Aaron Kula presents ‘Klezmer on Steroids’ at FAU

Aaron Kula’s Klezmer Company concert has become an annual tradition at Florida Atlantic University since 1997, but this year Kula is doing something that has never been done before, anywhere.

An orchestral production: “Jewish Broadway with Orchestra and Chorus” will be performed at 3 p.m. Sunday in the FAU Performing Arts Auditorium. The production features a full orchestra, the 50-voice FAU Libraries Judaeo-Choral Society and of course the eight-piece Klezmer Company.

“We’ve never done anything like this before,” Aaron Kula declared last week, “I don’t think this has ever been done in the country before: a Klezmer Company with orchestra and chorus. But it’s not about me. It’s my dream concert; a blending of the old and new into a tradition that hasn’t been created before."

The first half of the concert, “Klezmer on Broadway,” features new orchestral arrangements written by Kula, a recently discovered 1927 Dybbuk Suite for Klezmer Orchestra by Joseph Engel and a Klezmer Hora from Saint-Saens’ “Samson and Delilah.” The chorus and soloist Betty Silverman will sing in English, Hebrew and Yiddish.

“No one would call Saint-Saens Jewish, but he certainly was influenced by Jewish music,” Kula states. “You listen to Samson and Delilah and you hear a Hora in the middle of a French opera. Jewish and Klezmer music can be found in big band, Broadway and popular music. Part of our mission statement is to reach out to the community and utilize music from our 20,000-piece library that has been sitting on the shelf for 15 years. It’s all right here, from the late 1800’s through the 1900’s. We have enough music for ten generations.”

The second half of the program features songs by leading Jewish Broadway composers, including Leonard Bernstein’s “Candide,” the timeless classics of Rodgers and Hammerstein and Lerner and Lowe, the contemporary sounds of Jerry Herman, Jerry Bock and Stephen Sondheim, and even a Freylach based on music by Gustav Mahler.

“The library director, Dr. William Miller, wants to leave a legacy,” Kula explains, “He is creating a new model of libraries, on that leads and interacts with the community. The creation of the Judaeo-Choral Society is part of that goal. In my career as a conductor, composer and musician, I’ve never had an opportunity like this. You see me with an accordion in my left hand and a baton in my right.

The production “Klezmer on Broadway” comes to FAU Sunday, March 6th. We want to create the kind of excitement that will make people stand up and cheer.”

Someone who will be leading the cheering is television personality and arts advocate Bess Myerson, who will receive a Lifetime Achievement Award from FAU Libraries in recognition of her contributions to the international Jewish community, starting with her win in 1945 as America’s first and only Jewish Miss America.

“I think Aaron Kula is an incredible genius,” exclaimed Myerson from the Boca Raton’ home she purchased a year and a half ago. “I went to the Klezmer concert last year and I was overwhelmed by it. I have a degree in music and I was a concert pianist and flutist, so I know the difference between talent and genius. It’s lovely and quite an honor to be recognized by FAU, but what Aaron Kula is doing is astonishing.”

Tickets range from $19 to $31, with premium seating at $56. Please call 297-3737.