

Rhythm Divine

by Scott Kearnan
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YEARS IN THE MAKING. Twenty years ago, Alla Elana Cohen brought her gift of music to Boston. On Feb. 12, she finally plays her first ticketed American public concert. Photo: Eric Antoniou

In 1989, Alla Elana Cohen fled Soviet Russia with pockets that were empty but a heart filled with the dream of possibilities. The composer and pianist had already graduated from the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory with the highest honors of distinction, but as an artist, a gay woman, and a person of immeasurable determination, Cohen understood she could never know real freedom living under the communist regime. She chose to uproot her life and endure the hardships that come with rebuilding in America.

Exactly 20 years later, she has no regrets. And as she prepares to finally play her first ticketed American public concert at Boston's Calderwood

Pavilion on Feb. 12, her music pays tribute to the sheer will that has served her, the faith that has carried her, and the overwhelming belief that any dream can be attained, no matter how long the road to reach it.

"When people left the country [Soviet Russia] they were only allowed to take \$150," explains Cohen. "No life savings, no valuable things. We could come here carrying only that." It took years, she said, to even entertain the notion of playing her critically acclaimed compositions - chamber, orchestral and operatic works - for a paying audience. Thursday's show, for example, will incorporate piano, violin, cello, marimba, string quartets and an 11-piece orchestra.

"I had to start building my life from scratch, and I am a musician, not a medical doctor whose salary would permit to quickly accumulate money to start fresh," says Cohen. "This concert, it took years for me as a musician to financially become at such a level as to permit myself such a great undertaking. ... I simply couldn't afford to do it."

Speaking by phone, Cohen's Russian accent is still thick, which she acknowledges with a brush of self-deprecating humor. But she speaks with a cadence so steady and a command of language that makes the average born-and-bred Bostonian sound like the foreign linguist; she even composes poetry in addition to her music. It is obvious Cohen has taught herself the language with the precision of an orchestral arrangement. It's not surprising, considering that only one year after landing in Boston she joined the faculty at the New England Conservatory of Music. Five years ago, she joined the faculty at Berklee College of Music as well, where she teaches composition, harmony, counterpoint and ear training. She has since received special awards from ASCAP for "inspiring, educating and mentoring young musicians to become the composers of tomorrow," received Certificates of Recognition and Awards from the MTNA Young Composers' Competition on the national level, and been awarded with Berklee's Ted Pease Teaching Excellence Award.

Even with this professional work under her belt, Cohen's early years in Boston were filled with

considerable financial hardship. Yet nothing, she says, could begin to compare to the joy she felt at newfound freedom.

"There is nothing one wouldn't give for freedom," says Cohen. "People parted [from Soviet Russia] with nothing, knowing that they would acquire something else far greater. We had no regrets. We willingly parted with material things. We wanted our freedom."

As a gay woman, Cohen's freedom was particularly compromised by the oppressiveness of a communist regime.

"It was absolutely taboo," she says of being gay in Soviet Russia, where homosexuality was illegal. "This couldn't be mentioned to anyone. To risk it was too dangerous. They were persecuted, gravely."

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Other artists might say that these struggles informed their passionate music, but Cohen takes a more divine approach. She believes that all of her music - including her newly released CD *Dedications*, filled with pieces honoring her friends, her passed mother, and even her music students - constitutes a "gigantic circle of prayers" that are inspired by her faith in an almighty.

"I would say my music is never directly influenced by any event in my life, probably because I think it comes from above, from the almighty," says Cohen, who is Jewish. "I only receive it. I write it down as it descends to me." That kind of faith certainly helps shed rays of hope during daunting hours. "Much of my work has a tragic, dramatic, somber character," she admits. "But I think that a lot of it has quite a good amount of light to it."

She adds that she does not feel any sense of conflict between her sexuality and her strong

convictions of faith. "I believe that God created all of us," says Cohen. "It is God's will for a person to be this way, or that way. I've never had a conflict [because I believe] this is something that is willed from above."

What's more, that level of faith can certainly provide comfort among the difficulties of life. "For me, I believe that if your life is not connected with the almighty... it is deprived of the only thing that can make a person really happy on this earth," says Cohen. "Whatever our earthly pleasures, they are so transient, they are so fragile. Only this can heal... only this is real."

Still, she doesn't consider her dramatic story to be a cause for pity. After all, it may have taken a while but she has the freedom she desired: "I never considered my life here as hard times," says Cohen. "For me, financial difficulties are not really something that would constitute hard times. A hard time was Russia... here, there were problems and difficulties that I absolutely knew, without any doubt, sooner or later would be resolved. Therefore, I was patient."

And finally, the curtain will go up on yet another chapter in her life.

The Music of Alla Cohen will stage on Thursday, Feb. 12, 7:30 p.m. at Stanford Calderwood Pavilion at The Boston Center for the Arts (527 Tremont St., Boston). Hosted by Joyce Kulhawik and Ran Blake, the evening will feature selections from Cohen's CD Dedications, her forthcoming CD Jupiter Duo, and new unreleased material. Tickets \$15 to \$24.50, available through bostontheatrescene.com or 617.933.8600. More more information on Alla Cohen, visit allacohen.com.