

A Brahms sonata would have improved program

By Avigdor Zaromp
staff writer

Among the cherished traditions of the Shatney Zedek synagogue is the annual concert series established by Peter and Clara Weisberg. Since 1980, this series has presented some fine artists to large audiences.

The artist this time was Israeli-born cellist Ofra Harnoy. This 24-year-old, talented musician, presently living in Canada, has already accomplished what many aspiring artists only dream about. When listening to her performance, the reason becomes clear.

Her accompanist was supposed to be Bernie Katz, who is well known in this area. However, he had to cancel and was replaced by Bert Anton, who was flown in from Toronto at the last moment. Judging by his fluent and authoritative performance, he was intimately familiar with the items on this program, some of which were rare and unusual.

As expected, much of the music was based on Jewish themes. Opening with "Nila" by Leon Zuckert, who wrote this work when he was 12, Harnoy proceeded to reveal a world that is seldom touched. "Nila" is the concluding prayer following the traditional Yom Kippur services.

Another item that is obscure to most of us, has a special meaning to Harnoy. This was a sonata by Glick, a leading Canadian composer, that was dedicated to her. The work, using some contemporary idioms, is, nevertheless, tonal and accessible to the average listener.

Other selections were by Popper, Bruch, Block, de Falla, Casals, Rimsky-Korsakov and Kreisler. In most of these works, Harnoy's command of the instrument and artistic maturity were remarkable. The clarity of tone and depth of expression were enhanced by intense personal involvement. One of the exceptions was in Bruch's "Kol Nidrei." The



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performance, while technically correct, sounded aloof and detached.

Among the more established works featuring Jewish themes is Bloch's masterful rhapsody "Shelomo," for cello and orchestra. The

name "Shelomo" is the Hebrew version of the biblical king, Solomon. In addition to the challenging cello part, this version demanded substantial virtuosity for the piano, which incorporated the complex orchestral

parts. This performance brought out the intensity of the work with its climactic heights in spite of the limitations imposed by the absence of a full orchestra.

Among the non-Jewish, but popular, tidbits were a Spanish Dance by de Falla, "Flight of the Bumble Bee" by Rimsky Korsakov and Kreisler's "Liebesleid." None of these was written for cello, but this performance gave the works a certain aura of authenticity. Perhaps best of all was "Song of the Birds" by the legendary cellist Pablo Casals, who frequently presented it in his encores.

The popular Yiddish song, "Yiddishe Mame," is a source of much nostalgia. But the audience didn't join in with singing, in spite of encouragement to do so.

While attempting to cater to the Jewish audience, it was obvious that Harnoy is versed in a much wider repertoire. It would have been preferable, in my view, if she had included at least one substantial selection by a great master, such as a Brahms sonata. After all, the artistic appreciation by a Jewish audience isn't any lower than that of any other audience.

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