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MUSIC

Klezmer-blues link hits with a gasp

By CHARLES PASSY
Palm Beach Post Music Writer

On the surface, there wouldn't appear to be a musical link between klezmer and the blues. The former



is a popular style rooted in the ancient Jewish prayer melodies. The latter is a sparse and soulful expression of the African-American experience.

But Aaron Kula, a Jewish musical scholar based at Florida Atlantic University's Boca Raton campus, sees a world of similarities between the two. And to prove his point, he's developed an entire concert program devoted to exploring the connections.

He calls it "Klezmer Does the Blues." After bowing earlier this year at FAU, the show, featuring Kula's Klezmer Company ensemble and the Ebony Chorale, comes to Palm Beach Community College's Eissey Campus Theatre in Palm Beach Gardens on Sunday evening.

For Kula, there's an obvious way to understand the link: Such Jewish composers as George Gershwin and Kurt Weill were clearly influenced by the music of the synagogue — Gershwin and his brother and collaborator, Ira, attended services regularly, Kula notes. But they also wrote in the popular style of the day, which was inevitably influenced by such African-American styles as jazz and blues.

To illustrate the point, Kula features a prayer from the Jewish Friday-night service in the concert, then goes into Gershwin's *It Ain't Necessarily So* from *Porgy and Bess*.

"You can hear the audience gasp The similarities are so striking," Kula says.

KLEZMER DOES THE BLUES — Featuring the Klezmer Company and Ebony Chorale. At Palm Beach Community College's Eissey Campus Theatre, Palm Beach Gardens, 7:30 p.m. Sunday. Tickets: \$24-36. Phone: (877) 877-7677.

Still, Gershwin isn't exactly klezmer — in the familiar sense. (Although Kula points out that all the Hebrew word literally means is "instrumental music.") So, Kula offers plenty more, including a klezmer piece, written for the legendary Jewish clarinetist Giora Feidman, that sounds like a "Jewish New Orleans funeral march."

And it's worth noting that Kula's own eight-member Klezmer Company is made up of musicians with jazz, blues and R&B experience. Take violinist Randi Fishenfeld, who plays regularly with Clarence Clemons (of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band fame).

The other participant in the program will be the Ebony Chorale, a 36-voice African-American group that sings spirituals and secular music. They'll join the Klezmer Company for some numbers, including Gershwin's *Summertime* and a klezmer-style rendition of the spiritual *Let My People Go*, but will also perform two selections on their own.

Choir director Orville Lawton says the idea of combining the groups — and the styles — makes perfect sense, noting the connection between Jews and African-Americans that played a key role in the civil-rights movement in the '60s. The connection inevitably carries over into the music, which reflects both cultures' history of oppression and redemption.

"It's music that comes out of a struggle," Lawton says.