

Find Your Roots

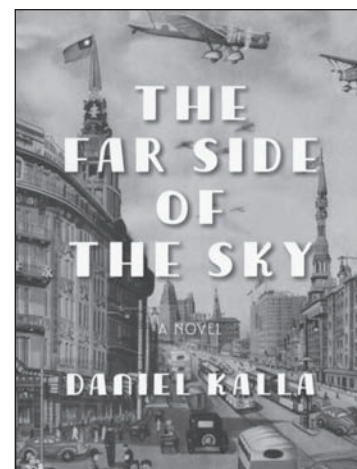
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Israeli star to perform here

Marina Maximilian Blumin joins local Yom Ha'atzmaut.

CYNTHIA RAMSAY

By the time Marina Maximilian Blumin placed second on Israel's *Kochav Nolad* in 2007, her star was already rising. Now, at 24, her star is shining bright: she's a pianist, vocalist, composer, actress and model who has attracted positive attention from sources as varied as renowned classical music composer and conductor Gil Shohat to *Vogue Italia*. And, she's coming to Vancouver this month to help our community celebrate *Yom Ha'atzmaut* (Israel's Independence Day).

The evening, presented by the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver at the Centre for Performing Arts on April 25, 7:30 p.m., will begin by closing the commemoration of *Yom Hazikaron* (Israel's Remembrance Day). "Following that, there will be a series of presentations and performances by young members of our community, including a performance by the Or Chadash dance troupe," said Stephen Gaerber, co-chair once again of the celebration with his brother, Allen. "New this year will be a short video highlighting our community's contribution to our partnership region, the upper Galilee (Etzba Hagalil), and a unique live presentation that was written specifically for the event that celebrates 64 years of the state of Israel."

The fact that there will be 66 kids performing at the community celebration seems appropriate given that Blumin started performing in earnest at a young age. Born in Ukraine, she came to Israel with her family when she was three years old. Soon after, she began piano and vocal training. According to her website, "At the age of 10, she began performing in festivals, including a classical duet with singer Charlotte Church at Israel's Millennium celebrations, accompanied by a symphonic orchestra. At the age of 14, she began performing in jazz clubs with original jazz." At 15, Blumin began performing in theatre productions, as well as performing in and writing music for various other shows. She graduated with honors from the classical and jazz performance de-



Marina Maximilian Blumin

OHAD ROMANO

partment of the Tel Aviv High School for the Arts, and received several scholarships and awards during those years for jazz vocal performance and composition.

"I grew up as a classical pianist and vocalist," Blumin told the *Independent* in an e-mail interview. "As I got older, I continued my exploration of music through jazz and the world of improvisation, treating myself as a vocal instrument. Then I discovered musical arrangement and song writing."

"My mother is a musician who was trained by a strict method of teaching, but grew up to be a sensitive, gentle and unique piano teacher. My father is a performer in his soul. As for my older brother, he used to play the violin and is a former choreographer. So, by these examples alone, and there are many more, you can imagine the environment I grew up in."

"My earliest memories of myself are as a singer and performer. I don't remember ever having chosen it – yet, I remember that I always knew it about myself."

When asked to share some of her career highlights, Blumin said, "Thanks to the fact that I'm a hyperactive, curious child, and, thanks to the fact that music is a divine creation, every time I perform, I feel the possibility of reaching new heights and new accomplishments. But, if I must choose [a highlight], I'd intuitively choose the moment that I won second place

also busy working on my album."

She is also the face and figure of a fashion company called *Onot* (Seasons), and she has been acting in a few drama series on Israeli television.

According to her website, Blumin has performed in many festivals, including the International Red Sea Jazz Festival in Eilat and the Bolzano Jazz Festival in Italy, and she has worked with musicians such as Avishai Cohen, Jason Lindner, David Hazeltine and others. Since her *Kochav Nolad* experience five years ago, Blumin has created at least two different shows: *Experimental*, which she also produced, includes original songs in English and Hebrew that she performs with a band; and a solo show, *Amok Ba-Tal* (a line from a poem by Leah Goldberg), in which she plays the piano and performs material from her upcoming album.

Blumin is looking forward to coming to Vancouver.

"I'm honored to have been invited to perform at the Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations in Vancouver," she told the *Independent*. "I am especially excited since I have family there. I wish us all a great evening together to celebrate our national and individual independence! I invite all of you to join me in a wonderful celebration!"

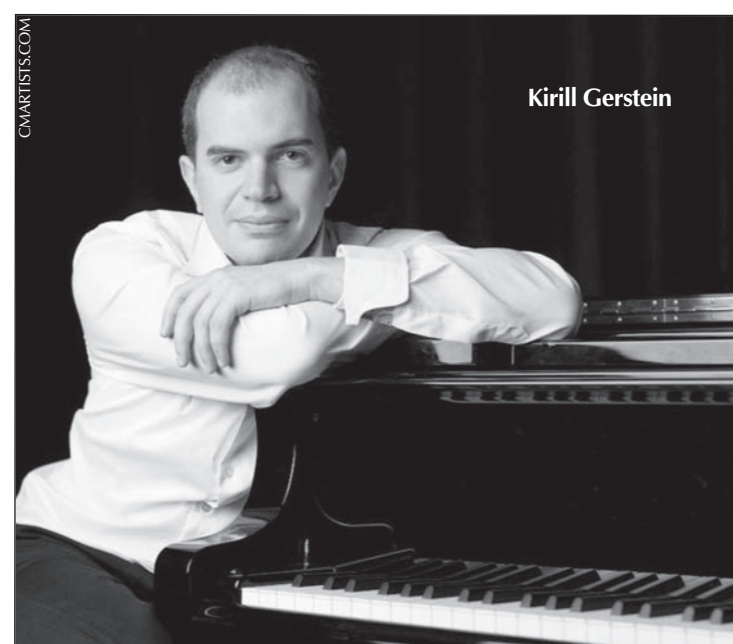
About the repertoire she'll be

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A profound versatility

Kirill Gerstein is at the Chan on April 19.

DANA SCHLANGER



Kirill Gerstein

He's young, but there are many young concert pianists. He can play anything in the repertoire, but there are many young pianists who are versatile. He's on Facebook and Twitter, but so is everyone else nowadays. What sets Kirill Gerstein apart is that he has all of this plus an usual breadth of inspiration and curiosity, including a significant jazz repertoire on par with his classical music prowess, and he possesses a thoughtful yet unassuming manner in which he juggles a formidable international career. Vancouver audiences will have the opportunity to get a sense of Gerstein's musicianship on April 19, when he performs for the Vancouver Recital Society at the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts.

In 2010, Gerstein received the Gilmore Artist Award. The prize is bestowed every four years on an exceptional pianist who, regardless of age or nationality, possesses broad and profound musicianship and charisma, and can sustain a career as a major international concert artist. The *Jewish Independent* caught up with Gerstein in Germany, where he spoke about receiving the award:

"The Gilmore has only been awarded five times before and it's wonderful because it is not a piano competition in any traditional sense. The committee is secret and it's not even announced that anyone is un-

der consideration until the recipient is actually notified. The jurors covertly go to many concerts over a period of two to three years without the pianist even knowing it," he explained. "I think that this very careful and intensive process of selection assures that there is much less an element of gamble than in a regular piano competition, where you hear someone for two weeks at one point in their life, in a certain year, and it's done. It also comes with a huge monetary award, \$300,000, which is to be used for musical purposes ... not for parties! This welcomes the question what to do with this kind of money."

The award has enabled Gerstein to commission new piano music from composers that he admires. "This is one of the big things I've been using the money for, because I felt it was good to redistribute the award amongst fellow artists. It's wonderful to offer the opportunity to create pieces that I get to premiere, but they remain in the repertoire afterwards for any interested pianist to play them, forever. It

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performing, Blumin said, "I am going to bring songs from various sources. I like to take beautiful old Israeli songs and rearrange them in my way. For example, the wonderful Mordechai Zeira song 'Ma Omrot Einaich,' and Lehakat HaNachal's 'Yeshnan Banot.'

"I will be performing with my band – Aviv Cohen (drummer), Gillad Abro (bass player) and Jonathan Albalak (guitarist) – who are considered to be among the top musicians in Israel and have participated in festivals around the world."

While there are videos on YouTube of Blumin performing that you can find using English search terms, there are much better finds – including a spirited ren-

dition of "Yeshnan Banot" – if you search in Hebrew. In interviews and in performance, Blumin seems self-confident, energetic, eclectic and delightfully quirky. When asked how she came by her chutzpah, she responded, "I think chutzpah is something you are born with. Because I've studied since a very young age, I've gained technical confidence in what I do, and especially the confidence to know that, whatever I would like to do in this life, I need to nourish with discipline – there's nothing a person cannot achieve with these tools." ■

For tickets to the community celebration of Yom Ha'atzmaut, visit jewishvancouver.com or call 604-257-5100.

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also gives me a chance to interact with living composers that I greatly respect. This is the case of Oliver Knussen's Ophelia's Last Dance, which I commissioned on very short notice for the Gilmore Award festival in 2010 and will also be playing in the Vancouver recital."

Gerstein said he loves to build programs around a central idea and for Vancouver he has created "a program that is all related to dance. The way I see it, dance is, in a very primitive way, half of music's origin, the other half being song. It's terribly over-simplified, but the idea was to show how dance figures in piano music. The start of the program is Bach's English Suites, which is a collection of Baroque dances. The second piece is a Mozart gigue, arranged by Ferruccio Busoni, the great Italian pianist and composer, who juxtaposes what is, more or less, the original Mozart gigue with a section that is the fandango from a Mozart opera. And then comes Ophelia's Last Dance, a very melancholic dance, but nevertheless a dance. The first half ends with Weber's Invitation to the Dance, which is perhaps the first example of a concert waltz, and a very beautiful piece. The second part starts with Liszt's transcriptions of many Schubert waltz-like compositions, grouped under the name Soirée de Vienne, followed by Schumann's Carnaval, which is all pervaded by the spirit of dance and evokes the image of carnival celebrations and playful deceit."

It's an unorthodox program, but this is the way Gerstein puts his stamp on everything he does. It seems he's being doing things this way ever since his childhood in Soviet Russia, when he was studying classical music but taught himself jazz piano by listening to his parents' jazz record collection.

"Jazz became my main focus," he said, "and I went to America at 14 to study at Berklee College of Music, which is basically a jazz school. For awhile, I was still going back and forth between the

two styles, but realized at some stage that I need to make a choice, which I basically did when I was 16, and chose classical. But I never stopped playing both genres of music and I am interested in investigating, and then blurring, the borders between these styles, as well as highlighting the similarities. I've also commissioned two new jazz works, by Chick Corea and Brad Mehldau, with my Gilmore Award money, and premièred them in an exceptional evening on March 30 at Berklee."

One of the main turning points in Gerstein's career was winning the Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition in Tel Aviv in 2001. "It was very important to me," he said of the experience. "It was confirmation that I was doing the right thing. It was also good because I didn't feel the need to go to more competitions, but instead could just start playing many concerts and recitals, which attracted me so much more. It was also my first time in Israel, which was quite moving. I grew up with a strong secular Jewish identity. [I] did not grow up religiously, because that was just not possible in Soviet Russia at the time, but I did have a strong sense of being Jewish and definitely not being recognized as Russian."

Going to Israel within the context of the Rubinstein competition enhanced the emotional experience, he said. "It was very special to go to the place that I had heard so much about. I was ready to be a skeptic, but was surprised to find it a very moving place. I experienced a very strong connection but, of course, the fact that I won the competition also helped! I've been to Israel many, many times since, for various performances and I'm always going back with great joy."

For tickets to Gerstein's April 19, 8 p.m., performance, call 604-602-0363 or visit vanrecital.com. ■

Dana Schlanger is a freelance writer and director of the Dena Wosk School of Performing Arts.

Ethiopians uncover heritage

Teens learn about immigration story in oral history project.

ARIEH O'SULLIVAN THE MEDIA LINE

Two interrogators came to my cell and said, 'So, you're the traitor. You are the one who wants to be a white man.' I told them, 'No. I'm not a spy, just a teacher,'" recalled Yaacov Elias.

Elias was tortured and jailed for more than two years by the Marxist government in Ethiopia for Zionist activities in the late 1970s before moving to Israel. Decades later, he is telling a group of high school students gathered in his living room about his experience.

"I was tortured six different ways and it hurts me just to tell you about it," he says in low voice. "They hung me from a tree and beat the daylight out of me. They bent my back to my feet till I thought my spine was going to break."

Yasmine and Batel, two high school juniors interviewing Elias, squirm in their seats. Two of their classmates are handling the technical part: Yuval zooms in with his video camera while Yosef manoeuvres the microphone boom.

They have taken on the endeavor with two missions in mind. One is to use oral history to teach Israeli high school students filmmaking and interviewing techniques by getting Elias and the other Ethiopians who were jailed because of their Judaism and Zionist activities (referred to as "Prisoners of Zion") to talk about their experiences. The other is to teach Israeli high school students, most of whom were born in Israel to Ethiopian parents, about the heroic struggle of their community in the late 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s to leave Ethiopia and come to Israel. Retelling the history aims to boost the self-esteem of the men and women who led the struggle as well as the next generation that benefitted by it.

"I'm involved because it is important for us. I want to know what our parents had to go through to get to Israel and it is not to be taken for granted that we are here and we need to know this. Especially as time goes on we forget," Yuval Tamano, 16, told this reporter.

Ethiopian-born filmmaker David Gavro is guiding the students in video, editing and interviewing techniques and serves as a role model.

"This video film is a tool, really. It's aimed at having them meet their history. I'm the professional and they are experiencing the stories and the encounter with these people. We had kids whose parents were Prisoners of Zion and who knew nothing about it all until we put them before the camera," Gavro explained.

For the Jews of Ethiopia making

the journey to Israel, reaching the Promised Land was not an easy endeavor. More than 4,000 perished along the way and were buried in unmarked graves in the deserts of Ethiopia and Sudan.

In a stunning feat in 1991, Israel brought more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel in one weekend in Operation Solomon. They joined some 10,000 who had managed to arrive or be airlifted in the 1980s. Today, there are an estimated 90,000 Ethiopians living in Israel.

The community overall has had a troubled absorption in Israel. One explanation for this difficulty is that a large number came from farming villages and were unprepared for modern life. Indeed, many remain poor and unemployed. The younger generation,

"I want to know the stories of other families, not just my own.... This will help the image of the Ethiopian community a lot. It will show people a side they never saw."

however, has embraced Israel, fighting the stigma of coming from an underprivileged community, sometimes at the expense of their being aware of their own heritage or family history.

This is where ATZUM, a non-governmental organization set up about a decade ago to encourage social activism, has stepped in. Launching Project *Abrab* (illuminate in Amharic), ATZUM has brought together high school kids, mostly from Ethiopian backgrounds, to interview prominent individuals and Prisoners of Zion from Ethiopia.

"We want to bring honor and recognition to the Ethiopian Prisoners of Zion and [other immigrants], to tell stories, and their story isn't known by Israeli society," said project coordinator Yael Rosen. "We also want to empower high school students and raise self-esteem for those who are Ethiopians, so they can know more about their heritage, know more about what their parents went through and know more about their own community and, for non-Ethiopians, really, to give them a window into the Ethiopian community, which is a community that Israeli society at large has so much to learn from."

The students' videos will be combined into one film to be screened in various communal and educational settings, allowing the message to be spread widely.

Batel Cohen, 17, said she got involved because it was important for people to break out of the bubble of their own lives. "I want to know the stories of other families, not just my own or in my ethnic group," she said. "This will help the image of the Ethiopian community a lot. It will show people a side they never saw."

Elias is proud of his role in helping bring the bulk of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel in the 1990s. As a youth in the 1950s, he was chosen to come to Israel for schooling. He was sent back as an emissary and taught Hebrew and Zionism to Ethiopian Jews until he was jailed. He returned to Israel in 1984 and worked to help absorb the community into the country.

Elias and scores of others were imprisoned or exiled for their Zionist activities, yet few are aware of this. Prisoners of Zion is a term that was used usually in reference to Jews of the former Soviet Union who suffered the same fate. Today, Elias is retired and lives in a high-rise apartment in Rishon Lezion, south of Tel Aviv.

"Maybe we didn't toot our own horn enough or the media didn't write about us enough," Elias said. "Still, it was my fate to be part of this history of immigration of the Ethiopian Jewry and their absorption in Israel. I helped a lot in the areas where I was able to help."

Many of the Ethiopians who dealt with torture and hardships never spoke about their experiences, not even to their own children, he explained. Glancing at the teenagers in his living room, he said that he was warned by the students' interest in their history and that he hopes the film will enhance the image of the Ethiopian community.

"Exactly," said filmmaker Gavro about the long silence. "That's because many times the Jews of Ethiopia went through humiliations along the way, they buried a lot relatives and don't even remember where they are buried. So it is an open wound they are trying to forget. There are stories you'll never fathom, difficult stories."

Yuval agreed. "When we'd ask our parents, they tried to ignore us or say, go to your room but, with this project, we have been able to find people who are willing to talk about it and share their experiences with us and perhaps afterwards our parents will share a little with me." ■