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## Innovative Premiere by Music of Remembrance



Mary Kouyoumdjian, composer. Photo credit: Dominica Eriksen

Last night's **Spring Concert** presented by Music of Remembrance (MOR) featured the world premiere of an extraordinary collaboration: *to open myself, to scream*, a portrait piece inspired by the Holocaust survivor Ceija Stojka (1933-2013), with music by Mary Kouyoumdjian and visual design by Kevork Mourad.

The entire concert, titled *Ceija*, and presented at Benaroya's Nordstrom Recital Hall, was dedicated to the legacy of this Roma artist, writer, and musician who survived three concentration camps — though many members from her extended family did not.

Born to Catholic parents, Stojka traveled during summers with her Roma family across the Austrian countryside as a child — the family business involved horse trading — while they wintered in Vienna.

Only 12 by war's end, Ceija Stojka took decades before she could even begin processing these traumatic memories through her painting and writing. (She was 55 when she began painting.) But she gained a following, also publishing a trio of autobiographies that broke ground in addressing the issue of the Nazi genocide of the Roma people — whose persecution hardly ended with the war. Vienna named a **square** in Stojka's honor following her death in 2013.

Kouyoumdjian is a young Brooklyn-based composer who has been commissioned by such distinguished ensembles as the Kronos Quartet. In previous works she has addressed experiences of the Armenian genocide and the chaos of war, which directly affected her family.

This commission is very much in keeping with MOR's commitment, in the words of founder and artistic director Mina Miller, to remind us of "the Holocaust's urgent lessons for today, and of the need for vigilance and action in the face of threats to human rights everywhere." MOR friends Marcus and Pat Meier, longstanding advocates for and collectors of Stojka's art, had brought the artist's story to Miller's attention and sponsored the new commission.

Kouyoumdjian took her title from a speech Stojka gave in 2004 for

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the opening of a retrospective at Vienna's Jewish Museum: "I reached for the pen because I had to open myself, to scream."

Each of the four movements of *to open myself, to scream* is also titled after quotes from the artist. Kouyoumdjian says that she was drawn to Stojka's "themes of longing for the past and coping with the aftermath of unimaginable trauma," adding, "I hope to continue the conversation about how we sympathize with those who experience the unimaginable, and how we can pull from the past to move forward."

That's a tall order for any work, but Kouyoumdjian succeeds brilliantly in drawing us sympathetically into Stojka's world. She makes us sense precisely these themes of longing and coping through art. What's more, she does this without sentimental manipulation or a false glaze promising aesthetic redemption.

*to open myself, to scream* creates a bold, innovative soundspace using techniques of layering and multiple forms of dialogue among its unusual chamber configuration of clarinet, trumpet, violin, cello, and double bass (all played by Seattle Symphony musicians).

The most overt musical dialogue is between present and past. The players interact with an electronic soundtrack that samples and processes material they had previously recorded; Kouyoumdjian also recorded vocal samples representing Stojka's memories of her mother comforting her (she was in the camps with her daughter) — but these are filtered and distanced, so that the comfort offered always seems just beyond the horizon.

Overall, the effect is of a labyrinthine internal dialogue, a dialogue poised restlessly between contradictory impulses. The narrative framework implies a desire to revisit happy memories of childhood (evident particularly in folk-flavored idioms), which are accompanied and superseded by the trauma to which these are inevitably linked. Kouyoumdjian's continually transforming soundscape conveys this harrowed consciousness, whose very sensitivity enhances the pain of memory.

Another significant dialogue is the one between music and visuals. The latter, working with the whole spectrum of Stojka's paintings and ink sketches, were designed by Syrian-Armenian artist Kevork Mourad (a multi-media master who has collaborated with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project among many others).

Projected onto a large screen behind the players, the paintings are animated into a filmic accompaniment to the score (rather than the conventional order of the reverse). Mourad's remarkable animations underscore the music's sense of memories and images being unrelentingly processed. In turn they establish their own varieties of dialogue and interchange: between figuration and abstraction, saturated colors and somber black-and-white, recognizability and ambiguity.

Particular figures are seen moving into or receding from the foreground. At times the "action" creates an illusion of the paintings trying to breathe, which anticipates one of Kouyoumdjian's most startling gestures, at the end of her score. In conjunction, music and visuals reinforce the feeling of a struggle between the past and "moving forward." A kind of anxious pedal point grounds many of the musical gestures, even at their most frenzied, until the piece ultimately builds to an overwhelming, unresolved climax.

What's especially innovative here is the sense of emotional pulse Kouyoumdjian establishes: never linear or straightforward but always in motion, acting and reacting. The last movement is titled after one of Stojka's most unforgettable statements: "Auschwitz is only sleeping. If the world does not change now ... then I cannot explain why I survived ..."

MOR's program also presented the world premiere of new choreography by Olivier Wevers, artistic director of Seattle's Whim W' Him company. The music was from Osvaldo Golijov's score to the 2000 film *The Man Who Cried*, which depicts the story of a Roma man and his lover, a young Jewish woman, in Nazi-occupied Paris.

Featuring dancers Liane Aung and Karl Watson, Wevers' choreography emphasized the passionate urgency of the lovers' bond, their individuality facing powerful destructive forces. The sextet of SSO musicians gave a poetically touching account of

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### Arts & Culture Stories from NPR

- [Celebrated Playwright And Actor Sam Shepard Dies](#)  
Sam Shepard was both a prize-winning playwright and an acclaimed actor. He won a Pulitzer for Drama for *Buried Child* in 1979 and wrote more than 40 other plays as well as short stories and essays. He died Thursday at his home in Kentucky of complications from Lou Gehrig's disease. He was 73.
- [Remembering Actress Jeanne Moreau, Icon Of French New Wave Cinema](#)  
Moreau pursued acting despite her father's disapproval. She told *Fresh Air*, "I led a double life. ... He discovered it when he saw my picture on the front page." Moreau died Monday at the age of 89.
- [In New Novel, Tom Perrotta Shares 'Post-Parental' Reflections From An Empty Nest](#)  
Mrs. Fletcher tells the story of Eve, a single mother whose only child, Brendan, has left for college. Perrotta says the book was inspired by the upheaval he experienced when his own kids moved out.
- [Sam Shepard, 'Poet Laureate Of America's Emotional Badlands,' Dies At 73](#)  
A Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and Oscar-nominated actor, Shepard cut a towering presence in theater and cinema. He died last week of complications from ALS, a family spokesman says.
- [Art Exhibit Features Chagall's Works For Ballet And Opera](#)  
A new exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art explores the role that music and ballet played in the work of painter Marc Chagall.
- [Sasheer Zamata Uses Comedy To Address Intolerance](#)  
The comedian just came off four seasons on *Saturday Night Live*. Now, she wants to break through to the next part of her career — convincing people she's a writer as well as a performer.
- ['Game Of Thrones' Season 7, Episode 3: 'I've Brought Ice And Fire Together'](#)  
The third episode of *Game of Thrones'* seventh season, "The Queen's Justice," featured a long-awaited meeting, a long-awaited reunion, and a long-dreaded goodbye to the show's best

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Golijov's music, with its blend of klezmer and Roma-folk elements.

The program also included a number of works by composers who either fled or fell victim to the Nazis. SSO violinist Mikhail Shmidt and pianist Jessica Choe offered a bit of needed relief between the emotionally gripping premieres: a dazzling performance of Mieczyslaw Weinberg's 1949 *Rhapsody on Moldavian* themes, populist and wildly mercurial.

The first, relatively lighter half of the program included a nostalgic reverie of old Vienna in Karl Weigle's *Revelation* for string quintet and Hans Gál's Schubert-inflected *Variations on a Viennese Melody*, a youthful work from 1914.

Vocal music by Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who fled Europe to become a legendary Hollywood composer, filled out the rest of the program. [Catherine Cook](#)'s lush, resonant mezzo soprano was perfectly tailored to the arrangement (for piano quintet) of "Mariettas Lied" from Korngold's 1920 opera *Die tote Stadt*.

While Hitler was in power, Korngold refused to write concert music or opera and turned to film music. One near-casualty of his career after fleeing the Nazis was a series of songs set to Shakespeare texts, some of which were lost when the family estate was confiscated; fortunately the composer was able to recreate them from memory in his new home in Los Angeles. With Mina Miller at the keyboard, Cook sang four of these, including Korngold's folk-simple but piquant version of Desdemona's "Willow Song."

On May 24 MOR will perform Kouyoumdjian's *to open myself, to scream* at the [San Francisco Conservatory of Music](#). The rest of the program will include music by Hans Krása, Betty Olivero, and Lori Laitman.

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character.

- [How Much Can A Vision Of Your 'Future Self' Motivate You To Achieve?](#)  
Invisibilia co-host Alix Spiegel introduces us to a young man whose sights were set far beyond the Syrian orphanage in which he spent part of his childhood.
- [Even More Great Albums By Women Outside Of The Top 150](#)  
NPR Music recently released a top-ranking list of 150 albums by women. NPR's Noel King chats with Jill Sternheimer of the Lincoln Center and NPR's Paula Mejia who had some of tough decisions.
- [Museum's Plan To Sell 40 Works Has Art World Up In Arms](#)  
The auction, including two Rockwell paintings, would fund the Berkshire Museum's renovation and increase its endowment. But two prominent museum organizations say the sale violates fundamental ethics.

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## Music of Remembrance's Latest Program Is Also Music of Our Time



Stojka, Ceija. "Hiding". Courtesy of Pat and Marcus Meier

My [story](#) for *The Seattle Times* on Music of Remembrance's latest commission (details on the concert [here](#)):

Mary Kouyoumdjian's *to open myself, to scream*, inspired by Roma artist and Holocaust survivor Ceija Stojka, is at the center of MOR's May 21 program. "Our mission is to speak out for oppressed people," says MOR founder Mina Miller.

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