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ONSTAGE

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Celebrating the Spirit of America

Klezmer Company Orchestra gets patriotic at FAU.

BY JACK ZINK
THEATER/MUSIC WRITER

The band concert is as much an emblem of Independence Day festivities as fireworks displays. The televised Boston Pops Esplanade and Capitol Fourth concerts incorporate both musical and rocket blasts.

In South Florida, an inconspicuous holiday concert program inside Florida Atlantic University's Kaye Auditorium last year has become the seed for what might be a new tradition. Spirit of America: The Concert featured the Klezmer Company Orchestra (KCO), the school's wildly eclectic professional ensemble, in a program that ranged from patriotic to classical.

Some 1,800 people showed up and, shortly thereafter, conductor Aaron Kula began hearing talk of a repeat. Thus, Spirit of America: The Concert will get an official "II" beside its name at 3 p.m. Sunday, with a program Kula promised to be of equal intensity and diversity.

"It is unusual what we're doing," said Kula, director of music collections and performances at FAU Libraries. "And it can be difficult when you're out in front of trends."

But Kula is a tireless promoter as well as practitioner of his musical philosophy. In the decade since forming his first small Klezmer Company band in Delray Beach, the unit has become a fluid ensemble of 50 on-call instrumentalists from around the country. The core eight-piece combo can be augmented from big band (16-18), to last year's holiday concert chamber orchestra (25), up to 45 for the largest musical needs.

The KCO is both lesser known and lesser understood than Boca Raton's other two orchestras: the Boca Philharmonic Symphony and the Boca Pops. It is, in fact, the city's third resident professional orchestra. Its 2006-07 season, climaxing this weekend, included five full orchestra concerts. Venues ranged from the



GETTING IN THE SPIRIT: Aaron Kula conducts the Klezmer Company Orchestra with the help of emcee Benjamin Franklin (Kenneth Keaton, an associate dean and professor at FAU's Schmidt College of Arts and Letters) in Spirit of America: The Concert. FAU photo

Eissey Theatre in Palm Beach Gardens to the Jackie Gleason Theater on Miami Beach to Miami's Carnival Center grand opening. The core octet performed an additional half-dozen programs, with four sessions by the KCO jazz quartet.

Kula strives at every opportunity to define the KCO beyond the stereotype of the klezmer label, typically a sextet performing Southeastern European secular Jewish music. Though the KCO's roots are there, and Kula's instrument of choice is an accordion, he fervently preaches a code of musical variety.

Sunday's program, for instance, ranges from the opening *Music for the Royal Fireworks* by Handel to Ives' *Variations on America*, Barber's *Knoxville Summer 1915* with soprano Elena Correia, folk music (*Goin' Home*), country classic (*Orange Blossom Special*), ragtime (*The Entertainer*) and Gershwin's *An American in Paris*.

"Last year we had just gotten a donation of the Spirit of

America musical collection at the library," Kula said. "We quickly put together a concert with 25 musicians. This year's is with the same thematic idea."

Kula typically writes the ensemble's special arrangements. With 42 players and more time to put the show together this year, he mixed this show up with treatments ranging from off-the-shelf to highly improvisational.

Kula's accordion, by the way, is a \$20,000 Italian instrument "a la Argentina," he explained. "It's all about tone color." He said it takes the musical palette far beyond the wedding party stereotype. He also pointed out that the KCO's violin section is 13 strong, though he called them "fiddles." They're led by permanent member Randi Fishenfeld, who will solo on *Orange Blossom Special*.

"My concert doesn't look, feel or fit like a typical symphony concert," Kula said. "I'm redefining the future of orchestras, mixing up the concert experience. The goal is to have an element of sur-

prise, not to duplicate.

"We need to show that an orchestra is a vibrant, dynamic musical organization. In the big cities, they're finally getting around to examining how to bridge generations and see how the institutions survive."

Still, he said with a chuckle that he could never do what he does here at his other jobs and guest appearances, past or present, such as the New England Conservatory or Boston Ballet.

Still, he didn't really set out to create an orchestra when he joined FAU in 1997. At that time, the Klezmer Company (sans Orchestra tag) was the usual sextet. Soon after, he increased it to eight, a number that allows a combo to deliver a fuller sound across a much larger repertoire. Kula doesn't include himself, but his accordion brings the base unit to nine.

"Normally, our orchestra concerts now are for up to 27 musicians," Kula said. "I will go to the ends of the earth to get the people I need." The orchestra grows especially with the need for strings, but the

IF YOU GO

Spirit of America: The Concert will be performed by the Klezmer Company Orchestra, with guest soloist Elena Correia.

Where: Florida Atlantic University Kaye Auditorium, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton

When: 3 p.m. Sunday

Tickets: \$15-\$25;
fauevents.com or
800-564-9539

conductor sees no need for more than an ensemble of 45.

In addition to Kula, three of the original sextet remain: violinist Fishenfeld, double bassist Jackie de los Santos and Chaim Rubinov on trumpet and flugelhorn.

The others in today's core octet are drummer Zachary Eldridge, percussionist Teresa Flores, Tom Jaworski on reeds, trombonist David Levitan and clarinetist Stas Pomerant. Collectively, they've played in many of the world's best-known jazz outfits and blues bands as well as in pop and classical surroundings. Bios and additional information on the orchestra are available at klezmercompany.com.

The core group will be "in front of the sound" for the more improvisational numbers. Kula includes in this category a "wildly improvised swing" for *Down by the Riverside*.

There will be yet another difference from the usual concert experience. The emcee will be Benjamin Franklin—portrayed by Kenneth Keaton, associate dean and professor of music for FAU's Schmidt College of Arts and Letters. Kula said the backing by the school, and the library, has been phenomenal in establishing the KCO as a resident member of the region's cultural scene.

And after a former career in the purely classical field, "I'm just extending my life right now," the conductor said.

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