

Attuned to her art

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All eyes were on mezzo-soprano Laurie Rubin as she sang, gliding about the stage with dramatic flair, playing the lead in a production of Rossini's *La Cenerentola* in 2001. Mid-song, Rubin had to step down the stairs, by herself, in fancy shoes with dangerous heels.

The audience gasped. They knew Rubin couldn't see the stairs. She's blind.

Blindness is not a virtue for an opera singer when it requires dodging stage props and scouting out markers on stage, all while learning layered music without a score. But Rubin, who takes the challenge head-on, doesn't stop there. Her specialty is new, contemporary works.

It's the kind of music hard enough to follow with a score, a visual reference for the meter changes, foreign rhythms and pitches often outside of a tonal system. Next Sunday, she'll perform the world premiere of Noam Sivan's *In the Mountains of Jerusalem* in Rochester.

"I learned theory, I had an understanding of what the staff looked like and clefs pictured in my head," she says. "I also learned in theory about tone rows and all the new-music stuff. If I'm aware of the tone row, it makes it easier to learn."

She learns only by listening (basic Braille scores exist, but she has no idea how contemporary music notation would translate), using her perfect sense of pitch and an almost sixth sense for music.

"Luckily, it's easier to do it by ear, when I'm not tied down to the page," says Rubin. "With new music, I'm forced to learn it the right way because there's no set expectations as to what it's supposed to be like."

Rubin, 29, has been blind since birth. Music comes out of her in such an honest, organic way that it's mesmerizing. One reviewer of a Rubin performance at Carnegie Hall noted that "it's impossible to say whether her communicative power draws on emotions stemming from her disability or whether her compelling artistry comes from a deep part of her that has nothing to do with the sense of sight." She'll perform that piece — Keeril Makan's *Target* — again in a sold-out performance at the Chamber Society of Lincoln Center in April.

"People when they have one disability, they have outstanding abilities with the other senses," says Sivan, who wrote his piece for Rubin. "So, she doesn't see, but she feels the music in a very, very special way, a personal way. And in a way, it enables her to focus more on the expression."

Sivan, a native of Israel who lives in New York City, was inspired by modern Israeli poetry by Leah Goldberg, especially in her use of language stemming from Hebrew prayers yet with a contemporary, direct message. The poetry winds through a forest of emotions, allowing Sivan to compose music appropriate for each.

Writing with Rubin in mind, he tried to have the piano give clues for the singer. He then made a CD parsing out the accompaniment and vocal lines, both with pitch and just rhythm, for Rubin to use for practice, which is "much more than other people have ever done," says Rubin. "He's been really involved in my learning process."

Rubin does experience cases of discrimination, but she's proven herself and, in that, hopes to be an advocate for the blind. She even has a side hobby of jewelry-making, saying she's always been interested in fashion and making unusual, modern designs.

And now, more than ever, she's proud of what blind people have achieved, specifically referring to New York's new governor, David Paterson. She heard him speak at an event through the American Federation for the Blind and says he was "very warm and engaging, and extremely eloquent."

"I think it's going to make blindness more accessible to everybody," she says. "I'm really excited to see what he does in office. I hope it pushes him forward."

