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A festive homecoming for Nir Kabaretti

Conductor and music director from Holon will repeat famous Bernstein performance.

By GEORGE MEDOVOY OCTOBER 1, 2018 21:47



Some 30 years ago, Kabaretti, then enrolled in a master class for young orchestra conductors in Israel, was offered an opportunity to conduct the Sinfonietta. As the 50-year-old native of Holon warmly recalls: “It was the very first time I stood in front of a professional orchestra.”

Kabaretti had been the permanent music and artistic director of the Santa Barbara Symphony Orchestra in California since 2006. He now returns to lead the Sinfonietta, following the departure of Maestro Justus Franz, who had been its music director and conductor for the past five years.

Kabaretti’s Beersheba debut also comes with an exciting caveat: he will do the same program performed during a fateful November of 1948, when Leonard Bernstein led the

Israel Philharmonic in Beersheba, conducting Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 15 in B Flat Major, K. 450, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major (Op. 15), and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue."

The orchestra's "auditorium," if one could call it that, was a makeshift, open-air affair, but the performance was nothing short of thrilling, with the indefatigable Bernstein filling the desert setting with the sounds of the European masters and the American Gershwin.

For Kabaretti, there are two important reasons to repeat the 1948 program: "First of all, it is the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel, which we now take for granted, but it is sort of a miracle... And to see what has been done in Israel in the last 70 years is even more miraculous. Also this year is the 100th anniversary of Bernstein's birth."

The Sinfonietta festive tribute will be held in Beersheba's new Center for the Performing Arts, which Kabaretti said reflects the city's dramatic growth and development. Featured in the program will be Dorel Golan, piano, Asaf Kleinman, piano, Daniel Gortler, piano, and The Tempera Ensemble (Yigal Meltzer, trumpet, Gan Lev, saxophone, Tomer Yariv, percussion, and Amit Dolberg, piano).

The concert will also include the world premiere of a new piece, "Tempera Sketches," by Ziv Cojocar.

"We added this contemporary Israeli piece to follow in the spirit of Bernstein, who was a champion of promoting and performing contemporary music," Kabaretti explains.

ADDING TO the historic significance of this concert, Kabaretti and the Sinfonietta are extending an invitation to anyone who may have attended the original concert to contact the Sinfonietta office.

"They will be our guests of honor," says the conductor.

Turning to the changes that have taken place in Beersheba, Kabaretti notes enthusiastically that the city "is one of the fastest-growing places in Israel."

"Seventy years ago," he says, "it was just liberated. Without really much notice, Bernstein took the Israel Philharmonic... and went to play in front of soldiers who were

just preparing for the next battle. This solidarity, more than anything else, means a lot to me and I think should not be forgotten.”

During the course of our conversation, I ask the conductor what he thinks was behind the choice of pieces for the original 1948 performance – why Mozart and Beethoven and why the hauntingly beautiful Gershwin piece, an American classic in its own right? Kabaretti, who studied piano and conducting at The Rubin Academy of Music in Tel Aviv, explains that these compositions were part of Bernstein’s natural repertoire and that as a “very strong pianist,” he could play from the piano and conduct the orchestra at the same time.

“Gershwin,” he says, “really is a bridge between classical music and jazz. We shouldn’t forget that Bernstein wrote (the music for) West Side Story and music for films. He grew up on the East Coast, where jazz you could easily hear and was somebody who could play jazz music and improvise. So for him to play Gershwin is absolutely the most natural thing, which really combines the two worlds – Western European classical with the American native element.”

Of course, Kabaretti adds, Bernstein was also a champion of introducing new music: “So when we’re talking about 1948, Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” was a pretty new piece. It was also before everyone had access to technology to listen to records.

Not everyone had a record player in his home. In those times, pretty much playing a concert was introducing the piece. I don’t think a lot of Israelis in ’48 had actually heard Gershwin’s music before.”

Kabaretti’s contract with the Santa Barbara Symphony has been extended for three seasons until a new conductor is found. He left Israel in 1990 to study at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna, graduating in 1995 with a master’s degree in conducting and going on to build an impressive international career.

AMONG HIS many professional achievements, he has worked as coach and chorus master at the Vienna State Opera and the Salzburg Festival, subsequently advancing to assistant to the music director at Teatro Real in Madrid and personal assistant to Maestro Zubin Mehta at Teatro del Maggio Musicale in Florence, Italy.

In 2002, he was appointed principal conductor of the Ra’anana Symphonette Orchestra in Israel and its musical director until 2008. Since 2015, he has also been music director of the Southwest Florida Symphony.

Kabaretti's guest conductor credentials include the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra del Maggio Fiorentino, Orchestra del Teatro dell'Opera di Roma and the Vienna Chamber Orchestra.

In opera, he has worked at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Teatro Real in Madrid, The Israeli Opera, Opéra de Lausanne, and The New National Theatre in Tokyo. He conducted *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a visiting production of the Vienna State Opera at the Bregenz Festival and Expo 2000 in Hanover.

As he begins his tenure with the Sinfonietta, Kabaretti is anxious to build what he describes as a unique "niche" in the community, borrowing from his successful record in Santa Barbara.

"You know," he explains, "Santa Barbara is a place where all the major orchestras of the world come and visit regularly... Even the Israel Philharmonic recently did San Francisco, Los Angeles, and in between one day in Santa Barbara. It's the same thing with great, individual performing artists. You hear them regularly in Santa Barbara."

The challenge in such an environment, the conductor explains, is to be "attractive and different" through collaboration, presenting programs which other visiting orchestras might not be able to do, like combining a concert with a ballet, collaborating with a theater company or adding a multimedia component.

Of course, while he will continue to do the classics, Kabaretti's over- all goal is to expand the repertory, looking for new ideas and new collaborations.

"My interest," he says, "is to bring a cultural, musical experience to a larger group – more than what we call, you know, the 'classical goers.' It's not that it isn't already done, but I would like to expand and do more of that."

For example, he is already planning a four-day themed festival focusing on Spain – something very dear to him since he worked in Spain for three years. The festival will focus on "everything that represents Spanish music" – flamenco, guitar, Jewish music, Ladino music, dance, Jewish chants from the Golden Era, Catalan music. Also in the planning stages is an evening of music with David Broza, "whose Spanish songs translated to Hebrew have become one of Israel's treasures."

Pointing to his wish to be “relevant in the community,” Kabaretti notes the presence of many Bedouin in the area, including the city of Rahat, and has invited the well-known performer of classical Arab music, Taiseer Elias, to do a program.

Kabaretti’s own family predates Israeli independence. His mother, whose parents came from Syria, was born in Palestine just before Israeli statehood. His father, Lebanese-born, arrived in Israel as a child around 1949.

“My great-grandmother was born in Jaffa,” he says. “The Jews in Jaffa at that time did not speak Hebrew. They spoke Arabic and Ladino, the Yiddish of the Sephardi community.”

But economically the times were difficult in Jaffa, so the family moved north to Lebanon, where there was an opportunity for “some prosperity.”

Meanwhile, other parts of the family moved to South America because they spoke Spanish.

The conductor regards the Sinfonietta as “one of the treasures of Israeli cultural life... really a phenomenal ensemble,” and he believes that “being able to bring a lot of the experience I gained while out of the country is something that for me is very important. If I can do that, I would feel very happy and proud as an Israeli, it’s something that’s in my heart.”

The tribute performance will take place at 8:30 p.m., October 27 and 29 in the Beersheba Performing Arts Center.