



## **Q&A With Eliran Avni, Founder and Creative Director of the SHUFFLE Concert**

Interviewed by Juilliard Faculty Member Anita Mercier

### **How did you come up with the idea of doing a Shuffle concert?**

Shuffle started as an idea I had while listening to my MP3 player in the gym. I think it was when Chrissie Hynde and The Pretenders became Prokofiev's 5th Symphony. I was so shocked I had to stop on the treadmill. It was like, huh, how did I get from Chrissie Hynde to Prokofiev? I began to think it would be interesting to have a concert that would revolve around this idea of crazy juxtapositions of styles.

### **What's the appeal of a concert like this?**

I think that life in the 21st century is all about different styles and influences mixed together. You see it in cuisine, you see it in fashion . . . we're not so boxed into genres in the way we used to be, when the people who went to hear classical music only listened to classical and the people who listened to pop only listened to pop. We all consume all these different genres on a regular basis. Just think about the commercials we hear everyday: American Express commercials are using Bach Preludes and Mohegan Sun is using My Sharona seconds later. I'm positive that there are a lot of other people out there sitting on the subway listening to their MP3 players and going from Glenn Gould to the Beatles.

### **Besides the juxtaposition of styles, what else is unusual about this concert?**

Allowing the audience to choose the music! In the beginning we thought that we would have a computer program do the selection but then we thought it would be great if the audience actually had some input and got to choose what they will hear. This way the program really mirrors the tastes of the audience in a given night and isn't going to be repeated the same way twice. The variety of instrumentation is unusual too. We have 6 musicians: soprano Amy Justman, violinist Lauren Basney, cellist Linor Katz, clarinetist Moran katz (who is Linor's sister!) and who doubles on recorders, and oboist Roni Gal-Ed who also plays the English horn as well and myself on piano. We have pieces ranging all the way from the Middle Ages to Pop. I think it's a lot of fun to just have that kind of craziness going on.

### **I'm reminded of the "chance" music of John Cage and other composers, which incorporates random procedures. Do you see any connection?**

John Cage used chance elements in the actual process of composition, for anything from the choice of instrumentation to what phrase comes next. I personally think Cage wanted to try and capture the electricity that takes place when someone is improvising and is in the unknown. The magic of those moments is undeniable. The original Shuffle concept is very much a chance concept; it's about not knowing what piece will come next and enjoying the shock effect of switching between numbers and in some cases between radically different styles. But in working our way through the logistics, we realized the need for some limitations.



We decided to let the audience choose from a closed list of pieces (about 50 numbers) and not the entire vast universe of music and we pick the numbers at the beginning of each half so everyone knows what's coming.

### **How did you choose the music?**

The whole project started with me talking to friends and other people about the idea. I just wanted to see what their reaction would be and I was really surprised to see people getting excited just about the concept, just the thought, about doing something so unique and different. When I then spoke to the musicians it was very clear that to really make it work we needed to start with pieces that we felt passionate about. Considering we don't know what pieces or order the audiences will select, it was important that whatever was going to happen on stage, we were going to be 100% enthusiastic about. I asked each member of the Ensemble to come up with a list of pieces they would like to perform and made a giant excel file with all the entries. Everyone had great ideas! It's important to add that we are not dumbing down the experience; we're not going to give you Für Elise for a classical work, we're going to give you a real movement from Beethoven's Clarinet Trio that we think is exciting. In the contemporary music menu we have a short piece by Ives for clarinet trio that is challenging. It's five minutes of beautiful and complex. From our experience people really love that piece because it's so different and unusual.

### **So what you're talking about isn't just a program of greatest hits.**

Right, we really tried to avoid that. We did on the other hand try to find works that will give you the essence of the style. We didn't look for the oddities within the style but for something representative of the period. Maybe you could argue that some composers represent a certain period and a certain style better than others, but we really tried to keep some sort of integrity in the choice of pieces.

### **Is the entire program decided by the audience, or do you plan some pieces ahead of time?**

We are trying to give the concert some structure and balance by starting and finishing the program with a piece that involves all the members of the Ensemble. Those two pieces are going to be determined ahead of time. But everything in the middle is up for grabs, whatever the audience wants.

### **How long are the pieces?**

The length is limited to somewhere between 3 and 8 minutes on average. Some pieces are longer and some are very short. But we're not going to perform entire multi-movement works.

### **How much of the program is original music, and how much of it had to be arranged?**

About 80% of the music we're performing is in the original instrumentation. We started incorporating arrangements when Amy, our singer is involved and for the more contemporary styles. For example, we do "The Shape of My Heart" by Sting and Dominic Miller. There is a



piano arrangement and from that composer Jonathan Keren derived an arrangement for the larger ensemble. I think the most outrageous thing we have done so far is arranging the Minuet from Ravel's Sonatine (originally written for solo piano) for the entire ensemble. Jonathan did that too and it's achingly beautiful. The objective was to be authentic. Clearly we are not a jazz group and we are not a pick-up band. We are classically trained musicians, that's our bread and butter. What we did want to do was give each piece on the program a committed performance. Meaning, something that sounds as authentic as possible within the constraints of our ensemble, something moving and coherent in its interpretation.

**Were there some pieces that you tried out but really couldn't make work?**

Yes. Debbie Harry's "Call Me". I really wanted to do that, but I guess Rock is something that is just not going to come out well with an English Horn. A lot of the Medieval material that I wanted to do, that is vocal in origin, is very hard to translate into instruments. But we are doing some, for example a Perotin Organum and a Dunstable Chanson. So we have a couple of works from that period, but we are really limited in using only recorders, violin and oboe.

**Do you hope to attract a wider audience for classical music?**

We are not trying to revolutionize anything. This is about enjoying music. My hope is that people who go into the experience thinking that they really love Jazz or Pop, will hear something by Beethoven or Dunstable or Kurt Weill and go, "I really like that, I should listen to more of it. That, for me, is the real edge of this project, to open peoples' minds to styles of music that they would normally not hear. And I think that in this format it's not intimidating. It is five minutes of music that you may or may not like. This is not about eradicating recitals or destroying classical music as we know it. It's about creating another alternative, an option, and having a blast while doing it!

**I can imagine how someone who hears a little bit of Schubert might then be motivated to go and learn more about Schubert, buy some Schubert, listen to an entire CD of Schubert.**

If you think of all the music you love and how you became familiar with it, it wasn't that someone forced you to listen to a Beatles album cover to back, the entire Wagner's Ring or all of the Scarlatti Sonatas. You heard a song or a piece, something that triggered your interest, and you were motivated to hear more of that kind of music.

**When you juxtapose different styles, genres, and periods of music, how is the music changed in the process? Will we hear Beethoven differently if he's next to Sting?**

I think this question has two parts. As performers I really hope that we can present the best performance of a Brahms Trio and the best performance of that Sting song regardless of the fact that they come one right after the other. I think that's very important. We're not compromising the quality of the performance just because we don't know the order. Now, is your listening experience different because of that order? I would be curious to hear that from



people. Part of that shock moment I had at the gym was that here I was all energized from the dance-club Pretenders' beat and I was suddenly transported into this vast Russian landscape. It was the closest thing to time travel.

**What are you hoping for the future?**

You know I'm reminded how my sister made me listen to Led Zepplin and Bruce Springsteen when I was growing up and how I in turn coaxed her to listen to Rachmaninoff and Debussy. And then there was my dad with his Sinatra and Oldies. I mean I grew up to listening to it all and loving it all. In my mind it is all great music. So my hope is that people will feel like they just walked into my living room and they are relaxing and listening to great music. The Shuffle Concert is also a great educational tool for kids in schools who may not necessarily be exposed to such a variety of musical styles. My personal hope is that I will be excited about every concert I play in the way I'm excited about this project! It's really great to not know what you're going to do every night...