

Contemporary composer: Lera Auerbach

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Tuesday, March 14, 2017

Pwyll ap Siôn on a Russian-born American polymath whose striking music is inspired by dreams and haunted by other composers



In an age of multitasking habits, polymodal perceptions and multisensory experiences, we are all now expected to become polymaths. As Vinnie Mirchandani put it in his preface to *The New Polymath* (Wiley: 2010): '[We] can no longer be just one person but a collection of many.' But in trying to become too many people, what is lost? Identity, depth, talent? Genius, perhaps?

Lera Auerbach is a polymath in the original sense of the word – as defined and defended by Renaissance writers and thinkers; but she is also very much an artist of her time. Apart from being a successful composer and concert pianist, she's a painter, sculptor, librettist and author of several books of poetry and prose, but for Auerbach these extramusical activities are not exercises in dilettantism: all art forms are interconnected and designed to nourish and sustain each other.

Auerbach was born in 1973 in the Russian city of Chelyabinsk, which lies east of the Ural Mountains near the border with Siberia. Prodigiously talented, she studied the piano at the local Tchaikovsky music school, and having successfully participated in a number of national competitions, she was invited at the age of 17 to give a short tour in the US. The tour ended with a concert in New York City. This proved to be a turning point in Auerbach's life and career. She insisted on staying in New York instead of heading back home, immediately enrolling at the Manhattan School of Music and then at the Juilliard School, where she studied composition with Milton Babbitt and Robert Beaser. Other than a year spent in Germany at the Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media, she has remained in New York ever since.

Such a unique set of circumstances and outcomes has in turn given shape to a highly individual creative voice that, in Alex Ross's words, produces music of 'extraordinary power and intensity'. Auerbach has already amassed a sizeable corpus of works, including three symphonies, three violin concertos, a number of large-scale choral works, a three-act 'opera misteria', *Gogol* (2010), about the Russian novelist and dramatist Nikolai Gogol, and a series of highly successful ballet scores. However, it is in the area of chamber music that Auerbach has so far made the greatest and most lasting impression. Her chamber output includes eight string quartets, three sonatas for violin and piano, a sonata for cello and piano, and two large-scale sets of preludes (24 each) for violin and cello respectively, with piano accompaniment. Her music for solo piano – often technically challenging but always highly idiomatic, and which has proved especially popular – also includes a set of 24 preludes, as well as the terse, epigrammatic *Ten Dreams* (both 1999).



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/k27IDDj07Z4>

The latter work serves as a useful introduction to Auerbach's colourful and vivid imagination – a world of extreme contrasts and sharp juxtapositions which often exploits wide registers while foregrounding pounding, obsessive repetitions of notes and chords. Dreams often provide the creative spark, with Auerbach once stating: 'I dream, then dissect the dream into sounds, translate the sounds into symbols, which can resurrect the dream.' These oneiric visions are sometimes bathed in a sound world of blurred sonorities and indistinct edges, but such innocent moments disclose the shadow of something far more unsettling lurking underneath. Dreams often flip into nightmares. The first of the *Ten Dreams* is even subtitled *Alptraumhaft* ('As in a Nightmare'). Each movement becomes a little study in semitone relationships – sometimes agitated, at other times more dreamlike.

Beethoven's shadow looms heavily in Auerbach's dark parody of his Fifth Symphony in the fifth dream, which is full of cluster chords and sharp chromatic shifts. The ninth, with its coruscating patterns, rushes headlong into the tenth, which announces itself with 48 very loud, rhythmic repetitions of an eight-note chord.

Beethoven is also the subject of another solo piano work, *Ludwigs Alptraum* ('Ludwig's Nightmare', 2007), which quotes and distorts fragments from the composer's Op 27 No 1 Sonata. Auerbach observes that in this piece, as in dreams, 'the most disjointed elements suddenly reveal connexions and seem to belong together in a strange and distorted reality'.

Dreams guide the mind against its own will. Auerbach's music also possesses a will of its own. She describes her music as misbehaving: 'A composer does not own his sounds; the sounds own him.' Likewise, tonality is used not so much as a structurally binding agent but more in terms of its symbolic or psychological resonances, reinforcing the notion that Auerbach thinks of sound in terms of metaphors, images and stories. She points out that musical gestures become symbols in her String Quartet No 2 (*Primera luz*, 2005).

Auerbach's interest in dreams also extends to memories of childhood that are sometimes tinged with a bittersweet nostalgia. Parallels can be drawn between her 12 character pieces for piano *Images from Childhood* (2000) and earlier sets such as Schumann's *Kinderszenen*. However, Auerbach resists the urge to couch her language in an innocent and naive way. Instead, her music fluctuates from light and playful to dark and menacing, something that can also be heard in her ballet music, including John Neumeier's critically acclaimed 2005 adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's popular story *The Little Mermaid*. Dancelike qualities come to the fore here, especially a penchant for waltz patterns and rhythms.

Musical reference and quotation plays an important role, but unlike its use in the polystylistic compositions of, say, Alfred Schnittke, it often serves as a unifying element in Auerbach's music, binding the material together. Sometimes another composer's presence is implied in the music's shapes and gestures, for example Bach in *par.ti.ta* (2007) for solo violin. At other times the reference is more explicit, such as in the *Sogno*

di Stabat mater (2007) for solo violin and viola, vibraphone and string orchestra (a reworking of the larger *Dialogues on Stabat mater*, 2005). The collage-like design of *Sogno* quotes brief passages from Pergolesi's *Stabat mater* before plunging headlong into dense chromatic vortexes. It's one of Auerbach's most direct and striking compositions.

Donald Rosenberg (*Gramophone*, 7/13) detects not only a 'mocking parody' of Mozart but also 'veiled or overt' references to Bach, Bartók, Offenbach and pop music in the 24 Preludes for cello and piano (1999); while Christoph Flamm has drawn parallels between Auerbach's E minor piano prelude (No 4 from 24 Preludes for piano, 1999) and Chopin's E minor Prelude, Op 28 No 4. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Russian composers including Mussorgsky, Scriabin, Rachmaninov, Shostakovich and Schnittke are often cited as influences, although a more general influence is Sofia Gubaidulina, who early on recognised Auerbach's talents as a composer. Auerbach's large-scale *Russian Requiem* (2007) engages with notions of diaspora, nostalgia and geographic and cultural dislocation.

Auerbach's use of quotation has inevitably drawn comparisons to polystylism and postmodernism, while the strong emotional and expressive vein that courses through much of her music suggests a neo-romantic approach. In truth, her music is neither. Nothing appears quite what it seems in Auerbach's world, and her aim is often to find beauty 'in the most unexpected places'. As violinist Gidon Kremer has said: 'Her strong talent...is nurtured by a deep respect towards the past, but still allows her creations to remain sincere and personal, while being innovative and adventurous.'

Recommended recordings



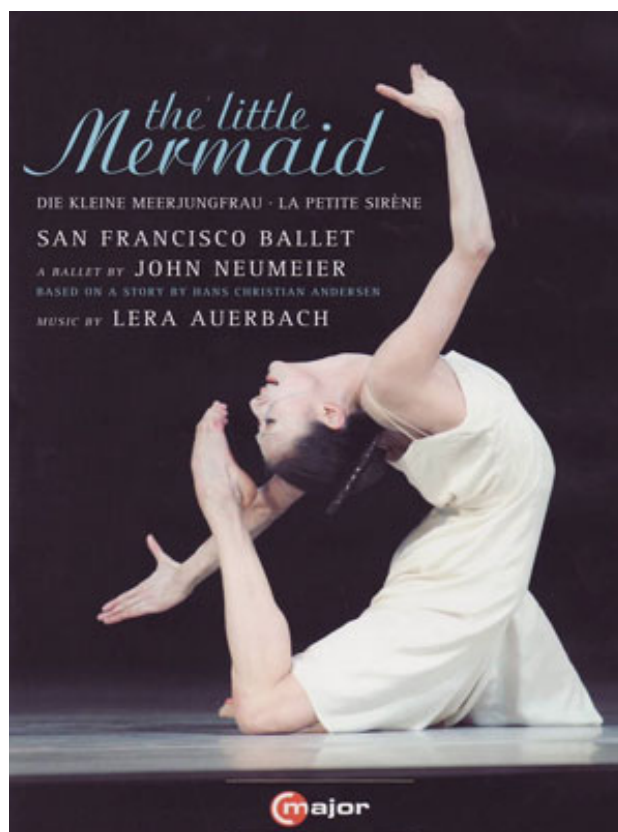
'Preludes and Dreams'

Lera Auerbach *pf*

BIS (A/06)

A number of recordings of Auerbach's solo piano music have been released over the years, including Ksenia Nosikova's 'Flight and Fire' (Profil, 2007) and Eli Kalman's excellent 'Homo Ludens' (Centaur, 2015). But the composer's own 'Preludes and Dreams' (BIS, 2006), featuring 24 Preludes, *Ten Dreams* and *Chorale, Fugue and Postlude*, remains the benchmark for all future interpretations.

[Read the review](#)



The Little Mermaid

San Francisco Ballet Orchestra / Martin West

C Major

John Neumeier's powerful, poignant adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* is brought to life by Auerbach's vivid and dramatic score, which ranges from muscular *Rite of Spring*-style moments to expansive filmlike themes, quotes from Beethoven, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, percussive sounds occasionally reminiscent of ceremonial Japanese Noh theatre and disembodied vocal sounds from a theremin.



Sogno di Stabat mater

Gidon Kremer *vn* Kremerata Baltica

Nonesuch (11/10)

Kremer teams up with Kremerata Baltica in Auerbach's highly imaginative reworking of Pergolesi's famous piece.

Auerbach facts

- **Born**

October 21, 1973, in Chelyabinsk, Russia.

- **Prodigy**

Began learning the piano at an early age, and started composing aged four. She completed an opera, *Snow Maiden's Gift*, at the age of 12.

- **Studies**

Manhattan School of Music; and Juilliard School with Milton Babbitt and Robert Beaser.

- **Breakthrough work**

24 Preludes for piano (1999).

- **Other facts**

Named poet of the year 1996 by the International Pushkin Society, New York.

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