

# Painting his own 'Pictures'

After tackling Mussorgsky, Israeli jazz pianist turns to Bach

By Heather Porter  
Special to the Advocate

Martin Buber, Helena Rubinstein, Karl Marx and Felix Mendelssohn are among the notable figures in his family tree. He's been compared with such jazz greats as Dave Brubeck, Oscar Peterson, Art Tatum, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk and Chick Corea.

Israeli-born, Boston-based pianist Eyran Katsenelenbogen has established himself as a musical force to be reckoned with.

His versatility will be on display with the Boston release May 2 of the DVD "Classical Meets Jazz: Pictures at an Exhibition." Katsenelenbogen teamed up with classical pianist Andrei Ivanovitch in the 2009 American premiere of the work, which was recorded at Jordan Hall. It weds classical composition and jazz improvisation in all 13 movements of the Mussorgsky warhorse to great effect – as demonstrated by the boisterous standing ovation caught on camera at the end of the performance. The international DVD launch will follow in June.

Katsenelenbogen will appear May 27 at Boston's Steinert Hall, as part of a series of performances in the United States, Europe and Israel. Given the gravitas of family history, the hoopla over the DVD release, a steady stream of concert tours, performances at local jazz clubs and his teaching schedule at the New England Conservatory of Music, one might expect a little name-dropping and horn-blowing from the 45-year-old pianist.

But he does neither. Students and colleagues alike attest to Katsenelenbogen's pianistic technique, imagination, virtuosity – and humility.

"He builds a new category in which he lives as a musician," said acclaimed jazz bassist Tal Gamlieli. "The tone quality, the control – he bridges the gap between classical and jazz. ... [And] he's a really modest person." That's a trait the "greatest musicians that I've worked with have," added Gamlieli, who has performed with Danilo Perez, among other jazz icons.

Katsenelenbogen is a member of Gamlieli's jazz trio, and will appear on a CD that Gamlieli will be recording next month. The trio, which includes percussionist Jorge Perez-Albela, plays every other Thursday at Lilypad Jazz Club in Cambridge.

So how is a jazz musician born? Katsenelenbogen traces his career back to when he was 5 or 6. Raised in the Tel Aviv neighborhood of Afeka, he took his first piano lessons from Aida Barenboim, mother and teacher of conductor/pianist Daniel Barenboim. "She lived up the street from my family home and had a house with seven rooms of pianos," Katsenelenbogen said. "If you played well, you were elevated – you would go into the next room."

He laughed as he recalled being "one of those kids who didn't want to go to lessons."

At some point, that all changed. By age 16, inspired by the music of Keith Jarrett, Katsenelenbogen decided to make music his life's work. At the time, his teacher was Liran Bar-El, a computer engineer who taught piano on the side. Now Bar-El "comes to every one of my concerts when I'm in Israel," said Katsenelenbogen.

He went on to study for a decade with Menachem Wizenberg, founder and head of the Interdisciplinary Music Department at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. Then, in 1993, the pianist moved to Boston to study at NEC. As at the time he was improvising in a "Ravel-esque style" and "focused on playing free improvisation," Katsenelenbogen said he was surprised when he was asked in 1996 to teach jazz at the conservatory.

Now, with more than 10 solo and compilation CDs and DVDs to his name and additional recordings with students, Katsenelenbogen exudes a youthful enthusiasm for teaching. His students range in age from 6 to over 80.

After retiring at age 70 as a Superior Court judge, David Roseman began studying with Katsenelenbogen. At 81, Roseman recently recorded



Eyran Katsenelenbogen

PHOTO BY VINCERE SYLPH

a CD featuring his interpretations of works by composers including George Gershwin, Jerome Kern and Richard Rodgers.

"Going into my 11th year," he said, "I wanted to have something to document what I've been doing."

Roseman described Katsenelenbogen as "wonderful to play with because he can play anything, and he plays with you, not against you."

As to his role in the recording, Katsenelenbogen said, "He [Roseman] is the foundation of the piece and I just ride along with little ornamental lines."

The "Pictures at an Exhibition" production was the brainchild of Gerhard Hummer, a German educator, musician and concert organizer. Hummer paired Katsenelenbogen with Ivanovitch, a Russian-based virtuoso pianist and great grandson of the Romanian composer Ion Ivanovici.

Through a friend, Hummer met Ivanovitch in 2001, when he was interpreting Bach's "The Art of the Fugue" for a film production of "Glenn Gould: The Russian Journey."

Hummer met Katsenelenbogen in 2005, while on holiday in Rome with his wife. They happened to notice he was giving a concert and "on the spur of the moment" decided to go.

Initially, Hummer invited Ivanovitch and Katsenelenbogen separately to perform concerts at his "Kultursalon," an 80-seat concert hall on the top floor of his residence, a converted farm house in the village of Sossmar, Germany. The monthly concert series, launched in 1993, attracts artists and music lovers from around the world, fulfilling Hummer's dream to promote "the understanding of people" across nationalities and religions.

Bringing together the two masters of classical and jazz genres – from divergent cultural, religious and national backgrounds – Hummer organized eight hugely successful concerts in 2007. Among them was the world premiere of "Classical meets Jazz: Pictures at an Exhibition," held at the Bechstein showroom in Hamburg.

"I only met Andrei three days before we played the first concert," said Katsenelenbogen. The chemistry "worked on stage," and "every single concert" received a standing ovation.

For his next project, Katsenelenbogen plans to perform improvisations of all 48 piano pieces that make up Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier." Likening the challenge to "bringing the Bible" into jazz, he expects it will take two years to complete his interpretation of Bach's monumental keyboard work.

For more on Eyran Katsenelenbogen, visit [www.eyran.com](http://www.eyran.com); for his performances with Tal Gamlieli, visit [talgamlieli.com](http://talgamlieli.com).

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