Unveiling treasures

Yiddish music moves ‘from shelf to stage’ at FAU

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Aaron Kula rummaged through the cardboard boxes in his office at the Florida Atlantic University Library in Boca Raton, looking for pieces of treasure that lay buried for 15 years. He lifted a stack of glossy publications from the American Yiddish theater out of a box of sheet music. There was a 1909 score by composer Abraham Goldschen.

“Kula was the father of the Yiddish theater,” Kula said. “He set the stage for what was to appear in America in the later 19th century. The sheet music for ‘Hello Molly,’ a production featuring legendary Yiddish performer Molly Picon singing ‘My Mama,’ stuck out from a pile on a table.

She was the Barbra Streisand of her day,” Kula said. The pieces are two of thousands in the library’s collection of Yiddish theater, classical, ethnic, folk, cantorial and Klezmer sheet music.

“We’re still counting it,” Kula said. “It’s just been lying dormant, because you have to have kind of the right person to fire up the grill.”

As the newly named director of music collections, Kula might be able to get things cooking. In his ninth year at FAU, the 46-year-old Kula will be able to concentrate on organizing the collection. He said he is no longer teaching or conducting the university orchestra. And he’s not making weekend trips to Boston to conduct an orchestra there.

Kula said he wants to preserve the collection and catalog it in a database. One way to preserve the music, he said, is to perform it. So Kula is writing an arrangement of ‘A Child’s Prayer’ from a single page of music written for first violin. It is the only sheet music the library has for the orchestral piece and has a 1912 copyright by the Hebrew Music Publishing Co.

“There were other undetermined instruments,” Kula said. “We have to reproduce where the music comes from.”

For Kula, reproducing the music is a way of reconnecting with it. He said he tries to ‘reconstruct what may have happened in the orchestra pit.’

Kula calls the process going ‘from shelf to stage.’

Although the music collection is large, the output of Yiddish music in the United States during the latter half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th was enormous, Kula said.

“The Yiddish theater dates back to the Renaissance,” Kula said.

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naissance and Baroque period in Germany. Out of those periods grew a tradition of theater in Europe, mostly in Germany and Russia,” he said. Kula said the music was both vocal and instrumental.

Jewish immigrants to the United States brought the Yiddish theater with them. It was strongest in New York, but cities with large Jewish populations had their own Yiddish theater productions or were visited by traveling troupes.

Composers and lyricists created music the common person could appreciate, Kula said.

“Kula said the story lines were about everyday life. Falling in love and cheating were popular themes, as were good and bad, love and hate, mother, rabbit and respect.”

The goal was to entertain, and often there was a moral to the story,” Kula said.

Many of America’s greatest Broadway composers and lyricists were influenced by the Yiddish theater and their Jewish heritage, he said. Among those include Richard Rogers, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein II, George Gershwin and Jules Stein – and later, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim.

“They were listening to their own heritage, whether it be in the synagogue or the Yiddish theater,” said Kula.

“They were familiar with creating compositions and improvising, so it was easy for them to cross over to the Broadway theater, he said.

Klezmer music was on a parallel plane to the Yiddish theater. For Kula, composing and playing Klezmer are his passions.

“I’ve been playing Klezmer music since I was in fifth grade,” he said. Now Kula composes Klezmer music and conducts and plays in an eight-piece Klezmer band.

Rabbi Merle Singer, rabbi emeritus at Temple Beth El in Boca Raton, said Kula’s Klezmer music reflects the culture of our Jewish parents and grandparents.

“This music is very good and authentic to the spirit of the shetl [Jewish village] in eastern Europe,” Singer said.