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Stories
in sound

"Some-
times you
need to
lose every-
thing in
order to
find every-
thing,"
composer
Lera Auer-
bach says.

LERA AUERBACH'S VIVID WORKS PULSE WITH DRAMA, INTENSITY, EMOTION

By MARK STRYKER
FREE PRESS MUSIC WRITER

Lera Auerbach didn't know when she woke up in a New York hotel on July 3, 1991, that the rest of the day would change the course of her life. At 17, the Russian-born prodigy, a pianist and composer, had reached the end of a short tour and was preparing to return to the Soviet Union the following morning. But Auerbach, a woman of instinct and intuition, had been feeling pangs of discontent. That morning they flowered into an epiphany: She had to defect.

"I had taken in everything Russian culture had to offer," says Auerbach, resident composer of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, which opens Saturday. "I was at a dead end. I needed to be in New York, in a global city, with exposure to everything. I was hungry for it."

Auerbach telephoned a distant acquaintance of her mother in New York. He introduced her to a conductor, who took her to the Manhattan School of Music, where, lucky to find the building open and even luckier to find the president and a few faculty members in their offices, she auditioned and was admitted on the spot. Now came the hard part: calling her parents.

If she stayed, she might never see them again. Yet if she went home, she might never have the money to return; it had taken a year of her father's salary to send her to America. Her parents left the decision in her hands. With \$100 in her pocket and just a few changes of clothes, she rolled the dice.

"I felt like fate was giving me the chance to experience this world, and if I don't take it, maybe I never get to come back."

Nearly 20 years later, Auerbach, 36, has matured into one of the most compelling composers of her generation. Her music — highly dramatic, communicative and rich with brooding intensity and poetic expression — speaks in a singular voice that builds on the language of modern Russian composers such as Shostakovich and

Alfred Schnittke. The festival, one of Detroit's signature classical music events, offers local audiences their first chance to hear her music in depth, including a concert devoted solely to her work.

Auerbach's career has had a jack-rabbit start. She made a splash in her 20s, acquiring high-profile champions on both sides of the Atlantic, including violinist Gidon Kremer, and fields a constant stream of commissions. Her catalog already includes more than 75 works, from solo pieces and chamber music to orchestral scores and ballets. She's currently finishing an opera, a fantasy on the life of Russian novelist Gogol based on her own original libretto, for the historic Theater an der Wien in Vienna.

Auerbach continues to perform as a pianist, but her artistic world is bigger than music. She's probably more famous in Russia as a poet than a musician, having published five volumes of poetry and prose. She was named Poet of the Year by the International Pushkin Society in 1996, and her work is taught in contemporary literature courses in Russian schools.

A gripping intensity of feeling and intelligence links all of Auerbach's creative pursuits, qualities also reflected in her life and personality. You can sense it in the vivid imagery of her speech — "It was the sense of freedom; I felt like a wizard who can create the whole world" is the way she describes falling in love with composing. And you can hear it in the very Russian sense of irony and double consciousness that pulsates

through her music: Beauty and suffering often appear as two sides of the same heartbeat.

Pianist Wu Han, who with her husband, cellist David Finckel, commissioned Auerbach's Sonata for Cello and Piano (2002), remembers when Auerbach first came to their Manhattan apartment to play the new work.

"There was a huge snowstorm, but she still showed up," says Wu Han. "She started to play the sonata and she started to sing the cello part. It was this half-crying, half-wailing kind of song. I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, this is one of the most intense people I've ever seen.'"

COMPOSER, POET, PIANIST

Auerbach, who has highlighted brown hair, green eyes and cherubic cheeks, was born in Chelyabinsk, a remote city in the Ural mountains near the Siberian border. Her mother was a piano teacher who taught her daughter to read and write music around age 4 or 5, about the same time she was learning her letters. Her mother also memorized a poem a day to keep her memory sharp. Auerbach picked up the habit when she was little and began writing her own poetry at 12.

Her first composition, at age 4, was a song about death. The inspiration might have come from the daily walks she took with her nanny to a cemetery, where the nanny took care of her late husband's gravestone and her reserved tone next to it. The exercise was not a somber one and left Auerbach with the lasting impression

that death is merely part of life.

"I would go to the piano and I would compose stories," she says. "I would create a fairy tale or story that was illustrated in sound or derived from the sound. Even though music is the most abstract art form, it's also the most personal. For me the personal connection is very important. I do think in metaphors, images and stories as I compose, but all of them can change from day to day."

Auerbach's music is tonal, but she loves spiky dissonance, aggressive gestures, extreme dynamics, contrasts of color and texture and heightened emotions, from hallucinatory reverie to slashing violence. In a piece like the Sonata for Cello and Piano, the instruments circle each other, animated by inner lives like method actors exploring their subconscious.

"She has a very good sense of pulse and a good sense of timing," says Wu Han. "Her ideas never go on too long. They're like a good story."

Auerbach often refers to standard forms. She has written several sets of preludes (for solo piano, violin and piano, cello and piano) that wink at Bach's seminal models and journey through all 24 major and minor keys. But her language still sounds contemporary, suggesting new wine poured into old bottles.

Auerbach's admirers are quick to call her an original, but her own view

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

In its 17th year, the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival has earned a national reputation for the quality of its performers and inventive programming. The 2010 festival, "The Poet Speaks," highlights Robert Schumann, Samuel Barber and resident composer Lera Auerbach.

Saturday through June 20
Seven venues in metro Detroit
Subscriptions \$85-\$165. Advance single tickets \$32 (weekdays), \$35-\$45 (Saturdays), \$5 more at the door.
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Highlights and full schedule, Page 30

embraces a paradox.

"I think it's important to understand that the only way to be truly original is when originality is not a goal," she says.

"Art doesn't develop in a Darwinian sense. We don't get better and better; we get different. We tend to think of progress in the scientific way, but it doesn't apply to art. The only way to discover your true original voice — and there is infinite possibilities for originality nowadays — is by being honest with yourself and striving to write the best music you can, and not think about what category the critics might put you in or if this might start a new trend."

Auerbach says that fearlessness is a prerequisite. That's certainly how she's lived her life, particularly on that fateful day in July 19 years ago. Of course, there were trade-offs; she didn't see her family for five years. More recently, tragedy struck in the form of a fire last fall at the New York apartment she shares with her husband, a double bassist. Auerbach's Steinway piano, library of Russian books, musical scores and family

letters were destroyed, and the couple has been living with relatives in Sarasota, Fla., while the apartment is rebuilt.

The losses were devastating but she has soldiered on, finding meaning, even poetry, in the act of starting over. After all, she's done it before.

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Lera Auerbach

Born: October 1973, Chelyabinsk, Soviet Union

Occupation: Composer, pianist and poet

Education: Bachelor's and master's degrees in piano and composition from the Juilliard School. Teachers included Milton Babbitt, Robert Beaser and Joseph Kalichstein. Also studied at Manhattan School of Music and Hannover Hochschule für Musik.

On CD: "Preludes and Dreams" (Bis), "24 Preludes" (Bis), "Tolstoy's Waltz" (Bis), "Ballet for Lonely Violinist" (Bis), "Flight and Fire" (Profil-Hänssler), "For David and Wu Han" (ArtistLed)

On the Web: leraauerbach.com. Her blog, "The Trouble Clef," hosted by Best American Poetry, bestamericanpoetry.com.

At the festival: Six pieces by Auerbach appear on three programs, including an all-Auerbach concert on June 14. Violist Kim Kashkashian premieres Auerbach's arrangement of Shostakovich's "24 Preludes" for viola and piano June 10-11.