Beautiful music

Klezmer Company Orchestra has diverse repertoire

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Finding fusion
Klezmer Company Orchestra goes beyond its name

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A South Florida musical group is reshaping the image and sound associated with traditional klezmer music, adding a new flavor with each passing year.

Aaron Kula, director of the band and of music collections at Florida Atlantic University’s library, composes the music for the concerts. But these are no ordinary klezmer compositions.

“I had a strong desire to perform Jewish fusion music and there was nothing like it, and there still is nothing like it in South Florida,” Kula said. “The nature of the music I am performing does not fit neatly into one genre.”

His orchestra has built a strong following by mixing the klezmer sound with music types as varied as jazz, blues and Latin since 1997.

“All of our concerts are now sold out, because we’re always presenting an interesting and high-level presentation,” Kula said. “It’s not something you find every day.”

The core ensembles consists of Randi Fishenfeld, violinist; Dan Salmian, saxophonist; Chaim Rubin on trumpet and fiddle; Steve Sigmund, trombonist; Jacqueline De Los Santos, double bassist; Frank Derrick on drums; Steve Salo, percussions and Kula on accordion and piano.

These eight, along with larger configurations of the orchestra, are drawing three generations of audiences, Kula said: His, his parents’ and his children’s.

“I want to make things relevant to where we are today,” Kula said. “I think one of the reasons we are so successful is that we are diverse and flexible.”

He said the blending of different styles somewhat follows the models of icons Leonard Bernstein, who mixed American music with jazz and folk, and Gustav Mahler, who blended European music of his time with symphonic orchestras.

“Those composers were not completely accepted in the early stages of their careers,” Kula said. “I think my music is widely accepted, but maybe not always understood.”

The Klezmer Company, in a 20-member orchestra configuration, performed a “Spirit of America” tribute concert at FAU last month. This concert featured classic American tunes, ranging from Scott Joplin to John Philip Sousa to George M. Cohan.

Kula said some people asked whether his orchestra could perform such a concert. “Why not?” he said to them.

“The Klezmer Company Orchestra has become a vehicle to play any kind of music,” Kula said. “You don’t have to be pigeonholed, and that’s my overriding factor.”

Kula even reworked a klezmer piece from the 1920s into a square dance-type song.

“It’s great,” said William Miller, the director of libraries at FAU. “He’s always looking for ways to expand the boundaries. It takes us in a new direction, beyond the klezmer music.”

In another concert, titled “Go Down Moses,” Kula said he combined klezmer with Negro spirituals in order to demonstrate, on stage, the commonalities between the Jewish and black communities.

“What I wanted to do was find concert themes that would push the envelope for what people expected,” Kula said. That was also exemplified by his “Salsa, Strings and Swing” last March.

Fishenfeld described the “Go Down Moses” concert as breathtaking.

“It’s so true to the tradition of klezmer being an expansive form of music, but outside of the box,” she said.

Fishenfeld has been with the group since its formation, and said what drew her in is that she is always interested in working with different types of music.

“It’s a lot of hard work, and it’s a lot of fun,” she said. “Aaron always comes up with some great stuff. There’s such a high level of creativity.”

To form this group, Kula said he went on a “musical journey” to find the best musicians who would be interested in such a group. During its nine-year history, Fishenfeld said, the group has developed into a family.

Rubinov, who is also an original member of the core ensemble, said he has an emotional connection with klezmer music and liked the idea of the orchestra because it is different.

“It’s not your average klezmer band,” Rubinov said. “Aaron is a very creative person who comes up with some great ways to get the music across.”

Klezmer, which literally means “musical instrument,” also refers to the person playing the instrument or the instrumental form of music originating in Eastern Europe.

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Kula said his dynamic use of the genre is akin to that of traditional klezmer musicians.

"The klezmer musician was always playing music from every walk of life, because that's how they made a living," he said. He added that such a musician might have played at a bar mitzvah during the day, in an orchestra in the afternoon and at a jazz club at night.

Kula also discusses music history during his visits to schools, which he said fulfills an education and outreach mission, in addition to entertainment.

Usually, six members of the core ensemble go on these trips to local middle and high schools, Kula said. So far, there have been three separate visits, with more planned for next year.

During these presentations, part education and part performance, Kula said he discusses Eastern European, Middle Eastern and jazz music, using the instruments as the vehicles.

A Long Island native, Kula attended the University of Minnesota and graduated with a double major in music theory and Judaic studies. For graduate school, he attended the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, and soon thereafter began conducting its college and youth orchestras. Now, he leads the orchestra there every summer.

Kula has also guest-conducted around the United States and the world, working with musicians such as cellist Yo-Yo Ma and clarinetist Richard Stoltzman during his career.

Kula and Miller hope to take the Klezmer Company Orchestra on the road to tour Florida's state universities. They hope that after the tour, they will perform at Carnegie Hall in New York in 2008. The orchestra's next performance will be an encore of their "Salsa, Strings and Swing" concert. It is scheduled for Dec. 17 at the Jackie Gleason Theater in Miami Beach.

For more information about the Klezmer Company Orchestra, visit www.klezmercompany.com or call 361-297-2116.