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Intriguing Instrumentation in Alla Cohen's Works

by Liane Curtis

Alla Elana Cohen, the noted composer, music theorist, and professor at both New England Conservatory and Berklee College, was featured in a concert of her own works on February 25 at the Goethe Institut. The audience arrived soggy and bedraggled from their encounter with the elements, but it was a full house with everyone determined not to miss out on this important event. The sponsor was the Israeli Consulate, and the audience included a wide range of students, colleagues of Cohen's, dignitaries, as well as a range of aficionados of contemporary music. A stellar cast of Israeli musicians were engaged to perform, with Cohen herself at the piano.

The program began with her *Book of Prayers*, vol. 2, series 8. I wondered if there was some story behind the interesting instrumentation – piano, bassoon, trumpet, and chimes? Had it been written with these trumpet and bassoon players in mind (Michael Grandel and Elah Grandel, respectively), and are those musicians related? The instrumentation worked, with the bassoon and trumpet exchanging elegiac incantations, and the piano interjecting thick cascading waves.

While the next work, *Querying the Silence*, for solo cello, had evocative moments...The initial rising rhapsodic gestures were followed by eerie, wraithlike echoes. The second movement featured descending cascades broken by pizzicato interjections. Cellist Mickey Katz was an inspiring performer, with a full-throated bass range, and agile in leaping to the upper register.

Next were two works in Cohen's series *Watercolors of the Master Who is Accustomed to Paint Oils*...it was in these delicate and accessible watercolors – small studies, miniatures, even, that Cohen's music was the most immediately infused with significance and warmth. Vol. 1, series 9 was a set of four movements for clarinet and piano. Moran Katz was the magnetically expressive clarinetist, and Cohen (here as elsewhere) performed on the piano. In the second movement, lush, sparking piano chords shimmered in alternation with quizzical comments from the clarinet. The third had a buoyant, march-like character, and fourth featured intense rhapsodic exchanges that coursed to an energetic finale.

Another set of *Watercolors*, vol. 2, series 2, followed; for string quintet, the superlative Ariel String Quartet was joined by bass player Tal Gamlieli...the strings produced brittle snapping pizzicatos and harsh scraping sounds, although there was a passage where suddenly the puzzle pieces fit together with neatness and a sense of relief. In the final movement, the texture became more richly contrapuntal, with overlapping layers, and sustained suspended sonorities, and then an ending of startling simplicity.

Sephardic Romancero, series 1, was another instance where some I wondered if there was same explanation for the unusual instrumentation. Flute, oboe, piano and – electric guitar? Surely there was a story there. In the first movement the instruments shared much motivic material, with the same ideas voiced in the different timbres of the contrasting instruments. The second movement (Cohen never titles her movements) was lyrical with oboe and flute interacting over the spare, regular support of the guitar line, and then the piano energizing – or disrupting – with its entrance. The last movement was lively, even playfully contrapuntal, with the instruments overlapping and exchanging a small group of short and closely-related motives. The use of electric guitar in this work was highly intriguing and definitely worthwhile. There was no mention of whether Cohen drew inspiration from the music of medieval Sephardic romances.

Inner Temple, vol. I, series 5, "Selihot" was for violin and cello...I was left wondering about the specific content of the "Selihot." Of the three movements, the third was the most striking, with its passages of interplay moving into chordal sonorities that evoked a hymn-like atmosphere. This work is on Cohen's new CD "The Road that Chooses Us," but unfortunately without this third movement.

Another set of Watercolors, vol. 1, ser. 10, for flute and piano, was next. In three movements, the first offered a melancholy, controlled use of dissonance. In the second an expansive and meandering melody was explored contrapuntally, while the final piece featured brilliant exchanges of virtuosic flourishes. As with the pieces for clarinet and piano, these "Watercolors" were perfect little gems, expertly performed by flautist Amir Millstein, and Cohen on piano.

The motive of the Israeli Consulate General of New England, "increasing awareness of the cultural connections between Israel and New England through music," is of course laudable, and the concert was certainly a success.