

Classical



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Listening to a Disconnected Society

In her opera 'The Blind,' Lera Auerbach distills isolation.

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

"He sees! He sees! But what can he see?" sings one of the sightless men in "The Blind," an a cappella opera by the Russian-American composer Lera Auerbach opening this week at the Lincoln Center Festival.

"It's not the characters who are blind," she said during an interview at a Manhattan cafe. "The message is that we are the blind. With all our means of communication we see each other less and connect to each other less. We have less understanding and compassion for other people. We have this screen between us."

A new staging of "The Blind," based on Maeterlinck's symbolist play of the same name, has its premiere on Tuesday and continues through July 14 at the Kaplan Penthouse; audience members will be blindfolded throughout its one-hour duration.

Written in 1890, the play is ostensibly about a dozen sightless people taken by their priest on an outing. When he suddenly dies, they are stranded on an island, left helpless and scared. The priest had been their guardian for many years, but they realize that they never really knew him as a person, Ms. Auerbach said.

"They also realize they don't know each other, how to communicate to each other, or how to see each other spiritually," she added.

"The Blind" is one of the earliest works in the substantial catalog of Ms. Auerbach, who at 39 is increasingly in demand as a composer and balances her deadlines with a career as a concert pianist. She recently had six world premieres in one month and is now signing contracts for commissions in 2018.

After ordering a bowl of matzo ball soup, she discussed her packed schedule and perennial jet lag. On this occasion she had just returned from Greece, where she performed her own music for viola and piano with the violist Kim Kashkashian.

Ms. Auerbach's catalog of some 95 pieces features 2 operas, 8 concertos and 28 chamber pieces, including a sonata for cello and piano commissioned by the pianist Wu Han and the cellist David Finckel, who described her as "in a very elite league of talent." Her richly constructed and often lyrical works explore contrasts of sound, from solitary whispers to rambunctious frenzy. Major recent commissions have included a multifaceted Requiem to commemorate the destruction of Dresden; a piece for the Rascher Saxophone Quartet and women's choir; and "Gogol," a three-act opera set to her own libretto.

Ms. Auerbach, once asked to describe her music in a single word, said the first adjective she thought of was "fearless," a term that could also be applied to her intense personality. The daughter of two university professors whom she called "typical protective Jewish parents," she began composing at 4 in her hometown, Chelyabinsk, a Russian city near Siberia. At 12, she wrote her first opera, which was staged locally. At 17, after a 10-day American tour performing as a pianist, she decided to defect. She had only carry-on luggage with her, spoke no English and didn't know anyone in the United States.

"I sensed this intangible sense of freedom, which everyone talks about," she said, reflecting on her decision not to return to the Soviet Union. "I felt like I needed it like water in order to really mature as a human being and as an artist. I was very hungry for all these influences."

Ms. Auerbach was scheduled to fly home



RAFAEL DESTELLA

on July 4, 1991, which she calls her "personal independence day." She telephoned her parents on July 3 to tell them she was thinking about remaining in New York. They didn't know if they would ever see their daughter again but encouraged her to follow her dreams. (Her parents, Lev and Larisa, now live in New York.)

Her first few years in the city were tough, with studies at Juilliard and duties as a live-in caretaker for an elderly woman. Ms. Auerbach received a bachelor's degree in piano performance, studying with Joseph Kalichstein, and a master's degree in composition, studying with Milton Babbitt and Robert Beaser. She did postgraduate piano studies in Germany as well.

She wrote "The Blind" in 1994 while a student at the Aspen Music Festival. The score languished in her drawer for the better part of two decades before the first performance in Berlin in 2011. A voracious reader who said learning makes her "feel alive," she read Maeterlinck's play after her parents sent her a copy. She thought its "emotional crescendo" would be well suited to unaccompanied voices.

The resulting piece, she said, is "almost like an anti-opera, so intimate, so introspective." It opens with an overture featuring the only electronic music in her catalog, which introduces the work's postapocalyptic atmosphere. Some of the play's characters pray continuously, so Ms. Auerbach set sacred texts as sung psalms, which form a framework for the piece.

Even singers with perfect pitch depend on instrumental accompaniment to orient their pitches, so a cappella opera poses daunting challenges. "It requires brave singers to go through the experience," Ms. Auerbach said. "It's like you are naked. There is a fragility and vulnerability and you have no safety net. It takes great courage, trust and openness. I think Maeterlinck's play is about those qualities."

When the director John La Bouchardière, who experimented with surround sound and a cappella singing in "The Full Monteverdi" at Lincoln Center in 2007, was invited to stage another work, he suggested Ms. Auerbach's opera. He wanted audi-

Top, the pianist and composer Lera Auerbach; above, a scene from "Gogol," a three-act opera she wrote for the Theater an der Wien in Vienna.

A pianist and composer in growing demand navigates the stresses of a frenzied schedule.

ence members to be blindfolded throughout. "Imagine going to a version with the audience sitting in an auditorium watching people who are pretending to be blind," he said. "It's problematic. So it was a logical step to get rid of the divide between the audience and story and characters."

The production has attracted some backlash, including from the writer Stephen Kuusisto, who is blind. On his blog, Planet of the Blind, Mr. Kuusisto wrote that Ms. Auerbach "employs nearly every conceivable 'ableist' cliché about blindness one can employ," adding, "How could Ms. Auerbach imagine that in 2013 blindness can still be used as a metaphor for lack of knowing or knowledgeability; powerlessness, spiritual failure, immobility, or worse, stand as a metonymic reduction for death itself?"

Ms. Auerbach said that those complaining are misreading her work: "They missed the point." The story is not about physical blindness, she added, but "a metaphor for our nearsighted existence."

Mr. La Bouchardière said that "using disability as a metaphor will always be controversial potentially," but added, "I certainly hope it doesn't offend anyone, as it's intended to be inclusive."

He noted that the opera "is about mankind's ability to understand its existence," adding, "I think political correctness shouldn't prevent us from doing it."

Throughout the performance of "The Blind," the singers and the conductor Julian Wachner move around the room; his aim is to keep everyone on key. He described leading "The Blind" as "a little disconcerting," since musicians build on the energy of the audience, something harder to discern when that audience is blindfolded. I heard part of the opera while blindfolded at a rehearsal and found the experience initially disconcerting but then vividly intense, as I became highly attuned to the sounds, sensations and unseen movements unfolding around me.

Ms. Auerbach described herself as "a very intuitive composer," adding, "In some ways I dream up my music."

She tries to write as idiomatically as pos-

sible for each instrument, a skill facilitated by her study of violin and flute in the Soviet Union. When writing for orchestra, she imagines herself playing every instrument in the score.

She said she is lucky that most of her artistic dreams have come true. But a few years ago, after a fire in her Manhattan apartment destroyed all her possessions, she expanded her artistic endeavors. The fire, she said, "was one of those wake-up calls in life." It inspired her to learn to paint. Painting has since become a "coping technique," she said, helping to alleviate stress.

Ms. Auerbach, who is married to the classical musician Rafael DeStella, often composes late at night after days spent practicing and rehearsing. Frequently sleep deprived, she said, she pushes herself "beyond health limits."

"I'm not good or comfortable with small talk," she added, referring to the post-concert socializing she finds draining. "I am very much a hermit, and I like privacy. On the other hand, I love being onstage."

She said she often turns to painting and poetry for "creative procrastination" when faced with composing deadlines. A poet who counts the Russian writer Joseph Brodsky among her influences, she has published five volumes of poetry and two novels.

In addition to finding comfort from artistic pursuits, she said her dog, Finek, a Pomeranian mix who travels with her, provides "a sense of something stable."

"He knows if I am in distress even before I register it," she said. "He comes and lies on my feet, as if he's saying: 'I'm here for you. You are not alone.'"

Loneliness and isolation are themes that often surface in Ms. Auerbach's writings and music; her profile on the TypePad Web site is "Hermitdom (fluctuating between loneliness and solitude)."

Asked what she'd like listeners to take away from "The Blind," Ms. Auerbach said she hopes "they will experience the world in a more alive, awakened state." Perhaps, she added, they will even "ask themselves about their own struggles with loneliness."