

MUSIC ACCORD

LERA AUERBACH

Seraphim Canticles (2011)

Program Notes

Interview with Lera Auerbach

CMS: You are a composer, poet, and a pianist. How do you balance these three professions? Is one more important than another?
LA: When I was four, my mother taught me music notation, around the same time I learned to read and write. So, the process of writing down a thought or a musical idea was equally organic since that very early age. All art forms have the same roots, but differ in the symbols used for expression. Of course, as professions, literature and music often battle for my time and only now I am starting to discover a way for them to co-exist without a constant bloodshed.

CMS: This concert features a world premiere of your work "Seraphim Canticles." Can you tell me about the impetus for this piece?

LA: This work is very personal – an intense prayer, an unflinching gaze into despair, perhaps. I always give a title to a work only after it has been composed. So, the music is never about anything concrete, but only about itself, music simply *is*. Still, the sextet in many ways reflects the moment of writing it. As I was contemplating the numerological significance of the number six, it connected in my mind to the six wings of the fiery and terrifying angel Seraph. Seraph (literally – the burning one) is one of the most important angels in celestial hierarchy – a flaming angel who purifies the mouth of a prophet. I started working on the sextet at the Leighton Artists Colony of the Banff Center, which generously offered me residency after my apartment in New York's Upper West Side burnt down in a devastating fire. This fire devoured my beloved Steinway Concert Grand, manuscripts and a vast library, which was started in Russia by my grandfather and contained many priceless first editions as well as family memorabilia. The experience of losing everything you own can be empowering – at least I have chosen to view it as such. Fire purifies and allows for rebirth. I also felt this was a rather artistic (if not overly dramatic) way of life to imprint and signal its next spiral. Being a musician – one learns to recognize life's cadences. There was one other time when I lost everything and had to start anew – this was when I was seventeen and came to the United States for the first time. All I knew then – my language, parents, childhood – was left behind in the Soviet Union; I only had my carry-on bag with some scores, the entire capital of one hundred dollars in my pocket and a deep desire to grow as an artist and to share my gift with as many people as possible. I had then the advantage of the unstoppable confidence and conviction of a 17 year old with all its blessed ignorance and eagerness. Now, almost twenty years later – life gave me another chance to start anew. This whole year, since the fire in New York, was a very important time for me in this self-discovery, but also challenging in many levels. Perhaps this is why *Seraphim Canticles* was one of the most difficult works to write. From the musicians it requires burning intensity, full emotional commitment and great sensitivity to the colors and shades of sound.

CMS: In Russian Voices, we are linking your work with that of Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky. What kind of influence did their music have on you?

LA: My relationship to music of Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky also went through a spiral. I passionately loved many of their works in childhood. I spent blissful hours ecstatically conducting an imaginary orchestra, while listening to the recording of Tchaikovsky's Sixth symphony or learning Shostakovich's piano preludes. (Last year I returned to this cycle and transcribed it for Viola and Piano for Kim Kashkashian.) In my late teens and early twenties I developed an allergic reaction to these Russian classics, felt over-fed with their gut-wrenching existentialism and went through the years of withdrawal. I remember how some of Tchaikovsky's works would make me feel very uncomfortable, as if he was exposing my own guts as well as his; this felt intrusive and embarrassing at the same time. Now I learned to recognize this embarrassment as a reaction to the limitations, created by my own fears, and to allow myself to be open again to this experience without flinching from the vulnerability of such an exposure.

Seraphim Canticles

Composer: Lera Auerbach

Instrumentation: 2 vn, 2 vla, 2 vc

Premiering Artists: Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

Duration: 24'

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Lera Auerbach. Credit: F. Reinhold

About Music Accord

Comprised of top classical music presenting organizations throughout the United States, Music Accord is a consortium that commission new works in the chamber music, instrumental recital and song genres. The Consortiums goal is to create a significant number of new works and to ensure presentation of these works in venues throughout this country and, if the occasion arises, internationally. Music Accord awards commissions principally to performers who are US citizens or reside in the US and assists these performers in selecting composers who are United States citizens or who reside in the United States.

