

International Roots:
Cellist Rebecca Hartka's Debut Album "Folkfire"

by Elana Gartner

Folk music, in general, often comes from a need to create or preserve local identities, using oral traditions. As people start moving away from their villages and farms and into factories and cities, folk traditions become threatened. Classical music, on the other hand, is often seen as unrooted and not belonging to any one tradition. But classical composers such as England's Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Hungary's composer and ethnomusicologist, Béla Bartók, set out to collect and incorporate folk tunes in their classical compositions so they could be written down and remembered. This folk-inspired classical music was precisely what Rebecca Hartka wanted to explore in her debut cello album, *Folkfire*, released in October, 2010. The diverse styles on the CD, which include Vaughan Williams and Bartók, pull from several traditions and cultures, including Spanish, Russian, English, Jewish, Roumanian and Japanese, mostly from the early twentieth century.

When performing these songs and other works, Rebecca tries to give herself over to the music, in complete surrender to the moment. "As a performer, I have to work a lot to get out of the way of the music. I try to be a vessel...[but] it is a fine balance between being in control and letting go...going with the moment and [wanting] to play this run in tune." she said. This is a great and valuable part of the spiritual journey for her with any piece of music she plays. Often, the journey is not something musicians talk about candidly but she said, "Being a musician requires a tremendous amount of compassion."

Rebecca tries to serve as the bridge for her audiences to experience her music, to feel it and to let go of the insecurity of not understanding it. "Classical music is often seen as stuffy or for people with money or not contemporary, sometimes outdated or not relevant or just plain boring." she said and feels strongly that people don't need to understand the music to allow in the experience of it, particularly at a concert. "Music transcends our own human experience. We often feel isolated, like we're the only one feeling grief. But when we feel that hundreds of people are experiencing the rage and range of emotions that we are...that can be very powerful." Due to the high emotion that she tries to communicate with her playing, Rebecca often prefers to perform in smaller venues which give her the opportunity to talk to the audience and have a more intimate experience. She feels that, when an audience is able to listen well, they become a part of the performance and the instrument.

Rebecca grew up in a rural area, spent her childhood walking in the woods, playing in the streams, building with little stones and playing with newts. She finds nature to be delicate, dramatic and sophisticated, contrary to the popular view of it as rustic and simple. She tries to bring this ideal to her music and to her audiences. She has even had an audience member tell her that they heard waterfalls in a performance, without knowing that Rebecca grew up near a waterfall and spent hours listening to the thundering water hitting the rocks. For her, the cello has had a natural force of energy

behind it. The cello is an instrument made from wood and there is no amplification so the sound is pure and natural, something that she is very much drawn to.

Despite the great fun that she has experienced in playing the music, this CD has not been all play and no work. Her programming, for example, has to take into account that she is playing to the attention span of a 21st century audience, using music written for the attention span of a 19th century audience. She has learned to create themed programs which give people context for the music they are listening to. This CD, her first, was tremendously hard work behind the scenes: everything from getting licenses to recording in 90 degree weather with no air conditioning to coordinating schedules with her pianist, Azusa Komiyama, and her producer, Shuichi Komiyama, to being her own publicist. She said she started thinking about this CD a year ago.

After attending the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, the rest of Rebecca's training took place in Boston, a culturally saturated area with rigorous training and great orchestras. This urban lifestyle was also a huge influence on her approach to music, as she rode the T, seeing people of all different states of mind and backgrounds, trying to figure out how to relate to people she's never met. Beyond Boston, Rebecca worked as a professor of cello at Montana State University for several years before returning, with her husband, Wes, to her rural home in Western Massachusetts.

The move has brought her back to her roots: spending days hiking with her dog, stacking wood, and being close to the earth. She now teaches in Newton, MA once a week and is trying to balance her touring career with her rural life. Looking ahead, she is starting to work on turn of the century romantics and heavier music that might have gotten lost during the wars. One piece she is looking at is the Quartet for the End of Time by Olivier Messiaen, written in a prison camp during World War II. Others include a sonata written by Austrian composer, Alexander von Zemlinsky, and compositions by English composer, Frank Bridge.

Ms. Hartka Performs on the East Coast

May 28 in Hudson, New York

Folkfire selections and discussion on experience of recording with Gili Lev, piano, free and open to the public

July 24 in New Salem, Massachusetts

1794 Meeting House Concert Series with Sivan Etedgee, piano

www.rebeccahartka.com/schedule.htm