

# San Jose Mercury News

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## LifeStyle

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## Composer combines classical with the folkloric

MUSIC@MENLO OFFERS MULTICULTURAL WORKS

By Richard Scheinin  
*Mercury News*

Composer Gabriela Lena Frank is the daughter of a Chinese-Peruvian mother and a Jewish-Lithuanian father. She is one of the new breed of composers, combing the wide world beyond the conservatory for musical influences — which, in her case, cropped up pretty much right inside the home.

Born and raised in Berkeley, Frank, 35, has been racking up commissions for new works, from Carnegie Hall to Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project.

One of her works-in-progress is "Cifar and the Sweet Sea," a bounteous song cycle with texts from Nicaraguan poetry and myth: tales of seafaring adventure, an oracle, an island of Sirens. "It's Homer, with a Nicaraguan flair," she says.

Selections from "Cifar" will have their first West Coast performances Aug. 7 and 8 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, when the Music@Menlo chamber music festival presents a program titled "Music Now: Voices of Our Time."



SAVINA FRANK — COURTESY OF MUSIC@MENLO

Music@Menlo will include Gabriela Lena Frank's work in progress.

The Menlo festival actually kicks off this weekend with music by Handel, Bach and Vivaldi — but in the new, wide musical world, Frank is hot on their heels.

I recently talked to Frank about genes, music and what it means to be a composer in the 21st century.

**Q** Do you consider yourself a classical composer?

**A** People like me are making that term problematic. When I introduce myself to people, I say I'm a classical music composer, but that I draw on a lot of folkloric South American music, and people think I'm super-cool as a result.

**Q** Super-cool? That's a new adjective for a composer. Why do you think?

### Music@Menlo chamber music festival

**Where:** At venues in Palo Alto and Atherton

**When:** July 18-Aug. 8

**Music by Gabriela Lena Frank:** Will be performed Aug. 7-8 in Program V: "Music Now: Voices of Our Time" (which also includes music by Jennifer Higdon, Kenneth Frazelle and Tan Dun) at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, 600 Colorado Ave., Palo Alto

**Tickets:** Each program \$32-\$70, \$10-\$35 students; subscribers to six or more events get a 10 percent discount; (650) 331-0202, [www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org)

**Information:** [www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org)

# COMPOSER | 'Every piece is because of something I'm wondering about'

**A** Look at the times that we're in. In California right now more than 50 percent of the babies being born are Latino. Everybody has their favorite Mexican restaurant.

**Q** What about the "classical" part of your job description?

**A** People are fine about it. And I'm very proud to be following in the footsteps — Bartók is my hero. Ravel and all the titans. But I think there are equally tremendous folkloric musicians we haven't heard of.

**Q** Who's your top titan?

**A** If I had to pick one to go out for a beer with, it would be Bartók.

**Q** When did you start exploring Latin American music and culture?

**A** About 10 years ago, in a serious way. But off and on since I was a little girl. In Berkeley in the '80s, a lot of Bolivians and Peruvians played at all these venues near where I lived. And it was my favorite music. It wasn't classical music; we didn't even go to the San Francisco Symphony, though I took piano lessons all my life. And I liked Bach, but only because I loved the Prelude in C. It just grabbed me.

**Q** What music did your parents listen to?

**A** My dad (Michael Frank) is really into Gershwin. He's a Mark Twain scholar at Berkeley, so we're all big readers. My mom (Sabina Frank) is a stained glass artist; she has her shop out on Fourth Street, Berkeley. My brother inherited her talent — though he became a neuroscientist.

**Q** Do you feel you're erasing boundaries between classical music and folkloric music?

**A** I'm a small part of a big movement. We have more Latinos coming into classical music now, and I find that very exciting. I can say, "What do you think of this and that?" I think what I'm doing might come from a private wish to understand my own mixed ethnic and racial background.

**Q** Are you equally interested in your Chinese and Jewish-Lithuanian roots?

**A** At this point in my life I'm very interested in the Latin American, but who knows what's going to happen down the line? I have been involved with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project and will be writing something for them again later this year. But in terms of how deeply connected I feel to Chinese

music and culture through my blood — not as much. Maybe because it feels so distant; it's my great-grandfather who was from China.

Still, I grew up eating Chinese-Peruvian stir-fry; that's what my mom knew how to cook when she first met my dad. And I can cook great Chinese-Peruvian stir-fry!

**Q** You've described yourself as simultaneously feeling outside and inside Latin American culture.

**A** A lot of multiracial, multiethnic people have the same experience. People like myself . . . like to romanticize the motherland we've not visited yet. It's a shock when we go and we realize, "Oh my God, I'm such a gringa." I get sick from the food, or I don't understand the customs. And there are other moments when I feel so connected.

But it's because of the uncomfortable areas — that's where you grow, as you resolve the discomfort.

**Q** How are the areas of discomfort connected to your music?

**A** It's the absolute reason for the music. Every piece is because of something I'm wondering about. And that's why I feel that I have an inexhaustible source of material for the rest of my life.