Aaron Kula, musical mixologist

When Aaron Kula joined Florida Atlantic University in 1997, he was told simply that the library had a music collection. But what he discovered blew him away. “There were hundreds of boxes of music,” he says. “I said, being a conductor and composer, ‘This has to be performed.’”

Kula, as director of music collections and performance, began cataloging the 50,000 pieces of music in the special collections. The works come from all over the world, span various genres and date back to the 1600s. When a composition strikes Kula’s fancy, he’ll rework it for performance on the stage.

“I take [an] old piece of music, and I revise it through composition,” says the Boca Raton resident. “I’ll turn it into a beautiful new rendition that our audience can relate to.”

But he needed a “vehicle,” he says, to take the music “from shelf to stage.” So Kula, who also plays the piano and accordion, formed the Klezmer Company Orchestra. The group—which is the FAU library’s professional ensemble-in-residence—started out focusing on Klezmer but has branched out, bringing a fusion of jazz, classical and world music to South Florida audiences.

“Just because something is old doesn’t mean it’s irrelevant,” says Kula, 49. “I always feel like I’m giving a second life to this material that has been forgotten.”

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Q1: You often blur the lines between different types of music. What are your thoughts on genre? That is a central theme to my work. I want to create new possibilities of what music can be. I want to turn on the musicians as well as the audience.

Q2: Who is your favorite performer of all time, and why? I’d have to say Beethoven because he managed to overcome every obstacle in his life and yet create some of the most optimistic and beautiful music that was ever written.

Q3: What do you love about performing? I love performing because it inherently shares the most intimate secrets through sound. And you have the possibility to inspire the world.

Q4: What makes the KCO special? I think out of all the orchestras and musicians I’ve worked with, this has the greatest flexibility and the possibility for tremendous growth in unlimited directions.

Q5: Can you tell me something I don’t know about the South Florida arts scene? It’s fertile territory, and we’re just scratching the surface of where it’s going to be over the next decade. This could be a real cultural mecca in the next stage of Florida’s development.