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'Every Piece Has To Be Deep'

At 32, Israeli composer and onetime physicist Avner Dorman applies the rigors of mathematics to his music.

George Robinson - Special To The Jewish Week

Avner Dorman will premiere his Mandolin Concerto this week at the Angel Orensanz Center for the Arts. Photos by Dan Seltzer
The way he sees it, it was almost inevitable that Avner Dorman would become a composer. It was in the family genes. His father was a bassoonist and conductor. His mother's family included numerous highly regarded mathematicians. And there were serious Talmudists on both sides.

Talmudists? Mathematicians? To Dorman, whose piano music was recently recorded by the Naxos label, it makes perfect sense.

"Music, math and the tradition of debating the Bible in Jewish culture are very close," the 32-year-old composer says. "It's not a coincidence that so many Orthodox Jews are great mathematicians and physicists. They come out of a Jewish tradition of argumentation and logic, exercising the brain."

He adds, "Composing music is not far from that at all. You're taking some very simple material and trying to find what other things can be done with it. How can it be exhausted? It's fairly close to what theoretical mathematics does."

Like many Israelis, Dorman grew up in a fairly secular household, but he enjoyed the cut-and-thrust of his grandfathers' debates.

"I feel very close to that, not from the perspective of belief, but from an intellectual viewpoint," he says. "So I do have a very strong relationship to that tradition."

At the very least, his American wife "who is more religious ... is impressed with my knowledge of Talmud and Torah," he said.

He might very well have ended up following a very different career path. His undergraduate degree is in physics, and his father, he recalls, "was very concerned when I said I wanted to be a composer."

Of course, right now he is riding the crest of a considerable wave of favorable press and public performances of his music. And this week, his mandolin concerto will have its American premiere in New York City.

"One of my favorite things as a composer is to discover and explore new instruments," wrote Dorman in his concert notes. "When [mandolinist] Avi Avital approached me to write a concerto for him, my acquaintance with the mandolin was fairly limited. I had used it in chamber pieces only twice before, and did not know most of the repertoire for the instrument. As I got to know the instrument better, I discovered its diverse sonic and expressive possibilities."

Dorman isn't popping the champagne corks just yet. "Thank God, I'm doing well," he says. "But in a year, it could be much harder. It's an unpredictable career."

On the other hand, his rise has been, if not meteoric, certainly swift. The catalog of his published music starts with a piece composed when

he was only 17, and he has had numerous works performed around the world, including global and U.S. premieres of two works just last month. When he was 25, he became the youngest composer ever to win Israel's Prime Minister's Award, and in 2002 the Israeli daily newspaper Maariv chose him as the newspaper's "Composer of the Year."

(Last fall, when I reviewed the first American recording of his piano work, performed by Eliran Avni, I wrote, "These solo piano pieces are incredibly demanding, with huge runs, powerhouse chords in both hands and jagged, pulsing rhythms. Eliran Avni, who is the pianist on this recording, makes them sound downright easy, even with some startling changes of tempo and mood. Dorman's writing is good. ... and Avni makes him sing.")

Dorman certainly doesn't consider himself a boy wonder. As for his comparative youth, he says, "You could think of it as a burden or an advantage. I cannot complain. Occasionally it does stress me out, but how can you complain about something like this?"

On the contrary, he says, he is focused on the process of maturing, of getting older and wiser.

"My ideas from five years ago are not as developed as the ones I have today," he says. "When you write for an orchestra, every time you hear something played, you learn so much. There's no other way to write for orchestra: writing it, hearing it, rewriting it."

He is ruthless with his work, throwing away any piece with which he isn't happy.

"If you hear Bach, every piece is great," Dorman says. "That's the standard you're competing with."

In the back of his mind, he also hears the voice of one of his teachers, Josef Bardanashvili, with whom he studied at Tel Aviv University.

Bardanashvili, a Georgian Jew who emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Israel, used to tell his composition students, "Our people gave the Bible to the world. We can't write shallow music today. Every piece has to be deep because that's what we are expected to do."

Dorman sighs, then adds, "I find that a very powerful thought and I identify with it."

His grandfathers wouldn't have it any other way. n

Avner Dorman's "Mandolin Concerto" will have its American premiere Thursday, May 24 at 7:30 p.m., at the Angel Orensanz Foundation Center for the Arts (172 Norfolk St., between Houston and Delancey); the piece will be performed by the Metropolis Ensemble, led by Andrew Cyr, with Avi Avital as guest soloist.