

Life was a cabaret

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MAXIM REIDER , THE JERUSALEM POST

Whether it is seen as a concert or a show, The Jewish Cabaret is going to draw curious audiences.

The Atar Piano Trio, together with singers Yeela Avital and Odelia Dahan, will perform the program at Beit Avi Hai in Jerusalem on June 8. The program features chamber music and cabaret songs from 1920s and 1930s Europe by Kurt Weill, Joseph Achron, Arnold Schoenberg, Itzik Manger, Robert Kahn, Ernest Bloch and others, as well as popular Yiddish songs and original arrangements of Jewish folk music.

The ensemble, which was established in Jerusalem in 1996 by pianist Ofer Shelley after he finished his studies at the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem, performs extensively in various venues in Israel and it tours Europe and the USA. The other two members, violinist Tanya Beltser and cellist Marina Kats, are also Rubin Academy graduates.

Atar is currently one of the busiest chamber ensembles in Israel, giving many concerts, participating in various productions and special musical projects. "We all come from a classical background and this is the repertoire we traditionally perform. But over the years we came to the conclusion that there is room for more," says Shelley, explaining that in their special programs, which are preceded by in-depth research, they cooperate with many local musicians and appeal to a much wider audience.

The Jewish Cabaret is an evening for piano, violin and a singer, dedicated to the period before WWII. "Our interest in this music stems from various sources. First, this is a part of our Jewish/Israeli identity. Second, this was a captivating time, when the Jewish composers united for promoting Jewish music and Jewish folklore. And it was flourishing, with composers like Joseph Achron and Kurt Weill creating in this field. Just imagine that a piece written by Arnold Schoenberg as a side job has become one of the classics of the genre! This period of cultural growth between the two World Wars came to an abrupt end with the rise of Nazis to power."

Shelley describes the music as "amazing - vivid, colorful, with a wide and devoted audience in Israel, who find it different from the uniform American-style light music, which is not lacking on our shores. More complicated audiences perceive it as a concert, while less experienced listeners enjoy it as a show."

Two singers will participate in the coming concert. "Yeela Avital is an established classical soprano singer, while Odelia Dahan is known for her performances of Ladino songs; altogether, this gives the evening a special Mediterranean touch," muses Shelley.

The program also features a piece by a contemporary Jewish American, composer Paul Schoenfield, who writes chamber music, influenced by the cafe music of the '20s. "I am not quite sure it has already been performed in Israel, so most probably it will be a local premiere," adds Shelley.

The program has been running for several years now, and Shelley confides that playing this music for them is sort of a commitment. "This is wonderful chamber music that is not sufficiently performed: While Kurt Weill managed to escape Germany and became a prominent anti-Fascist, many composers perished in the war or their heritage was simply forgotten, due to the calamities of the epoch."

He adds: "We perform this music also in Europe, sometimes in an atmosphere which is not exactly pro-Israeli or pro-Jewish, and believe me - this is a very special feeling."

And for Shelley, there is a very personal connection to this music - and this time period, for that matter. "For the concert poster, I used an old family photo, showing my grandmother in Milan as she escaped the Nazis in Romania, finding refuge in Italy. Next year, we are invited to perform The Jewish Cabaret program in Turin, which in a way symbolizes a closing of the family circle," sums up Shelley.

The Atar trio will play the Scottish Fantasy on June 4 at the Felicja Blumental Music Center in Tel Aviv. For reservations: (03) 620-1185. The ensemble will also perform The Jewish Cabaret on June 8 at Beit Avi Hai in Jerusalem. Visit www.atartrio.com or call (02) 621-5900.

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