitate or follow anybody's style in any aspect of it. As the great French writer Flaubert said, "If you have originality, the first thing you should do is to display



it; if you don't have it, the first thing you should do is to acquire it!" Another great French writer, de Maupassant, in the preface to his novel *Pierre and Jean*, wrote that all that critics should ask from an author is to create something aesthetically valid that reflects peculiarities of his talent. So that is what I always try to do—to be my own musician and demonstrate peculiarities of my talent.

I find your style difficult to describe, so please allow me to ask how you would describe it!

There are distinctive features of my style that you can find in every composition of mine. The system of organization of musical pitches I use I call "trans-tonality." Essentially, this is a system in which contrapuntal dissonant tone aggregates arrive at certain points to quasi-tonal cadences, which employ softly dissonant vertical elements, basically triadic structures but with added dissonant tones. The listener must hear all this to appreciate what is happening. I also often use symmetry in building pitch structures in both vertical and horizontal ways. Besides those chords with a center of symmetry, I also use so-called chain-chords, multi-layered compound chords, chords with added tones, etc., i.e., many other kinds of chordal structures.

I have particular favorite extended techniques which I, however, always use in moderation. I don't want to turn any composition of mine into a mere display of various extended techniques, which are really just "spices" that should be used in music in great moderation. No one wants to eat an entire plateful of nothing but spices, after all! Similarly, in music we need to be mindful of the main ingredient, namely, the pitch organization of the piece.

Another very important aspect of my music is the role of virtuosity in it. The majority of my pieces place very high musical and technical demands on the performers, a reason that I prefer writing for chamber orchestra to full orchestra. In the former, I can use much more complex and sophisticated kinds of textures and make each part much more virtuosic than when I write for full orchestra. Improvisation plays a great role in my compositions, mostly as rubato sections in my pieces, but also as quasi-aleatoric canons that consist of fast accelerated passages in which each part is written down precisely, but the timings of the entries of each part are more or less free. There is, of course, much more I could say about my style than I've said here, but I suppose interested readers should just plan to study with me!

The ideas I hear in your Trio are so novel and unpredictable, I had no idea of what was coming next! What is the formal structure of this work?

This Trio is actually based on a quasi-rondo principle, plus it is arranged such that the episode with string harmonics is the center of symmetry. After this central episode, the material of the first half returns in inexact retrograde motion in the second half. The rhythm of the note patterns of the refrain correspond exactly to the words in my poem the way I recite them—Red Lilies of Bells, Golden Lilies of Bells, White Lilies of Bells.

Alla Elana Cohen Red Lilies of Bells, Golden Lilies of Bells, White Lilies of Bells  Interview & Review By Canfield	Luisa Guembes-Buchanan Beethoven in D  Beethoven in D Interview & Review By Jerry Dubins
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The subtitle of your Triptych is “Homage to Jean Cocteau and Jean Marais.” How has the work of these two men influenced your music?

I consider the script of the film *Orpheus* Jean Cocteau’s masterpiece, and the role of Orpheus, played by Jean Marais, the best role of this famous French actor. Cocteau’s script determines the character of the music, and consequently the subtitles of every movement of my “Homage to Jean Cocteau and Jean Marais” *Triptych*. The subtitle of the first movement, “Silence moves faster backwards,” refers to the strange words that Orpheus hears while listening to the radio. This movement unfolds slowly up until a certain point, where I utilize in retrograde motion all the pitch structures of the first half, but in inexact rhythmic diminution.

The second movement has the curious subtitle “7777 2294 3349”—the first eight numbers of which Orpheus hears, again listening to the radio (the third group was added by me). I decided that these mysterious numbers referred to combinations of intervals, and so it is these that I use exclusively in that exact order, shaped into a wistful and nostalgic waltz.

As in the previous two, the subtitle of the third movement, “The bird sings with fingers,” refers to something Orpheus hears on the radio. For me, this title is very much about musicians playing their instruments. After all, aren’t instrumentalists birds who sing with their fingers?! This movement is less intense and more lucid, and has imitations of chirping birds and chiming bells in it.

I like the most of Jean Cocteau’s prose and poetry, and the majority of the films with Jean Marais, with the exception of *Fantômas*, although I can’t subscribe to Cocteau’s aesthetic principles.

What is the meaning of the title “Hoffmanniana” for the solo cello work included on this CD?

The title is derived from the last name of Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, the great German writer/Romantic who was also a composer. His writings influenced and were utilized by many great composers in various works. These include Schumann’s *Kreisleriana*, Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker*, Wagner’s operas *Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger*, and Leo Delibes’s *Coppelia*. I have also written “Hoffmanniana” series 1 “Johannes Kreisler - Cat Murr” Quintet, which may be heard on Youtube at [youtube.com/watch?v=wRI6POHaxPo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRI6POHaxPo). This was inspired by Hoffmann’s novel *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr*. I also have written short poems for each of the six movements of this piano quintet. Another work in this series is my “*Hoffmanniana*” string quartet, also appending my poems to each of its four movements.

You’ve used the Hebrew word, Brachot, (blessings) in the titles of two of the works recorded herein. In what sense are you referring to the concept of blessings? Do you consider yourself blessed?

We are blessed daily from Above, and we are blessed by people in our lives—by our family, friends, colleagues, and

students. I also consider myself blessed by the performers and listeners of my music. I would go so far as to say we are in fact blessed by all those who have been sent to us to interact in our lives, be it for a short or long time. We also hope to be able to send blessings and to be a blessing to other people we encounter, and should also consider as blessings some things that are actually “blessings in disguise,”—things that we at first, or even for a long time, can’t consider to be blessings. We may view these as lessons or tests, but in the long run, they reveal themselves to be true blessings. That is the reason that my “*Brachot*” (Blessings) for chamber orchestra is rather somber and mysteriously oppressive, being permeated with dark fervor, as if to speak of the character of the music there. The character of “*Brachot*” for string quartet is quite the opposite as this piece has much more light. Its devotional mood conveys the spirit of deep gratitude for everything I am, and for everything I have.

I consider everybody—myself included—blessed, if one is aware of the fact, that we are daily blessed not only by what is wonderful and pleasant and precious in our lives, but also by what we experience as “blessings in disguise”; and of course, I consider myself blessed to be able to do what I truly love to do, and to find very early my vocation, and to have this vocation in the most wonderful and beautiful field of human activity—in music! We musicians are truly a blessed category of people, and if to love music in oneself rather than oneself in music, one can be really happy being a musician, and ten times so being a composer!

A. E. COHEN “Inner Temple” Volume 2 Series 1 “Brachot” for String Quartet ¹. Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano, “Red Lilies of Bells, Golden Lilies of Bells, White Lilies of Bells” ². Triptych for Chamber Orchestra ³. “Inscriptions on a Bamboo Screen” Series 4 for Soprano and Viola ⁴. “Inner Temple” Volume 1 Series 12 “Brachot” for Chamber Orchestra ⁵. “Hoffmanniana” Series 3 for Solo Cello ⁶ “Inner Temple” Volume 1 Series 11 “Shabbat Nigunim” ⁷ • ^{1-3,5,7} Marissa Licata, ^{1,5,7} Melissa Bull, ³ Ethan Wood (vn); ^{1,3,4,5} Alexander Vavilov, ⁷ Lauren Nelson (va); ^{1-3,5-7} Sebastian Baverstam (vc); Alla Elana Cohen (^{2,7} pn, ² nar, ⁴ cup gong); ^{3,5,7} Bianca Garcia (fl); ^{3,5,7} Izumi Sakamoto (ob); ^{3,5} Todd Brunel, ^{1-3,5,7} Alexis Lanz (cl); ^{3,5,7} Timur Rubinshteyn (kbd); ³ William Manley, ^{5,7} Aaron Trant (vib); ^{3,5,7} Matt Sharrock (mmb); ⁴ Rachel Schmiege (sop) • RAVELLO 7953 (73:55 )

From the very first notes of the present CD, I realized I was listening to one of the most distinctive compositional voices I’ve heard in quite some time. The music of Alla Elana Cohen, neither tonal nor atonal, simply sounds like that of no one else. Cohen has a way of using devices that other composers have used, but in new and original ways. These including the incorporation of glissandos as part of a melodic line, extended



passages mixing pizzicato with bowed notes, pizzicato accompaniment above the melody, overlapping pitches in two or more instruments, glissandos in contrary motion above trilled sustained notes, glissandos while trilling notes, and so forth. At the opening of her Piano Trio, there was a use of the Bartók snap-pizzicato, so unusual in its effect that I had to ask her what it was that produced the sound.

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All of the above devices, and more, are heard in the “Inner Temple” Volume 2 Series 1: “Brachot” for String Quartet that opens the disc. “Brachot,” means *blessings* in Hebrew, and each of the three brief movements is best described with the single word *dramatic*. Most of the pizzicato is reserved for the second of the three movements, and continues throughout the entire movement, mostly pairing two instruments playing pizzicato with the other two playing bowed notes. The effect of this 10-minute work is breathtaking, and the music continued to resonate in my mind for several minutes after I paused my player in order to write these words before the subsequent work commenced (my usual practice in writing reviews). The “Inner Temple” subtitle that Cohen uses in several of her works refers to not only a literal temple of whatever kind, but primarily to the sanctuary in our heart and soul, in which we human beings store and preserve all that is precious and sacred for us in this life.

Cohen continues her originality in the second work, Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano, “Red Lilies of Bells, Golden Lilies of Bells, White Lilies of Bells.” There are again three movements, but one of the novelties of this work consists of Cohen reading a Russian poem of her own composition, as the first movement of this work. Since my Russian (other than musical terms found on record jackets) is pretty much confined to Я не говорю по-русски (I don’t speak Russian), all I can say about the composer’s reading in her native language is that it is a very musical and heartfelt reading of her poem, and she even intones its refrain. The musical portion of this work is its 10-minute center movement. It opens with tone clusters in the lower range of the piano, but almost immediately, one hears the exquisite device (the composer refers to such things as “spices” in the above interview) of the Bartók pizzicato. As I mention above, it produces an effect in her hands that I never heard in the way Bartók and others have used it, the sound almost resembling that of a hi-hat. Another device that she uses very effectively is that of exotic chords moving in parallel motion, and at about the six-minute mark, an extended passage for the cello using artificial harmonics. Bartók pizzicatos are also employed in melodic fashion, and not surprisingly, one also hears tintinnabulatory sounds, especially in the piano. This work is decidedly less tonal than the opening one, but is every bit as rewarding to hear. The work closes with Cohen reading the English translation of the poem as its third movement. Her English is fluent but charmingly imbued with the typical Russian accent.

The *Triptych for Chamber Orchestra* carries the subtitle “Homage to Jean Cocteau and Jean Marais,” and opens once again with clusters—this time in the strings. Perhaps even

more than in the preceding works, Cohen juxtaposes varying devices and ideas in quick succession, but so skillfully done that the piece flows along in most convincing fashion. From the 11-instrument ensemble, the composer elicits a panoply of colors that beggars description. She might even outdo George Crumb in this regard. The level of virtuosity required in this work, is also on a par with that of Crumb, Foss, or Berio, and the performers are all up to the challenges hurled at them by the composer. The effect produced by composer and performing artists is one of palpable excitement throughout the 12-minute duration of the three-movement work, which judiciously juxtaposes moments of tension and release.

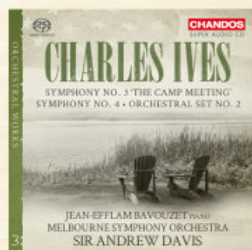
Cohen takes a different turn in *Inscriptions on a Bamboo Screen*, a work for soprano and viola. The composer has also freely translated the text into English from a Russian translation of the original Japanese, a further evidence of her versatility in working with words as well as notes. The interplay between singer and instrumentalist in this work is quite amazing, the two parts being given equal interest, and playing off of each other in eloquent fashion. Soprano Rachel Schmiede and violist Alexander Vavilov turn in a breathtaking performance, and the composer contributes occasional interjections on the cup gong, adding to the oriental flavor of the texts. The six movements transpire in haiku-like brevity. "Brachot" for Chamber Orchestra uses the same instrumentation as the *Triptych*. Felicitous juxtaposition of disparate ideas is again the order of the day in this work, and I remain amazed at the novel sonic effects that Cohen has created throughout this work. Only the second movement seems a bit more traditional in its effect to my ears, although even it retains the stylistic fingerprints of the composer.

Hoffmanniana demonstrates further the versatility of Cohen's compositional ability as this work is scored for a single instrument, the cello. Anguished outbursts in the upper register are contrasted with a sort of pizzicato commentary in the lower range in the first movement. The succeeding movements follow each other without break, and each alternates bowed and plucked material in varying tempos, with occasional interjections of double-stops, artificial harmonics, and glissandos over natural harmonics into certain passages. The CD concludes with "Inner Temple" Volume 1 Series 11 "Shabbat Nigunim," scored for the same forces as the two previous works for chamber orchestra. Interested readers should refer to Cohen's comments on several of her works in her interview above for further stylistic and structural information.

It's quite rare that I encounter a CD with music that will have virtually equal appeal to those who are enthusiasts of the avant-garde and others who are attuned to more traditional contemporary styles of composition. Alla Elana Cohen's music transcends such lines of demarcation, and for this reason should have appeal to a wide swatch of *Fanfare's* readership. Performances seem definitive, and the recorded sound is also most vivid. Enthusiastically recommended, and a strong contender for my next Want List. **David DeBoor Canfield**

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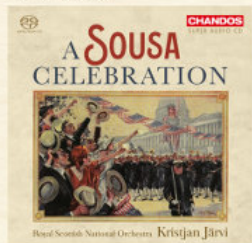
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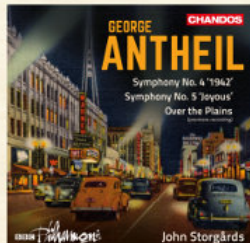
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