Reviving and Modernizing The Old Klezmer Songs

At Florida Atlantic University, one man is saving — and filling in the blanks — of Jewish music going back a century.

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When Aaron Kula comes across music for a Jewish song written perhaps more than 100 years ago and missing one or more pages, he doesn’t discard it but rather composes the missing sections.

Kula, director of music collections and performance at Florida Atlantic University Libraries in Boca Raton, said he creates about 25 to 30 musical compositions each year. Although some are pieces in which he has had to fill in missing sections, most are compositions Kula wrote having only the song’s melody and no accompaniment.

“I construct the music for an entire orchestra based on a single melodic line,” he said. “I’m filling out the score and injecting a 21st century feel to it so that it creates a fusion of style. ... I try to inject some new and innovative ideas into the music so it will generate excitement across generations.”

As his Web site points out, his compositions are a “fusion of ethnic jazz orchestrations and exotic melodies that defy classification. ... Kula’s cutting-edge compositions are based on ancient melodies from around the globe that reflect cultural fusion.”

FAU’s library has collected all kinds of music for more than 20 years, but “the largest body of material is Jewish music,” Kula said. “Within Jewish music is cantorial, klezmer and choral music. ... I’m composing music primarily for the Jewish division.”

He explained that although American sheet music is generally completely scored, Jewish sheet music is often not. And some of it has not been played for 100 years or more; only a few were actually recorded.

“I try to find pieces that are undocumented — not written about or ever recorded,” Kula said. “I have found thousands of them.”

To do that, he said he reviews the thousands of manuscripts, musical scores from the pens of the composers and raw music donated by people from across the country that are sitting in boxes in the library.

Kula said the music is in “remarkably good condition because it was often been kept in piano benches. ... People don’t want to throw it out because it may carry nostalgic memories and they want a place for it.”

“I estimate that we have about 50,000 pieces of Jewish music. Last year, I reviewed about 4,000 of them.”

Kula pointed out that “there was such an extensive amount of material published that I’m still finding new material that even ethno musicologists have never seen before — including cantors who are familiar with that period of music. ... What I’m trying to do is find music that is unique because we may have the only remaining copy.”

Traditional klezmer songs — secular or non-liturgical Jewish songs first developed around the 18th century that are typically in Yiddish — ranged in length of between two and three and a half minutes. They were first published around 1890, Kula pointed out.

“Most of the commercial music for public use did not emerge until the end of the 1800s,” he said.

Jewish music sales were very successful, and at one time there were more than 20 Jewish/Hebrew publishing companies, Kula pointed out. But to be successful, the published compositions were often “reduced to simple versions for commercial sales so that they could be played by people on their home pianos. Even some of the professional editions of Jewish music did not have orchestrations.”

Some of the music contains only a half-dozen measures and the rest of the song consists of improvisations on the melody. Other songs would just have the music for a singer and piano accompaniment. Additional instruments would then have to “improvise along the way,” he noted.

Some music leaves room to improvise, which Kula said is fine when there are just a few instruments and musicians who are familiar with this type of music.

“I don’t think any two performances are the same,” he said. “Each professional musician has a new experience and nothing is replicated. ... But when you have a full orchestra, there must be less improvisation.”

Writing the orchestration is not just an academic exercise because once completed, the music Kula has revived and modernized is performed by FAU’s Klezmer Company Orchestra.

“I have not found another klezmer orchestra in residence at any other academic library,” Kula told an audience last month during the orchestra’s performance.

Kula put together the orchestra — composed of accomplished jazz and classical musicians — when he arrived at FAU 11 years ago. The core of the orchestra consists of 10 musicians and the full orchestra has up to 50 musicians. Which one he uses depends upon what the concert requires.

The concert last month at FAU used 10 musicians whose occasional improvisations brought broad smiles to Kula’s lips. In one number, Randi Fishenfeld, the fiddle player, said she incorporated some “bluegrass stuff” into one of the numbers.

“Each of the musicians — because they are jazz and rock artists — add their own flavor,” she said. “That’s what klezmer is all about.”

In his musical compositions, Kula said he is “moving away from the old klezmer sound” to create a fusion of Jewish and klezmer music.

Thick, instead of using a clarinet that is dominant in klezmer music, Kula’s compositions sometimes call for a soprano saxophone, and instead of a fiddle, he will write music for an electric violin.

“An electric violin is not as crude as a fiddle,” he explained. “I also use a flugelhorn in place of a trumpet. And I’m creating more sophisticated arrangements that require excellent technique. A traditional klezmer band was made up predominantly of amateurs except for the leaders, and they did not perform concerts. They played for parties, so the execution of the music could be loser. We have a very tight ensemble — a well-rehearsed ensemble. It can’t be a bar mitzvah band.”