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SD Symphony

The Symphony brings Jewish melodies and Israeli flavor to the stage with Gil Shaham and Avi Avital

The year Avi Avital was born in the southern Israel city of Be'er Sheva, Gil Shaham, a 7-year-old boy living in Jerusalem, began taking violin lessons. By the time Avital was 8, he, too, was learning to master a string instrument, the mandolin, and was performing with the youth-focused Be'er Sheva Mandolin Orchestra. Today, both men are world-renowned musicians and highly accomplished on their respective instruments, and both are performing as part of the San Diego Symphony's 2013 concert season.

Gil Shaham in Recital
Violinist Gil Shaham (brother of pianist Orli Shaham) has a deep appreciation for music with Jewish and Israeli influences. Born in Champagne-Urbana, Ill., in 1971 to Israeli scientists, Shaham moved with his parents back to Israel when he was 2. He grew up speaking Hebrew and falling asleep to Hebrew lullabies sung by his grandmother.

"The Jewish musical culture has always run very deep for us," he says. It wasn't long, though, before the small boy with the violin was discovered as a prodigy. At age 9,

he played for Isaac Stern, Nathan Milstein and Henryk Szeryng and attended the Aspen Music School in Colorado, studying under Dorothy DeLay, who had also been Itzhak Perlman's teacher. He debuted as a soloist with the Jerusalem Symphony at age 10 and performed less than a year later with the Israel Philharmonic. At age 11, he was admitted to Juilliard School. In 1989, at age 18, Shaham saw his career skyrocket when he was asked to replace an ill Itzhak Perlman for a series of concerts with the London Symphony Orchestra. The rest, of course, is history. He has more than two dozen concerto and solo albums to his name, many of which have earned him multiple Grammys, a Grand Prix du Disque, Diapason d'Or and Gramophone Editor's Choice.

Shaham combines his "flawless technique with inimitable warmth and a generosity of spirit" in his performances worldwide.

On Feb. 7, he'll perform in recital at Copley Symphony Hall (the Symphony will not perform). On the lineup are Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata, Bach's Partita No. 3 and a new work by William Bolcom, which has yet to be announced. Perhaps most interestingly, though, he'll play Avner Dorman's Violin Sonata No. 3, "Niggunim." Commissioned by Shaham and his sister, the piece takes its name from the term for the fundamental musical concept of traditional Jewish music.

"We started exploring a project of Jewish concert music that was based on this huge folk tradition beginning about 1900, when a group of composers began to write concert music [with Jewish influences]," Shaham says. "They set out to explore Jewish folk music and bring it to the concert stage."

It was Dorman's idea to focus on what he called the lost tribes of Israel. The piece, therefore, contains musical elements of Jewish culture in Libya, Georgia and Macedonia, and all in the Jewish niggun tradition.

"I really think it's a great, great triumph, and we've been getting great reactions from it," says

ABOVE: Israeli mandolinist Avi Avital performs with the San Diego Symphony May 21. OPPOSITE: U.S.-born, Israel-raised violinist Gil Shaham will give a recital at Copley Symphony Hall Feb. 7.



PHOTO BY ROYD HAGEN

Shaham, who will be playing the piece in San Diego with pianist Akira Eguchi.

Avi Avital Performs

Avi Avital's hugely successful music career actually started by coincidence. As a small child, his neighbor happened to play the mandolin, and he spent a lot of time at the neighbor's flat listening and learning, and eventually, inheriting one of the neighbor's old mandolins. Before he knew it, he was in Be'er Sheva's youth mandolin orchestra. From there, he went on to study at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and the Cesare Pollini Conservatory of Music in Padua, Italy. He's performed at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center

and many international orchestras and chamber groups. He's won Israel's Aviv Competition, received Germany's ECHO Prize and been nominated for a Grammy Award. All this, and he's still relatively young, at 34. Perhaps it's his youth that keeps his take on classical music (especially Bach, his favorite) so exciting.

"It's challenging to offer something fresh and new in the context of the classical concert hall," he says, "so I feel very privileged to be a mandolin player, because almost everything I offer to the audience has some new element that is a complete discovery."

Haaretz Daily has called Avital's interpretation of classical music, "everything you never dreamt a mandolin could do... truly breathtaking in virtuosity and dedication." In response to his debut album under Deutsche Grammophon, "Bach," released this past June (he is an exclusive Deutsche Grammophon recording artist), The Denver Post wrote that, "Avi Avital's brand new version of familiar Bach compositions is downright radical." So, Avital has quite the reputation for making the mandolin do things most never imagined it could.

"I very much believe in commissioning new pieces for the mandolin and expanding the repertoire of the instrument," he says.

That's why San Diegans are so excited for Avital to leave his Berlin home to play with the San Diego Symphony May 21 at The Auditorium of The Scripps Research Institute. In addition to playing many works for mandolin and strings, the program will also feature a world premiere commissioned work by San Diego Symphony Associate Composer David Bruce. According to

Avital, what he likes about Bruce's music is the folkloric element it often possesses.

"The mandolin itself sometimes plays on that border between folk and classical music," Avital says. "The mandolin is also a very well known classical and ancient instrument within the Baroque period. And so artistically, we connected very much."

The musician and composer collaborated twice before, but it's only with this current collaboration that Bruce is writing a piece for the mandolin as a solo instrument, rather than as one small part of a whole.

"I'm looking forward very much to that," Avital says of working with Bruce on the yet-to-be-completed piece. Bruce actually traveled to Berlin last month to meet with Avital and collaborate on the material's first draft. "It's a very nice process, whenever a composer is open to dialogue with the performer of his music. It's always a very fruitful and entertaining process."

Though Avital says he doesn't know much yet about the piece, he hints at the possibility of Jewish Moroccan-inspired elements, since Avital's own family is of Moroccan Jewish descent. ✪

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