

## Breaking news

US added 214,000 jobs in Oct.; unemployment rate fell to 5.8%

CLASSICAL NOTES

# Cantata Singers, Roomful of Teeth premiere new Ruehr works

By David Weininger

| GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 06, 2014

The details of a composer's biography aren't always, or even usually, helpful for understanding their music, but they are for Elena Ruehr, a Boston composer who's been on the MIT faculty since 1992. Ruehr grew up in a small town in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Her mother was a folk singer and Ruehr's first piano teacher; from her Ruehr absorbed a mandate that music should be open, accessible. Her father was a mathematician and jazz pianist, from whom Ruehr took the idea of "these axioms that I start with — a kind of core idea, whether it's a harmony or a process, that I use as the basis from which I spin things out," she said by phone recently.

Ruehr deftly captured those two ideas years ago when she was describing her work: "the surface is simple, the structure complex." That maxim is, in its own pithy way, one way of answering the question of what we want from classical music in an increasingly



CHRISTIAN STEINER

**MIT's Elena Ruehr has three premieres coming in the next two weeks, employing three ensembles on two coasts.**

fragmented era. Her answer is that it should be sufficiently approachable to be entered into at first listen, but developed enough that it repays multiple hearings and deeper scrutiny.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

The next two weeks constitute a sort of bicoastal mini-festival of new works by Ruehr. On Saturday, the Cantata Singers will premiere “Eve,” a cantata based on the Genesis story, at Jordan Hall. The San Francisco Contemporary Players give the first performance of the sextet “It’s About Time” on Nov. 16 in Berkeley, Calif. Then on Nov. 21 at MIT, the innovative vocal octet Roomful of Teeth will premiere “Cassandra in the Temples,” an opera with a libretto by the writer Gretchen Henderson, for which Ruehr was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship earlier this year. It’s an enviable burst of activity for any composer.

The two new Boston pieces originated in almost diametrically opposed ways. About a year ago Ruehr got a call from Cantata Singers music director David Hoose, whom Ruehr has known for years, asking her to compose a piece that would be on a program with Bach cantatas. He requested, without stipulating, it be composed to a sacred text. That was problematic for Ruehr, who comes from a line of secular humanists. “We’re kind of a nonreligious people,” she said.

She had, however, tried to make her way through the Bible as a teenager, and in thinking about the new composition she remembered an epiphany she’d had about the Adam and Eve story. Instead of focusing on the apple and the Fall, Ruehr took from the text the notion that “she’s choosing consciousness. She knows what she’s doing and she’s making a choice to choose knowledge, even though God told her not to.”

For Ruehr, this was a cantata waiting to be written. True to her realization, “Eve” breaks off before the first couple is banished from Eden, ending at the sentence “And the eyes of them both were opened.” Her music is based on the interaction between two tonal chords whose notes create a wide array of harmonic possibilities. It was important, she said, that the piece “exist in the modern world but also have a sense of the history of Bach in it, and have a sense of the history [of] such an ancient story.”

“Cassandra in the Temples” came about in a more roundabout way last year. Henderson, a Mellon postdoctoral researcher at MIT, introduced herself to Ruehr at an MIT composers forum and proposed a collaboration. Ruehr was fascinated by

Henderson's writing, which includes a novel, poetry, and essays. During a series of meetings, they brainstormed an idea for an opera about the mythical figure of Cassandra. They were also intrigued by the idea of a "bodily" opera — one that would be performed a cappella, and danced as well as sung.

Before they'd actually hashed out concrete plans to write and produce the piece, the young composer Caroline Shaw won the Pulitzer Prize for Music for a piece she'd written for the stylistically promiscuous Roomful of Teeth. Ruehr and Henderson realized that this was the perfect vehicle for their opera. So they wrote a "teaser scene" and sent it to Roomful music director Brad Wells, who agreed to sign on for the project. The premiere of "Cassandra" — a concert performance, without the dance component — will be part of a weeklong residency for the ensemble.

The vocal writing moves back and forth from the characters' lines to that of the "orchestra" of supporting voices, which Ruehr said was a challenge to negotiate during the composition. During the residency, she added, "we're going to do some actual composing, in the sense of working on the vocal technique." Roomful of Teeth can do anything from straight classical singing to yodeling and Inuit throat singing; Ruehr wanted to get the singers' feedback. "I want your singers to tell me what they think if they have an idea," she told Wells.

Three world premieres in two weeks sounds exhilarating, not to mention nerve-racking in terms of deadlines. Ruehr, though, made it sound like no big deal. "I work every day," she said. "I spend four hours a day writing, pretty much every day, when I've got deadlines. You kind of plan it out, figure it out, and just do it."

She admitted, though, that she gets anxious during first performances, despite having been through a lot of them. "I never know until that moment whether it's actually going to come together and really work the way I imagined it." But, she added, "I hope I never lose the excitement of it. It's actually fun."

## **Boston Baroque online**

Boston Baroque has announced the launch of an electronic media platform that includes an Internet radio station, live concert streaming, and downloadable live recordings. Boston Baroque Radio, launched Tuesday, will stream the ensemble's extensive catalog of recordings. It will be available on the organization's website and via Internet broadcasters, including Tunein Radio and iHeartRadio.

The group will also stream all of its concerts in high-definition audio (as well as multicamera video for two concerts) on its website. This season's concerts will be free; next season there will be a charge to listen to or view them. Finally, Boston Baroque will make available a series of live recordings for download via the Naxos recording label. In a press statement, the ensemble said that it had entered into a special agreement for these projects with the American Federation of Musicians, only the second of its kind for an orchestra in Boston.

[www.bostonbaroque.org](http://www.bostonbaroque.org)

## **MUSIC OF ELENA RUEHR**

Cantata Singers

At: Jordan Hall, Saturday,

8 p.m. Tickets: \$25-\$69, students \$10, 617-868-5885, [www.cantatasingers.org](http://www.cantatasingers.org)

Roomful of Teeth

Kresge Auditorium, Massachusetts Institute

of Technology, Nov. 21 at

8 p.m. Tickets: \$20, seniors and students \$10,

617-252-1888, [www.roomfulofteeth.org](http://www.roomfulofteeth.org)

*David Weininger can be reached at [globeclassicalnotes@gmail.com](mailto:globeclassicalnotes@gmail.com).*

0 COMMENTS