

Interview: composer Lera Auerbach

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Life & Arts

The multitalented artist talks about music and ‘creative procrastination’



The pianist, composer, painter, sculptor and poet Lera Auerbach © F Reinhold

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Lera Auerbach excels at “creative procrastination”, as she terms it. She is a professional composer who procrastinates by playing the piano. She is a concert pianist who procrastinates by composing. Then there are her paintings and sculptures, which she often exhibits. And she is a published poet.

“I guess it’s the rebellious child in me who always wants to do what she’s not meant to be doing,” she reflects. But it seems that she hasn’t spread herself too thin: at 42, Auerbach is one of the most prolific, most widely performed contemporary composers in the US.

She might also be one of the most sleep-deprived, given her tendency to work in 26-hour cycles. When we speak, she has been working all night, and has some heavy, dark circles to show for it.

“I’m in perpetual home-made jet-lag,” she says, her heavy Russian accent betraying her origins. “It just happens. I get in the middle of working and then, before I know it, I’m in another timezone. Some of my projects are very large, and I need a lot of time to complete them.”

The Infant Minstrel and His Peculiar Menagerie, Auerbach’s new BBC co-commission with the Bergen Philharmonic and the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, is a case in point. In addition to the half-hour score for orchestra and choir, Auerbach has produced the libretto, and an accompanying book of illustrations and even a sculpture as well.

Due to be performed at the BBC Proms later this month, it typifies her artistic approach: *Gogol* and *The Blind*, her two operas, are similarly set to her own libretti.

“I work on these different art forms simultaneously,” she explains. “I’ve tried a number of times just to focus on one discipline, but every time I did, firstly, I would get depressed, and secondly, the quality of what I was concentrating on didn’t improve. In fact, it would get worse.”

Growing up in Chelyabinsk, a city in the Ural Mountains, Auerbach developed her musical and literary talents side by side. Her mother, a piano teacher, taught her concurrently to read words and music, and, from the age of four Auerbach improvised stories on the piano in the vein of Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*.

By the sound of it, her early childhood was fairly carefree, and, in spite of Soviet government restrictions, her education was relatively broad.

“I was lucky to have some special professors who wanted to share their knowledge, so a big part of my upbringing was the ‘non-official curriculum’,” she tells me. “That included the music of Schoenberg, Webern, and Stravinsky, who was considered a ‘bad guy’ because he had emigrated from the Soviet Union.”

Yet, she says, Chelyabinsk “was a city where no foreigners were allowed. And there were parts where even no Russians were allowed because it was one of the main centres for nuclear experimentation in the Soviet Union.” So when an opportunity for escape came, she took it. And it came in 1991, six months before the USSR collapsed, when Auerbach, then aged 17, visited New York on a concert tour. “I had no luggage, only a carry on. I didn’t have friends there. I didn’t have family,” she says. “But I sensed that I needed this air of freedom that New York offered. So I decided to stay spontaneously.”

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What emerged, following studies at the Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard School, was a compositional style as inventive as it was old-fashioned. On one hand, Auerbach writes music in 18th-century forms — sonatas, fugues, chorales — using gestures and the harmonic language of the 19th century. On the other, she gravitates towards the surreal.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Infant Minstrel and His Peculiar Menagerie*, which pays homage to the nonsense tradition. “I wanted to create a piece that could speak to the young and young at heart,” explains Auerbach. Accordingly, the piece revolves around a travelling storyteller, played by a solo violinist, and his cabinet of fantastical creatures. But, like the nonsense works of Lewis Carroll, it has hidden, even sinister meanings: “That is where the menagerie of creatures comes in. Take the moon-rider: he is a little like a gargoyle. He protects us from nightmares, but he is pretty much a nightmare in himself.”

I sense that Auerbach is at her happiest when lost in these fantasies. By her own admission, she is an “extreme introvert” who consciously chose a career over motherhood, and lives the life of a hermit: “I love performing, and even speaking in public, but I’ll be the first one to skip my own post-concert reception.” For her, the artistic process is a form of therapy, or, as she calls it, “a way of allowing subconscious demons or visions to come out”.

Yet, when I ask her to elaborate on that process, she flares up. “Who cares about the process?” she cries. “If you go to a restaurant, you should be focusing on the meal you’re going to experience. If you go to the kitchen and focus on the ingredients, then you are going to lose your appetite.”

This philosophy also helps to explain why Auerbach refuses to write programme notes for her works, preferring to supply an illustrative drawing instead. “The strength of music is when it makes a personal connection to the listener; when it accesses your own memories and experience. If I, as the composer, say what I am thinking about, it is like stealing from your experience.”

Is there anything, then, that she can reveal about her artistic preoccupations? She pauses to think. “A lot of my work, in all its forms, focuses on dialogues with time: what time is; what it does to us.”

And is time one of her “demons”? She smiles mysteriously: “It could be.”

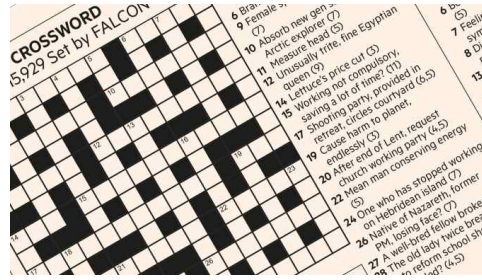
‘The Infant Minstrel and His Peculiar Menagerie’, BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London, July 31. bbc.co.uk/events/emnzc8

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