

MUSICAL EVENTS

CHAYA CZERNOWIN GIVES VOICE TO A WOUNDED WORLD

The composer's work, featured at a recent festival in Germany, includes a howling denunciation of war crimes against children.

By Alex Ross

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Czernowin's control of timbre, texture, and structure yields a kind of cataclysmic grandeur. Illustration by Cecilia Carlstedt; Source photograph by Astrid Ackermann

Global disaster shadowed this year's Witten Days for New Chamber Music, an ostensibly insular contemporary-music festival that takes place each spring in the Ruhr Valley, in Germany. Two Iranian composers were featured; only one, Amen Feizabadi, could attend in person. Golfam Khayam, the other, conveyed a message pleading for peace and extolling music as a "free bird who knows no border." The Russian composer Dmitri Kourliandski, also on the program in Witten, left his homeland in 2022 after participating in protests against the war in Ukraine. The Israeli-born composer Chaya Czernowin, the focus of several concerts, has described herself as being profoundly alienated from her country, and she has also decried repression in the United States, where she now lives. Composers from more stable lands nursed their own fears. In Germany itself, neo-Nazis are gaining ground.

The agonies of the day were only intermittently audible in the music on offer in Witten. The festival, which is organized by West German Radio and has been running in its current form since 1969, favors experimental idioms that customarily avoid obvious political messaging or clear cultural signposts. Kourliandski, for example, presented a string quartet, "Partially Restored Landscapes," in which fragile, brittle sonorities surface amid long silences. It felt like a refuge conscious of its vulnerability. Feizabadi's "Ungezähmter Fluss" ("Untamed River"), edges toward social significance by invoking the erotic mysticism of the great Persian poet Rumi, but the dissonant grunge of the musical language keeps worldly passions at bay. Khayam was an outlier, in that the work of hers performed, "Seven Valleys of Love," has tonal leanings and incorporates an old Iranian folk melody called "Deylaman." This being a stringent European new-music gathering, someone in the audience felt compelled to boo the intrusion of conventional harmony.

Perhaps the most political aspect of this year's Witten Days—its theme, "The Present / Inescapable," nodded toward the pressures of outer reality—was its obliviousness to national borders. Composers from nineteen countries, ranging from Cuba and Brazil to Japan and South Korea, communally explored an inexhaustible continent of sound. Activist spirits might dismiss this emphasis on the purely sonic as a strategy of avoidance, although the likes of Feizabadi and Kourliandski can't be accused of sitting idly by. In any case, to compose in the classical tradition today is to go against the grain of a hyper-commodified culture. Theodor W. Adorno, the high priest of the high modern, once wrote that art criticizes the status quo "simply by existing."

I went to Witten primarily to hear new and recent works by Czernowin, a composer I would follow anywhere. Born in Haifa in 1957, she emerged from an avant-garde background that included stints at IRCAM, Pierre Boulez's electronic compound in Paris, and at the Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music, in Germany. In the past couple of decades, however, Czernowin has deëmphasized the frantic gesturing that characterizes so much latter-day modernism. In large-scale instrumental scores such as "Maim" and "HIDDEN," and in the operas "Infinite Now" and "Heart Chamber," her language takes on a spacious concreteness, assuming the contours not just of a distinct landscape but of an entire organic world. Within open-ended forms that last up to an hour, you hear surges and storms, explosions and silences, isolated cries, insectoid choruses, mutant arias, and, beneath it all, axial, cosmic drones. Alternatively, all this could be experienced as a noise within—the groaning of an overloaded psychic infrastructure. Either way, Czernowin forges a logic that integrates disparate, unpredictable events.

Czernowin is, as it happens, a politically outspoken composer. She often divulges her preoccupations in program notes, although her music is so innately gripping that audiences may forget her agenda once their ears are engulfed. "Seltene Erde" ("Rare Earth"), for double-bass and ensemble, which Evan Hulbert and Klangforum Wien played in Witten, under the direction of Elena Schwarz, alludes to the deadly business of mining precious minerals for use in cellphones. Double-bass glissandos hint at hands grubbing in the earth, while abrupt moments of concerted action—notably, an accordion wheezing out an F-sharp-minor chord—suggest flickering signals and transmissions. But I eventually gave up trying to match the program to the musical narrative, which exists on its own plane of beauty and terror intermingled.

“EZOV (Moss),” for string quartet, is more oblique in its gestures toward contemporary crises. “*Ezov*” means “moss” in modern Hebrew, and the word is also associated with a Middle Eastern herb that was part of ancient Jewish ritual. Czernowin’s note for “EZOV” cites a time of “pain and suffering” and offers plant life as a contrary realm of connection and renewal. As in Kourliandski’s quartet, specks and splatters of sound are interspersed with silences. The sound itself is multifarious: sirenlike glissandos and scrambled tones give way to harmonies that touch on major and minor triads, although, because the chords are produced by letting the bow bounce woodenly on the strings, they remain jittery ghosts. At the end, a quivering high note on the cello gives a glimmer of hope, as in the fictional music that Thomas Mann conjures in his novel “Doctor Faustus.” (Czernowin’s next opera will be based on Mann’s “*Der Erwählte*,” or “The Holy Sinner.”) The Diotima Quartet gave an exacting, piercing account of the work.

Czernowin arrived in Witten with a new score for six musicians, titled “The Red-Haired Man,” which doubles as a piece of chamber theatre. The title comes from a miniature story by the Soviet writer Daniil Kharmis, who wrote absurdist literature under Stalinism and suffered as a result. Kharmis’s text, about a man who has neither hair nor head nor body, is recited repeatedly by the performers—in this instance, members of the Köln-based Hand Werk Ensemble. There is no plot per se, but you have the sense that a band of eccentric refugees is trying to maintain a veneer of humanity in the midst of all too familiar chaos. Early on, they lie on the floor amid blinding lights and wafting smoke; later, they huddle over suitcases. But they also bicker, sulk, dance, and maniacally grin for group photographs. The deadpan wit of the conceit is something novel in Czernowin’s output, and it aligns surprisingly well with her raw, dark sonic palette.

Closing the festival was Czernowin’s “No! A Lament for the Innocent”—a howling denunciation of the crimes against humanity that are committed whenever children are killed, maimed, or separated from their families. When she began the work, around the time of the first Trump Administration, she had in mind the United States’ cruel policies toward immigrants; when she finished it, in 2024, she was focussed on Israel’s destruction of Gaza. The U.S.-Israeli war against Iran has added thousands to the list of innocent victims. “No!” exists in two versions, one for two antiphonal female voices and two ensembles, the other for voice and ensemble performing against prerecorded tracks. The latter version was used in Witten, with Sofia Jernberg delivering the live vocals, Keren Motseri contributing the recorded part, and Yalda Zamani conducting the WDR Symphony. When Jernberg exchanged prolonged cries of “No!” with her electronic other, she embodied the solitude of anger in a digital age.

For the most part, “No!” inhabits an abstract soundscape, though an intensely fraught one. Instruments and voices accumulate into immense, sustained, saturating dissonances, with a snare drum cutting through the tear-gas haze. Characteristically, Czernowin’s control of timbre, texture, and structure yields a kind of cataclysmic grandeur. Then, at the very end, she kicks away the frame of art and makes things blunt. Singer and her doppelgänger plead together: “Don’t take my child away / Don’t take my child / Don’t / No.” The final syllables accelerate into a blur, whereupon a ritual of wailing erupts. A composer writes to the limits of her art, and steps into the real. ♦

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