

Coming to the Proms: MidEast's rivers of blood

Betty Olivero's music mixes the avant-garde with Sephardi folk - and was inspired by the pain of conflict

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By Jessica Duchon, August 19, 2010



Betty Olivero worked closely with contemporary music icon, Luciano Berio

It is not every day that a living female composer finds herself centre-stage at the BBC Promenade Concerts. Betty Olivero, whose work, *Neharot, Neharot*, is to be performed at the afternoon Prom on August 21, is overjoyed as she plans her trip to London.

The association the Proms held with her mentor - the late Luciano Berio, doyen of the Italian avant-garde - counts for a great deal. "The Proms have dedicated many programmes to Berio's music in the past," she says. "For me to be played there, where my teacher was so prominent, is a very emotional moment."

It is rare, too, for the Proms to feature an Israeli composer. Olivero's style, while entirely personal, is unmistakably infused with the sounds of the Middle East and the

Mediterranean. She credits her childhood home in Tel Aviv with providing her eclectic sonic backdrop.

"My parents were born in Greece and originally they are of Sephardic origin from Spain from about 500 years ago," she says. Their ancestors had migrated to Greece at the time that Jews expelled from Spain were being welcomed by the Ottoman Empire.

I enjoy every style of music. It's the energy that counts

"These autobiographic details are important in my music's content, because during my childhood I was very much exposed to Greek music, which is also strongly influenced by Arabic, Turkish, north African music. It runs in my blood, I'm very attached to these sounds and it comes into my writing almost unconsciously.

"In our building in Tel Aviv there was my family with all our music; next door there lived a family from Russia, upstairs a family from Poland, downstairs a family from Iraq and in front a family from Yemen. So in each flat another kind of music was coming through the window. If I look at my compositions today I can tell very clearly that I don't work out this synthesis between these different styles. I just write the reality that is already there."

Olivero studied piano and composition at the Rubin Academy in Tel Aviv and then undertook postgraduate work Yale University. But then came a life-changing experience: she spent two months at Tanglewood, the famous music summer school in Massachusetts, where she met Berio for the first time.

"For years his music seemed to be a column in my world, a natural source of inspiration, thanks to his research into ethnic music, his synthesis of ethnic, popular, folk and the avant-garde styles of that time. I worked with him all that summer and mentioned that I was about to go to San Diego to do my doctorate. He said to me: 'Why go so far away? Come to Italy and I will help you out'."

First, though, she felt she had to return to Israel for a year. "In the US I felt like a fish out of water." That had its advantages: "That was where I really found my identity as a composer. My music burst out there in America, probably because I felt so alienated. American culture was something that I felt I couldn't relate to; I felt there was a lack of authenticity, emotion and urgency in the music that I was hearing. It was very professionally written, but there was something cold about it that was difficult for me. This made things burst out from my roots to compensate for that."

Eventually she took Berio up on his offer, and her planned nine months in Italy turned into 18 years. "Within a week, I met my future husband," Olivero laughs. She married the double bassist who played in the concert at which one of her own new works, commissioned by Berio, was performed. She is now a mother of two, and the family lives in Israel where she is professor of composition at Bar-Ilan University.

The story behind the creation of *Neharot*, *Neharot* is less romantic. Scored for solo viola, accordion, percussion, two string orchestras and "magnetic tape", it was written three years ago while the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon was at its fiercest. The title means "Rivers, Rivers", and its resonances are many.

"The root of the word is shared with the Hebrew word *nehara*, which means light," says Olivero.

"The imagery draws in rivers of light, rivers of tears, rivers of blood. It is like a river that goes through history and carries us along, yet gets to the sea and unites in a kind of hope. This combination was the poetic message I wanted to express in this piece, because I felt overwhelmed - it was a terrible war."

Working frantically to meet her deadline for the piece, she put the television in front of her desk with the sound turned down. "This way I could write and sometimes look up to get some news. That made the writing even stronger because I'd seen all those scenes: houses falling down on fire, women screaming, screaming without voices. And so it all came into the music. I didn't intend that it would happen this way."

Years earlier, Olivero had taken part in a project led by Berio in which a group of his students reworked parts of Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo*. Olivero drew on Orfeo's powerful lament for Euridice, *Tu se morta*, for *Neharot*, *Neharot*, and also brought in traditional women's laments from Kurdistan, Yemen and North Africa. "I wanted to universalise the pain," she says.

"History keeps knocking on our doors; we are constantly looking into the future, being pushed forward. It's the reality that I feel." Extracts from *L'Orfeo* and the madrigals of Monteverdi and his contemporaries will feature in the Prom alongside *Neharot*, *Neharot*.

Olivero says that she senses a transitional period is taking place in contemporary music. "Of course it feels shaky: we don't know where we're going, but I think it's positive in the sense of opening windows, letting in the air. It's a reaction against a heavy, long period of very clear, decisive aesthetic and poetic direction that was dictated to us from the 1950 to the late 1970s. Now the younger generation are going all over the place, and I think it's a good thing.

"I can enjoy every kind of style and musical language. The only thing I care about is to feel there's a need to say what is being said: the sense that this composer couldn't do anything else, couldn't speak in another language, couldn't say what he or she needed to say in another way. This urgency is manifested in endless styles and aesthetics. It's the energy that counts."

And her Prom, given by the Britten Sinfonia and conductor Ryan Wigglesworth with the choir *I Fagiolini* under director Robert Hollingworth, promises to offer a very special energy.

Betty Olivero's 'Neharot, Neharot' is performed at the BBC Promenade Concerts at Cadogan Hall, 21 August, 3pm. Box office: 0845 401 5040. Also broadcast on BBC Radio 3