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## **Alla Elana Cohen**

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Pianist/composer/teacher Alla Elana Cohen.

A stimulating conversation spurs the speakers on. So too, the mix of instruments talking back and forth in **Alla Elana Cohen's** complex and rewarding compositions. The playing of these pieces from the modern classical mode elicited gratifying textures and tones that kept an appreciative audience on its toes.

The eminently successful "The Music of Alla Cohen," the first ticketed concert for the Russian émigré, now on the faculty at New

England Conservatory of Music and Berklee College of Music, was also breathtaking in its subtext. The compositions canvassed a life of great trauma, greater religious belief, and even greater generosity of spirit (evidenced most dramatically by having her students perform the challenging work sometimes in duet with her).

Ms. Cohen had said in an interview prior to the concert that she "by nature had a sunny personality as a child," however, that life under the "horrendous" conditions of an anti-Semitic, Soviet Communist regime that she and her mother escaped only in 1989 (with but a \$150.00 in their pocket), had altered her disposition. By age eight, for example, her parents instructed her on what to do, should she come home from school to find they were gone. "A child shouldn't live a life of fear and as a sensitive child, I felt things even stronger; I would tell my teachers, 'the walls are weeping.'"

Her musical gift was evident early on, and the little girl at five or so demanded they get her a piano which somehow they did. She composed her first song at six, a march in 4/4 time signature, "very, very cheerful," she recalls. As a college student she graduated from The Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory with the highest honors of distinction. Nevertheless, as host of the "Music of Alla Cohen" concert, Joyce Kulhawik mentioned in her introduction, because Alla Cohen was Jewish, she was never permitted to give a concert in her homeland. Fellow NEC faculty member, the great artist Ran Blake co-hosted.

Ms. Cohen's compositions played in the Calderwood Pavilion at the Boston Center for the Arts, Feb. 12, employed a wonderful variety of musical instruments. From the traditional pairing of the number that opened the evening, the silvery toned "Watercolors of

the Master, Who is Accustomed to Paint Oils," with the masterful Ms. Cohen at the piano and a prize student player Laura Keller on violin to a piece, "Two Short Prayers," the program moved shortly thereafter to feature the talented duet of Aaron Trant on vibraphone and Youk Yoshikawa on the marimba which sometimes gave the eerie impression of clocks chiming from down a long corridor.

The first piece perhaps references Ms. Cohen's father and paternal grandfather whom she recalls as wonderful painters, although restricted from fulfilling these gifts not only by the Soviet regime but by religious belief which ruled against using graven images in art. Ms. Cohen is very aware of her honorable religious heritage which tracks back in particular through her father's sir name some 40 generations to the priests in the temple in Jerusalem before its destruction.

The most thrilling piece of the evening was likely "Inner Temple" Volume 1, Series 3 "Route of Compassion for string quartet, in three movements. Played with fervor and expertise by Marissa Licata, first violin; Ethan Wood, second violin; Joanna Mattrey, viola, and Sebastian Baverstam, cello, the composition with its sophisticated harmonies and rhythms was more compelling than typical modern classical writing, yet blazed forth with utter clarity.

"The Music of Alla Cohen" brings this intriguing and worthwhile composer before the public eye in a way that hopefully will lead to more concerts outside academia. In the meantime, she has a CD "Dedications," which contains two of her string quartets as well as compositions for cello and piano, for violin and piano, for solo cello and for trio, featuring violin, cello, and piano.

As a teacher, she has received a special award from ASCAP for "inspiring, education, and mentoring young musicians to become the composers of tomorrow." The students who performed at "The Music of Alla Cohen" were yet more evidence of her remarkable stewardship.