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Concerto has its world premiere with a guest pianist and the Kansas City Symphony

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Two years ago, in Memphis, Tenn., rising-star pianist Alon Goldstein played a brawny, contemporary sonata he'd been making his own.

It was a calculated move, because Michael Stern was in hearing range, and Goldstein wanted him to tune into the work of the young composer, Avner Dorman, who, like Goldstein, is a native of Israel now living and making music in the U.S.

Well, one thing led to another, and this week all three musicians will align again on the proverbial and literal same page when Stern and the Kansas City Symphony present the world premiere of Dorman's new work, a piano concerto featuring Goldstein at the keyboard.

Called "Lost Souls," the piece is so new that Dorman has yet to hear Goldstein play it. That's scheduled to happen sometime after they arrive Monday night in Kansas City for a few days of rehearsals and the weekend concerts.

By this point, Goldstein says, he has been practicing it for almost two months, and he's discouraging any last-minute revisions by the composer.

"OK, no more changes," Goldstein, 38, said by phone the other day from his home in Rockville, Md., joking about a creator's tendency to perfect, perfect, perfect until the last possible minute. "Once it's in my reflex system, you cannot change it so easily. It's in my DNA now. It's very intense. It has many notes."

That the Kansas City Symphony will provide the counterpoint to the piano soloist in Dorman's concerto is no small matter. It's part of Stern's effort as music director to both broaden the repertoire and champion new music.

Orchestras have a wide array of 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century concerti to choose from — Mozart, Beethoven, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev — but few modern or contemporary piano concerti since Bartok's of the 1930s and '40s have found the legs to last.

Dorman and Goldstein hope to change that.

"I'm going to be tested like everyone else," Dorman, 34, said from his Los Angeles home. "It takes a lot to make a piano concerto compete in the real world. You have to be very compelling. And something about the piece needs to be very strong to convince people, to excite them enough to want to do it more than once."

Dorman seems like one of those immensely talented, broadly influenced creators who can inject new energy into the classical world. His music reflects not only the foundation of Western classicism but also the Middle Eastern cauldron from which he hails and his youthful enthusiasm for rock (Led Zeppelin and Prince among his early favorites).

Dorman's strategy in this new piece was to delve into the history of the concerto form and push the pianist squarely into the 21st century.

He does it by creating an underlying narrative drama. And drama it is: The 25-minute work — in three movements, without pauses — begins with a séance and ends with an exorcism.

Dorman suggested that listeners don't need to know the conceptual story to follow and appreciate the work as it's played.

"This is all added value," he said.

But in general, the idea involves a pianist and orchestra in struggle with the sounds of the past, with each other and with the future. As Dorman and Goldstein describe it, there'll be Chopin-esque

moments, quiet reflection, breakneck changes in speed and surprising turns — including passages that might put people in mind of Art Tatum, the towering figure of mid-century jazz piano.

“It’s thought-provoking and incredibly imaginative writing for the piano,” Goldstein said.

Dorman wrote the piece specifically for Goldstein.

“He has performed my music, solo piano music, before,” Dorman said. “And there was something about his aura that reminded me of a pianist from 100 years ago, something about him that reminds me of a different era. Then I had the idea that maybe he was born in the wrong time, at least from a storytelling point of view.”

Of course, how “Lost Souls — A Piano Concerto” will sound coming from the Lyric Theatre stage remains to be heard. But if Dorman’s recent work is any guide, it has a chance of being richly textured, adventurous and thrilling.

“I can imagine people on the edge of their seats,” Goldstein teases, “but there are a lot of things we don’t want to give away yet.”

Like Goldstein’s, Dorman’s reputation has been rocketing of late. This year alone brought the American premiere of his delightfully complex concerto for two percussionists and orchestra, “Spices, Perfumes, Toxins!” The New York Philharmonic gave it an ovation-stirring romp last spring, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic did likewise a few months later. His Violin Sonata No. 2, commissioned by Sayaka Shoji, also premiered in Japan and New York earlier this year.

“This has been a real breakthrough year for me,” Dorman said. “I just hope it’s not going to be a peak.”

The piano concerto comes to Kansas City on the back of an unusual package of financial support. The Symphony credits the Miller Nichols Charitable Foundation, which has launched a multi-year grant for commissioning new music, but funds also came from several other sources, including arts patrons on both coasts.

One is the Seattle Commissioning Club, an informal small group of music lovers who have become fans of Goldstein.

The other is the International Arts Foundation, which is connected to Goldstein’s management agency, Frank Salomon Associates.

“We’re very excited about this piece,” said Frank Byrne, the Symphony’s executive director. “I think it’s going to be a major new work. Avner represents a rising star of his generation of composers, and we’ve already programmed one of his works for 2010-11, a percussion concerto called ‘Frozen in Time,’ although that hasn’t been announced yet.”

For now, consider how Dorman takes his place in a program that also will include the work of two 20th-century giants, Sibelius and Bartok.

Goldstein regards the new concerto with one of the utmost of contemporary compliments.

“One of the words I don’t usually associate with classical music is, it’s cool. It’s really cool in a wonderful way. I don’t ever talk about cool and classical music, but they both start with a ‘c.’ ”

A PIANO PREMIERE

The Kansas City Symphony and guest soloist Alon Goldstein will play Avner Dorman’s “Lost Souls — A Piano Concerto” at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Lyric Theatre and 2 p.m. Nov. 22 at Yardley Hall at Johnson County Community College. Tickets are \$10 and up: 816-471-0400 or www.kcsymphony.org.

• To see a video of Goldstein playing a section of Avner Dorman’s Piano Sonata No. 2, go to KansasCity.com/entertainment.

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