

In search of inspiration by Joanna Kaczorowska

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Sheila Silver- a prominent New York-based composer - an uncommon woman; undoubtedly one of the most colorful figures of the current American music scene. This year she was awarded the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship.

I became interested in her work when I first heard the unconventional song, *The White Rooster: A Tale of Compassion*, written for a female vocal ensemble accompanied by a little known yet magical instrument: Tibetan singing bowls. From then on I followed the composer's music and soon featured one of her compositions in my New York Chamber Musicians' concert series, a fantastic piano trio for piano, cello and violin, *To The Spirit Unconquered*. This work makes a powerful impression on all.

Silver's musical language is a unique synthesis of saturated sounds of different cultures. Critics have praised her music as highly emotional, accessible to every listener, but also masterfully thought out. "...only a few [composers] in any generation will enliven the art form with their musical language and herald new directions in music. Sheila Silver is such a visionary.", German *Wetterauer Zeitung* wrote.

Long before receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship, Sheila was fascinated by the touching and exotic novel set in Afghanistan, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, where Khaled Hosseini (author of the bestseller *The Kite Runner*) - tells us about hope, love and salvation. The book tells the story of the friendship of two women who marry the despotic shoemaker Rasheed. Mariam, an illegitimate child loses her mother, and is married off to Rasheed by her father. Laila, after becoming a war orphan is taken in by Mariam and Rasheed, and she too is soon married to Rasheed. The two women's lives are dominated with abuse from Rasheed, resulting in a deep friendship that carries them through much tragedy, including the mistreatment of women by the Taliban.

The composer describes her fascination with Hosseini's novel, "My first encounter with the novel was in 2009, listening to it as a book-on-tape during my long commutes, tears streaming down my face as I listened to Mariam's execution scene, thinking that this was definitely operatic. At that moment I loved and respected Mariam so much. A woman who had suffered unbearable cruelties throughout her life, I wanted to portray her as I saw her...strong, noble, beautiful, having made the ultimate sacrifice of her life — a mother's sacrifice — for Laila who was like a daughter to her. Upon finishing the novel, however, I was afraid that it was too complex for an opera. On the third reading I dared to believe that the novel could work as an opera — ideas for the staged operatic adaptation started coming to mind — and so I gave a copy to my librettist, Stephen Kitsakos, who was as moved by the story as I was. And now, a little over a year after we committed to it, I have met with Khaled Hosseini and obtained the opera rights and his enthusiastic support, and Stephen and I are working on the adaptation. Ideas are flowing in abundance.

In January of 2013 I began a long-distance study of Hindustani music under the mentorship of Deepak Raja, author of *Hindustani Music, A Tradition in Transition*, and since June of 2013 I have been living in Pune India, studying singing North Indian classical music (khayal and a little dhrupad) with master singers, Pandit Narayanrao Bodas and Sri Kedar Narayan Bodas. They have opened an entirely new world of sound to me – and opened their home and their hearts to me as well. It is thrilling to be a student again and I will return home with a wealth of ideas and “source” material for my opera. I am also studying tabla (Indian classical drums) and this work is also presenting me with fresh rhythmic possibilities. My study of North Indian music will “color” my Western compositional voice – North Indian music being at the heart of Afghan music. The Bodas' are both extraordinary musicians and it is a privilege to be able to learn from them in the traditional “Indian” way. I am not only learning Indian music — I am also learning much about the deep traditions of Indian music and how it is taught and

conveyed. Yes, I am being transformed — and ... it will all go into the opera. We definitely have a big powerful opera here."

Currently, Sheila and her family are in India, where the composer is studying the music and traditions of northern India. During her time there, Sheila has captured her impressions in the form of a journal, which she shared with her friends:

"The first two weeks were difficult. We all wondered why we had come and experienced extreme homesickness. But we found an apartment, we went through the Kafkaesque bureaucracy of registering for residence, and we learned how to cross a street (still a very scary thing to do as traffic is like nothing I've ever experienced and you take your life in your hands with each crossing).

We are not tourists here. In fact, there's nothing much "to see" in Pune other than life itself, which is amazing. I'm schlepping across Pune in terrible traffic to get to my guru. The beauty is once I'm there, I'm in an ancient and incredible world and I feel welcome and I've learned so much in just a few weeks. I love being a student and learning something entirely new. I'm studying North Indian music via singing. I've been welcomed into the family. Both the son and the father are teaching me and the mother, who sits all day in the kitchen cooking, brings me tea and Indian delicacies. The three of them live in a 4 room apt (including the kitchen) in the simplest of terms. Entire square footage is probably less than our kitchen at home. My gurus will accept no money for the lessons (this I just found out and have had a lot of difficulty accepting the "grace" of my gurus) and they teach me for around 2 hours at least 4 times a week. Teaching is a sacred act and they do not believe that it should be confused with money. I'm working to accept this.

Other students come and go, serving the gurus and getting lessons. I've met the other students too. The father (the old man) throws a lot of material at me while the younger, the son, is more systematic in his teaching. When I came it was to study with the father but in truth, it is the son who does most of the teaching. Plus he has a gorgeous voice, speaks good English, and has a real devotion to his guru which he is trying to communicate to me. He is a master musician and I feel honored to be taught by him and actually he's enjoying teaching me. We have a lot of fun. Basically he sings and I repeat and transcribe what he's sung. I have been tutored in the protocol for addressing the family, (like touching the feet of the guru and bowing upon entering) but the Bodases (father and son) don't really want me to do it and so gradually my awkward stoopings have evolved into a humble "namaste" bow. It is thrilling to sing. I love it. Turns out I have a good voice for Indian music — unlike Western music.

Pune is very green but it's difficult to appreciate the trees when ambushed by traffic and throngs of motorcycles daily. Crossing the street is still an endeavor which takes total concentration. I mostly only shop at stores on "our" side of the main street. Dogs, donkeys, cows, goats, just hangout on the streets at their leisure. It's not uncommon to see a traffic jam because a bunch of cows are lying in the middle of a main road and all the cars and buses and motorcycles have to move around them.

The lessons and the music are much more fulfilling, challenging, inspiring, than I had ever imagined. The Indians with whom we've bonded have gone to extraordinary measures to make us comfortable and help us get settled. I've rarely experienced such generosity. It's in the connections with the people that I'm blown away."

Clearly, the experience of Sheila Silver is rich and inspiring. We are left to wait for the opera, the artist's next fruitful creative work.