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Alla Elana Cohen, pale-skinned and red-haired, removes her hands from the keys of the grand piano



and halts the rehearsal of her composition "Svetitshoveli."

"Already you played very well five measures. Trouble started in the last measure of page 28," she tells the 10 young

musicians - four string players, an oboist, a clarinetist, a flutist, and three percussionists - practicing in the basement of the New England Conservatory. "It is actually very clear harmony. It sounds as if it's a very complex atonal part. Try to think harmonically."

Cohen's deep voice still carries the intonations of her native Russia. She is a former "refusenik," a Soviet Jew denied permission to emigrate for a decade before she and her late mother left in 1989. Now she teaches here and at Berklee College of Music. On Thursday, after years of small recitals, she presents the first concert of her compositions at Boston's Calderwood Pavilion in an evening hosted by former WBZ-TV arts reporter Joyce Kulhawik and jazz pianist Ran Blake.

"Russia was horrible for Jews because anti-Semitism was on the state level. Very many doors were closed to us. If it starts on such a high level all of society is infected," Cohen says. "The system was obnoxious to all honest people."

The brooding piece the ensemble rehearses is named for a Georgian cathedral known for its miracles. Cohen's Judaism inspires other work. She draws on her lineage as a Cohen, descended from the priests of the Jerusalem Temple, in "Inner Temple," she writes in her program notes. "Sephardic Romancero" remembers Spanish Jews decimated in the Holocaust.

"Those tragic and serious and somber parts are more notable, not only because of my life experience, but genetic memory," Cohen says. "Very often, music of Jewish composers would have those somber, tragic, dramatic moods because of that history that is uniquely tragic and that is so very long."

Cohen rubs her hands and squirms as she talks. Sometimes she clutches her heart or closes her eyes. Her girlish pageboy and youthfully smooth complexion contrast with her dark, man-tailored suit. She hesitates to recall her past - being told by her parents what to do if they unexpectedly disappeared, being warned away from Moscow's synagogue because authorities were snatching congregants, feeling "as if even the walls were weeping." The reluctance comes partly from the pain of remembering - "I feel like I'm sinking" - and partly from a fear of having her music considered too autobiographical.

"I consider myself a humble tool. Glory to the Almighty," Cohen says. "This music reflects what the Almighty wants me to reflect. It is broader than such and such tradition or such and such experience."

- IRENE SEGE