

# From Russian composer, with anguish

By **MARK STRYKER**  
FREE PRESS MUSIC CRITIC

Lera Auerbach, resident composer of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, introduced her String Quartet No. 3 at Monday's concert devoted to her music by noting, "This is one of my most intense and tragic works."

Now that's saying something. Just before the Third Quartet, pianist James Tocco gave a deeply felt, volatile performance of her "Chorale, Fugue, and Postlude," a gut-wrenching piece whose emotional terrain travels from brooding discontent to suicidal despair. How much bleaker could her music get? Quite a bit.

Auerbach, a frighteningly gifted 36-year-old Russian-born composer — as well as an excellent pianist and a poet so respected in her homeland that her works are taught in literature courses — doesn't smile much in her music. Hearing four works back-to-back, each darker and more somber than the last, was sometimes too much to bear. But the concert still offered a rewarding window into the inner life of a composer with an acute

ear for the duality of the human heart and soul.

**HER MUSIC IS THEATRICAL**, negotiating the liminal territory between life and death, beauty and ugliness, love and betrayal, victory and suffering, sincerity and irony. Monday's concert, the halfway point of the festival, pulsed with wild mood swings, quick-strike dynamics, pregnant tolling and violent dissonance followed by tender expressions of longing and nostalgia.

Auerbach is Russian, but she seems to have inhaled all of her predecessors in a single gulp, not only composers from Rachmaninoff to Shostakovich and Alfred Schnittke but also heroes of literature dating back to Gogol and Pushkin. The result is a singular voice, rooted in traditional forms and tonality, but still contemporary. The festival's 2010 theme, "The Poet Speaks," finds a strong voice in Auerbach's storyteller aesthetic, literary



'Music of Lera Auerbach'

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

★★★

Out of four stars

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affinities and ear for song, and she's a good match with the 19th- and 20th-Century composers also featured this year, Robert Schumann and Samuel Barber.

**THE THIRD QUARTET (2006)** was the most mature and formally adventurous work. Subtitled "Cetera desunt" ("The rest is missing"), the piece unfolds in eight concentrated movements — sonnets, really, filled with internal rhymes — played without pause and lasting 25 minutes; Auerbach may have been thinking of the six continuous adagios of Shostakovich's 15th Quartet. Tensile passages with all four strings moving in furious lockstep rhythm set the tone. Elsewhere, two or more voices rubbed against each other in gripping dissonance; solos soared in delirious rhapsodies.

The music is serious, mournful and profound. The Jasper String Quartet, a young professional ensemble in the festival's Shouse Institute, had played

the piece last year and gave a polished performance.

Auerbach said her early Piano Trio (1992/96) had a lighter, jazzier cast, but it still brooded. It was the least evolved work of the night, and the performance by the Trio La Plata, a Shouse group, was unfocused. The 24 Preludes for Piano (1999), one of several similar cycles that Auerbach has written that traverse all the major and minor keys, is a 39-minute tour de force, ranging from austere apparitions to frenzied chaos. It's a measure of her originality that what could sound like a cheap postmodern homage to Bach, Chopin, Rachmaninoff and Scriabin still sounds fresh.

Auerbach played them herself, showcasing a broad range of tonal color, sturdy technique and charismatic flair. She ended with an encore, Rachmaninoff's sweetly lyrical G Major Prelude. While it perhaps broke the spell of her own music, it was nice to end with an emotional thaw and the promise of spring. Even in Russia the sun shines occasionally.

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