

Pianist/composer Alla Cohen scales new heights

By Keith Powers

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Twenty years ago, pianist/composer Alla Cohen was an outsider in her Soviet homeland - a refusenik, a Jew and gay.

She finally made her way to America, landing in Boston with only a couple hundred dollars to her name. Now Cohen is ready to celebrate the persistence of artistic vision in the face of adversity. She has a new CD, "Dedications," another on the way, and a performance hosted by Joyce Kulhawik and jazz pianist/educator Ran Blake to celebrate it all Thursday at the Boston Center for the Arts.

It may seem like a long path for a performer, composer, teacher and theoretician to travel to garner recognition, but Cohen - who splits her time between Berklee College of Music and New England Conservatory - remains sanguine about her journey.

"I told myself to be patient when I left Russia and not to expect too many things at once," she said. "I cannot say that my transition was difficult. It comes from what a person expects."

That said, when Cohen arrived in America she had to start from scratch.

"I had to leave Russia for many other reasons," she said. "A person with any modicum of honesty would

find it unacceptable. Anti-Semitism was prevalent, so many doors were closed."

Kulhawik, who continues to work to support the arts in Boston after leaving WBZ-TV (Ch. 4), said Cohen's music "formed an immediate connection for me."

"She expresses clearly the hardship of starting from scratch," Kulhawik said, "of coming from a place where everything was a challenge to a place where everything is possible. Her music is dark, but it has a seeking quality."



Dedicated: Hub arts supporter Joyce Kulhawik, inset, hosts a performance by Alla Cohen, pictured, Thursday.

"I'm also drawn to her process. The music comes in from another place. It's very spiritual."

Cohen would no doubt agree.

"My goal was always to find my voice," she said. "I am my own musician, and I never wanted to be described as a composer who composed in a certain style. Middle Eastern music and Jewish cantorial styles are important to me, but as a spiritual connection, not in a literal way. I never strive to quote verbatim, and I always try to grow as an artist, to say something new. It's not that unique - every artist should try to do that."

Alla Cohen at Wimberly Theatre at the Boston Center for the Arts, Thursday, 7:30 p.m. Tickets: \$15-\$24.50; 617-933-8600