

Anita Kamien, Sharon Azrieli light up Hebrew University Orchestra

• By BARRY DAVIS

Orchestras are, by definition, a sort of potpourri of characters, each with his or her own cultural baggage, personal history and, of course, musical skills. That is part of what makes ensemble offerings so dynamic. The multifaceted nature of the Hebrew University Orchestra will, no doubt, come across during the troupe's concert at the Jerusalem Theater on May 31 (8:30 p.m.).

The annual event commemorates the life of late British-born university chancellor Avraham Harman and will feature Canadian opera singer and cantor Sharon Azrieli, with orchestra founder Anita Kamien wielding the baton.

Kamien established the orchestra nigh on three decades ago, in 1989. Over the years the ensemble has provided a musical and social home to students on science and humanities undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate programs, with locally-born instrumentalists rubbing shoulders with olim and foreign students from across the globe, including from Russia, France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Japan.

By all accounts, audiences should get a diverse and quality return on their ticket layout. The program for the concert features what Kamien terms "An Evening of Orchestral and Vocal Masterpieces," and takes in Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 56, aka "The Scottish," and a couple of Jewish-sourced works by Maurice Ravel, "Deux Mélodies Hébraïques" and "Chanson Hébraïque." The concert will close with a resounding finale, with excerpts from Bizet's ever-popular opera *Carmen*.

It doesn't take a degree in musicology to note the Jewish aspects of the repertoire. Mendelssohn was of the faith, and Ravel felt a strong bond with the Jewish people, hence his cantorial-leaning scoring of the Kaddish. That forms part of



SHARON AZRIELI (left) and Anita Kamien. (Courtesy)

the "Deux Mélodies Hébraïques" set, the second of which, "L'énigme éternelle," is based on a Yiddish verse.

The Ravel feature was fueled by academic work undertaken by Kamien's longstanding friendship with American musicologist, author, academic and pianist Arbie Orenstein.

"Arbie is a very close friend who taught with us at Queen's College [in New York]," she notes. The first person plural includes Kamien's husband Roger, a revered musicologist.

"Arbie is the man who wrote the first serious biography of Ravel. I made the decision to do these Ravel songs, in Aramaic and Yiddish, which have all been recorded by the most major singers in the world. You've got [Italian mezzo-soprano] Cecilia Bartoli and [American soprano] Jessye Norman. This is material that, even if the singers are not Jewish, they take very seriously. This is gorgeous music."

The third work in the Ravel part of the program is "Meyerke, Mayn Zun" (Meyer My Son).

The Mendelssohn symphony was something of a given for Kamien.

"It's just a beautiful work," she enthuses. And the Bizet was clearly scheduled to provide the proceedings with a high-energy and zestful send-off. The Ravel required a little more thought and attention. The inclusion of the French impressionist composer's songs was, ultimately, down to more than a touch of serendipity.

"A while ago a friend of mine and Roger's invited us to lunch, to meet a childhood friend," Kamien explains. The long lost pal, it turned out, was none other than Azrieli. The matter of onstage synergy was raised and Azrieli duly consented to join forces with Kamien and the orchestra for the forthcoming concert.

The Canadian singer's cantorial skills were of particular interest to Kamien. One thing led to another, and the evolving professional fusion eventually produced the Ravel, Jewish-based slot. It was, it seems, very much a going-with-the-flow matter.

"Initially we were thinking of a totally

different program, and then the concert had to be delayed, from March to May," Kamien continues. "On noticed these Ravel songs on Sharon's repertoire list, and I knew she had the background of being a trained cantor. I felt she would do that in a most profound way."

The core of the concert lineup quickly crystallized.

"Once I had that in place I knew I had to work around the Ravel, to build a program I felt would work," Kamien says. "I felt the Mendelssohn was preferable to the original work I had planned - Beethoven's Fourth Symphony."

Fans of the latter lyrically stirring work will still get a chance to hear Kamien and the Hebrew University Orchestra work their magic on it, as the conductor has already scheduled it for next year's concert which, incidentally, will also mark the ensemble's 30th anniversary.

"I didn't feel the Beethoven symphony was the proper pairing for the Ravel," Kamien notes. "And I thought we wanted to be festive in the second part of the concert."

Hence, the *Carmen* excerpts.

"They are delicious," says Kamien with a smile. "They are absolutely marvelous. To me, the whole program for the concert feels as if it has a *raison d'être* to hang together. I think programming is very important." That goes for musical and textural aspects alike. "You have these ancient texts, but not only ancient ones," says Kamien. "There is the Yiddish thing too. The philosophical take in these songs is very special. 'L'énigme éternelle' is basically asking what we are doing here on Earth, and what's most important in life. These are unanswerable questions."

The audience may very well leave next Thursday's concert with food for thought, but also right royally, musically, rewarded.

For tickets: HebrewUOrchestra@gmail.com.