The Joys of Jewish Music

Exciting line-up of unique concerts coming to South Florida in December

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The Florida Jewish Philharmonic Orchestra, Cantor Alberto Mizrahi, Brave Old World and the Klezmer Company Orchestra of Florida Atlantic University will be among the many outstanding artists and ensembles displaying the richness of Jewish musical traditions during the ‘Hanukkah month’ of December.

On Dec. 2 and 3 in two concerts presented by Blue Cross and Blue Shield in association with the Parker Playhouse, founding conductor Andrew Kurtz will lead the Florida Jewish Philharmonic Orchestra in a pre-Chanukah musical celebration featuring the world premiere of “Lauren’s Waltz” composed by Joshua Mark Tabachnick, a member of Temple Shalom in Pompano Beach. Temple Shalom’s cantor, Heshy Mayersdorf, and soprano Michelle Auslander, a cantorial soloist at Temple Judea in Palm Beach, will also appear in the back-to-back performances (8 pm on Saturday night and 2 pm on Sunday afternoon) that will include a mix of traditional Jewish music along with symphonic works by Bernstein, Copland, and Rogers. Founded in Fort Myers by Maestro Andrew Kurtz, the Florida Jewish Philharmonic Orchestra is now entering its fourth year as one of only two orchestras in the U.S. dedicated to the preservation and performance of music based upon Jewish themes and traditional Yiddish motifs. In December 2004, Kurtz led the US premiere of CANTORS: A Faith In Song, featuring three of the world’s leading cantors, Alberto Mizrahi, Naftali Herstik and Benzioni Miller.

“We are thrilled to partner with this premier philharmonic orchestra based in Fort Myers that is so dedicated to promoting our Jewish heritage through music,” says Temple Shalom President Dr. Harvey Saff.

“Our synagogue is grateful for the opportunity to share these beautiful works with the entire community.”

Tabachnick was born in Montreal and at the age of four became the youngest student ever to be accepted to the Montreal Conservatory of Music. The composer is currently working on a screenplay for television and continues to score music for industrial and independent films. On the couple’s tenth wedding anniversary in 2002, Tabachnick presented his wife, Lauren, with a custom made, one-of-a-kind music box that plays the special waltz he composed for her.

All proceeds from the two concerts will be directed to the development of the temple’s education center. Tickets for the December 2nd performance range from $36 to $90. Tickets for the December 3rd performance are $36 for adults and $18 for students and children. Tickets may be purchased at the Parker Playhouse box office located at 707 NW 8th Ave. in Fort Lauderdale or by calling 954-462-0222, or online at: www.parkerplayhouse.org. A black tie VIP reception with Maestro Kurtz prior to Saturday evening’s performance is $180 per person and includes priority seating. Reception tickets are only available through Temple Shalom by calling 954-942-6410.

On Sunday, Dec. 3 at 7:30 pm the “Jewish Pavarotti,” Greek-born tenor, Cantor Alberto Mizrahi of Chicago’s historic Anshe Emeth Synagogue, will perform in a concert generously underwritten by Bob and Linda Spiegelman at Bet Shira Congregation located at 7500 SW 120 St in Miami (Kendall).

“Alberto Mizrahi is an extraordinary cantor, a superb musician and one of today’s leading interpreters of Hebrew liturgy,” says Bet Shira Cantor, Mark H. Kula. “He is a versatile stage performer trained in the classical secular repertoire and his concerts are of the highest level. This will be an unforgettable experience and should not be missed.”

From an early age, Mizrahi’s mother, who studied at the famous Odeon Music School in Athens, imbued him with a love for music. His father, an Auschwitz survivor, often took his son to see the movie “The Life of Caruso,” starring Mario Lanza. With both parents having excellent voices and recognizing their son’s musical talent, they immigrated to the United States in 1956 and settled in Cleveland when he was eight years old. After high school, Mizrahi enrolled in the Chicago Musical College and later moved to New York to study at the Cantors’ Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary with renowned cantors, David Kusevitsky and Moshe Ganchoff.

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"For many years, I walked a tightrope between opera and the cantorate," says Mizrahi. "I was known from day one as 'the cantor who sings operatically.' My role models were cantors who became opera stars like Richard Tucker and Jan Peerce."

Mizrahi has appeared as guest cantor in synagogues throughout the U.S., Europe and Israel and has made numerous recordings, including The Gates of Justice (Dave Brubeck), Jewish Music of the Dance, Klezmer Concertos and Encores, and Introducing the World of American Jewish Music, an extensive, multiyear recording project created through a partnership with Narxos of America and the Milken Archive of American Jewish Music.

General admission tickets are $36, and $18 for students/seniors. The minimum donation for Sponsors is $180 per ticket, and $72 per ticket for Patrons. Sponsors and Patrons may join Cantor Mizrahi following the concert at an elegant dessert reception. Information is available by calling 505-238-2601.

On Thursday, Dec. 7 'Jewish Heritage—A Night of Klezmer and Art' will take place in Miami at the Alper JCC located at 1115 SW 112 Ave. An opening reception from 6:30 pm will feature a spectacular collection of Chanukah menorahs from around the world on loan from the Futer Family. The exhibition will run through January 11. 'Brave Old World,' a world-class klezmer/jazz group that specializes in the playing of rare Jewish street and cabaret songs known particularly by the 250,000 Jews of Poland’s Lodz Ghetto during the Holocaust, will perform at 8 pm. Sung in Yiddish with printed English text, the concert promises to be a musical and spiritual journey of resistance, love and reconciliation, bringing together the past and present through original arrangements of traditional klezmer and Yiddish melodies with the sophistication of both classical and post-modern music. For information, call 305-271-9000 ext. 268 or visit www.alperjcc.org. General admission $20, JCC members $15 and students $5.

Florida’s critically acclaimed Klezmer Company Orchestra (KCO), under the direction of Aaron Kula, will present "Salsa, Strings and Swing," with 40 performers and guest vocalist Shira Lissak, on Sunday, December 17 at 3 pm at the Jackie Gleason Theater, 1700 Washington Ave. in Miami Beach. With its high energy performances and eclectic programming of traditional and non-traditional music, KCO defies classification. This third night of Hanukkah concert will combine the sounds of klezmer music blended with Latin musical genres of tango, salsa, mambo and swing. The production will also highlight recently discovered historical orchestrations from the early 20th century including "Yiddish Overture for Orchestra" and "Clash of the Suites." KCO features nine core soloists, a classical string section made up of premier musicians from regional orchestras and the 20-member Judiaica Choral Society. In addition, the concert will feature several new ‘Kula arrangements’ including Freylach a la Mambo, "Afro Cuban Bulgar," "Wrong Note Freylach," and "A Yiddish Tango."

Kula, the ensemble’s music director, conductor and accordion player, founded KCO when he joined the FAU faculty in 1997. In 2003, Kula was appointed director of music collections at FAU Libraries with KCO as the professional ensemble-in-residence. "The Libraries' rich collection is the link from the past to the present, providing a unique opportunity to create a concert that relates to people from different generations, ethnic backgrounds, religions and musical tastes," says Kula. "Since its inception, KCO has successfully taken music in the Libraries’ collections from shelf to stage. As an artist, it is my responsibility to perform, to teach, to promote, and to inspire people through music."

Dr. William Miller, director of FAU Libraries, knows that Kula is pulling off a rare feat with KCO and the Libraries’ collections.

"He has managed, yet again, to transmute the Klezmer format into something entirely new, while retaining its original essence. Aaron Kula is doing things with this music that no one else in the country has even thought of doing, and we in South Florida are fortunate to be here and witness his evolution as a concert artist," says Miller.

A special feature of "Salsa, Strings and Swing" will include the guest performance of New York City native and glamorous opera singer, Shira Lissak, a versatile young American soprano who is equally at home on the operatic, musical theatre and concert stages. Lissak will sing selections in English, Hebrew, Spanish and Yiddish.

The core members of the ensemble include Randy Fishenberg, violin; Stas Pomerantz, clarinet; Tom Jaworski, saxophone; Chaim Rubinov on trumpet and flugelhorn; David Levitan, trombone; Jacqueline De Los Santos, double bass and guitar; Zack Eldridge, drums; and Teresa Flores, percussion. These musicians’ credits include nationally and internationally renowned artists: Bruce Springsteen, Dave Valentine, B.B. King, Clarence Clemons, Barbra Streisand, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, The Bee Gees, Dionne Warwick, Ray Charles, Natalie Cole, Arturo Sandoval, Peabo Bryson, Quincy Jones, Marvin Hamlish, Nestor Torres, Tito Puente Jr., David Sanchez, Melton Mustafa, Miguel Cruz, Andrea Bocelli, Neil Sedaka, Vikki Carr, The Moody Blues, Yo-Yo Ma, Tony Bennett, Randy Brecker, Burt Bacharach, Aaron Neville and Dion.

KCO was the only Palm Beach County ensemble invited to perform at the grand opening of the Carnival Center for the Performing Arts and received a standing ovation after its performance. The Gleason will be its second major Miami venue. Proceeds from the concert will benefit the Florida Atlantic University Libraries' Music Archives and the Israel Sport Center for the Disabled. For information, visit www.klezmercompany.com. Tickets for the concert are $36, $65 and $100. For information, visit www.ticketmaster.com.