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[Art Talk with Gabriela Lena Frank](#)

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Gabriela Lena Frank. Photo by Shelley Justis

Composer Gabriela Lena Frank gave the world premiere of her new work *Hilos* with the ALIAS Chamber Ensemble at Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music in Nashville on Friday, Oct. 1. The concert was the culmination of Mestiza Music in Music City, which Frank describes as an "educational outreach initiative designed by ALIAS that took place in September and October 2010 as part of National Hispanic Heritage Month. It was graciously funded by the NEA, and brought Hispanic music, including my new work *Hilos*, and related educational materials to minority schools and communities in Nashville. The purpose of the program was to help promote understanding between Nashville's diverse cultures."

We spoke with Frank via e-mail about composing, creativity, and collaborating across disciplines to extend the reach of the arts.

NEA: What's your version of the artist life?

GABRIELA LENA FRANK: I am very much a freelancer, but I'm blessed in that I don't lack for work. When at home, I average 7-8 hours a day immersed in creative work—composing, studying scores, transcribing music from my travels in Latin America, practicing—plus another couple of hours in designing and/or administering projects such as my Under Construction orchestra reading program for emerging composers with my hometown orchestra, the Berkeley Symphony; studying the curriculum at a Latino community center that an orchestra I'm working with is connecting to as a civic partner; or listening to edits of my upcoming CD with the ALIAS Chamber Ensemble on the Naxos label. I have the occasional private student, too. These days, I spend more time on the road than at home, though, for concerts and other professional commitments, as well as for private creative research such as when I travel to Perú to find new ways to weld indigenous sounds to classical music traditions.

NEA: What is creativity?

FRANK: What a question! Bueno, for me, I would say that creativity is the forging of connections in ways that are surprising, exciting, and revelatory. And I believe it can come from anyone, from any angle at all. This was really made clear to me when ALIAS and I finished our outreach program, Mestiza Music in Music City, at Paragon Mills Elementary School in Nashville just a few days ago. For several weeks leading up to our visit where we played my

new work, *Hilos* ("Threads") written especially for ALIAS, the children had learned about the food, music, and folklore of Latin America, translating what they learned into beautiful drawings, weavings, and stunningly realistic masks rendered from colored/embossed pie plates. These ornamented the long hallway walls of the school, and while I stood there, entranced by what I was seeing, I thought about when I, myself, slipped over from being of a casually creative mind to a fully intentional one. Nowadays, I ply my craft daily at the piano and at the composing desk. Such industry! And because of the constant application of skills initially honed in a hell of a lot of music training, I learn how graceful I am, how disciplined I am, how imaginative I am, how willing I am to take a risk and try something scary-new. I put these endeavors in the context of previous work, and I look down a loooooong humbling vista of where I need to go in the future. This self-awareness has grown in force and ease the longer I've been at it. I think such applied ingenuity of mind and heart is what makes us human, and so for me, creativity is also a necessary act.

NEA: What do you think is the role of the artist in the community?

FRANK: An artist is someone who has the good fortune to be creative for many hours of most days. As a result, the hope is that objects and/or experiences of beauty are created that speak to the experience of a community of peers. Proactive steps have to be taken to not only produce, but then to disseminate—through recordings, through live concerts in venues outside of the standard concert hall, through meaningful education efforts, and so forth. If an artist is thinking this way, then he/she is a real citizen, not just a wacky nerd (although I love them, too).

NEA: How important is the role of collaboration in your work?

FRANK: Oh, I love collaborating! For me, instrumentalists are like disciples of a secret guild, with their little practices and rituals in sharpening their reeds, saucing their bows in rosin, and discussing arcane fingerings for particularly thorny musical passages. Ideally, before I write music for any instrument, I would approach the project with all of the knowledge that a life-long trained performer would have. Sadly, I can only claim such expertise at my own instrument, the piano. And yet, my job is to be able to write expertly for all instruments. What's a hapless composer to do? Bueno, collaborate! And humbly inherit wisdoms normally relegated to those with the secret handshake (ha!). In this way, I was able to write some really tricky plucked-string passages for Matt Walker, the cellist of ALIAS who premiered *Hilos* and surging lines reminiscent of Andean panpipe passages for violinist Zeneba Bowers. I was also fascinated by explanations of breath control and color given in rehearsals by Lee Levine, our clarinetist, and you can be sure that I'll be taking all of this exciting new information doled to me in a collaborative spirit into future compositions.

NEA: What is the Music, Authority, and Community program? How does it work and what are the goals?

FRANK: This is the brainchild of our academic colleagues and collaborators, Vanderbilt professors Jennifer C. Lena (Sociology) and Jonathan A. Neufeld (Philosophy), two totally wonderful and creative people. They secured what we believe is the first ever research grant to support the commissioning of a work of art by someone outside the university, convening panel discussions, classroom presentations, and contributing to scholarly research at the same time. In doing so, a new model was created of how collaboration can work when you unite professional musicians, academia, and the larger community into one team. I was privileged to be at the center of this program, as someone who believes deeply in "mestizaje," which is the idea that cultures can come together without one subjugating another. Yet, while I was at the center, I was also only one facet of this entire project, where authority in defining Latino identity was comfortably in the hands of all of us.

NEA: Any last words?

FRANK: Only that I stand with the ALIAS Chamber Ensemble in being deeply grateful to the NEA for its support. Your confidence in us galvanizes our spirit to do even more in the future.