

Two families, one concert

Musical bridge to connect generations in Emerson

JOANNE PALMER

Cantor Shira Lissek, who will perform in concert with Arbie Orenstein at Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson on October 28, said that her father's old friends can hear his voice in hers.

That's a neat trick. Her father, Cantor Leon Lissek of Teaneck, who for more than 30 years sang from the bimah of Congregation B'nai Amoona in St. Louis, Mo., was one of the paradigmatic voices of his generation, but his is a man's voice.

Hers, clearly, is not.

The way his voice still is part of hers, just as hers has become ever more her own – the voice of a Jewish woman – traces the mystery of the transmission of talent and passion and belonging and commitment and change from generation to generation.

And the way the concert will be a two-family celebration, featuring braided generations of Lisseks and Orensteins, shows the connections that underlie Jewish life in America.

Shira Lissek is a cantor at Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan; in a way, it would have been hard for her to choose another path. Her mother, Michal Lissek, is the daughter of Rabbi Pinchos Chazin, who was a prominent Conservative rabbi in Philadelphia, and the granddaughter of Hirsch Louis Chazin, an Orthodox cantor in Perth Amboy. And Lissek's father "was one of the great cantors of



Cantor Shira Lissek

his time," she said.

Inevitably, Lissek grew up surrounded by Jewish music, but "I never set out to be a cantor."

She was born in 1974; the year of her bat mitzvah was the first year the Conservative movement invested women as chazanin. "It's a very different Jewish landscape now than it was then," she said. "I never imagined that I could be a cantor."

There was no Conservative day school in St. Louis during her childhood, so she went to a modern Orthodox school; there she learned that a cantor's voice and a woman's were separated by an unbridgeable chasm. Eventually, though, she bridged that gap.

"I set out to be a singer," Lissek said. "I never realized that on this path, of opera and musical theater, I was building the resume for a cantor. I loved it, but there was something in the opera world that I was missing. It wasn't fulfilling me. I realized that I wanted a direct and elevated role in people's lives."

A part-time job at a shul in Brooklyn led eventually to Park Avenue.

The cantorate changed as Jews adapted to America, as well as to the sound of a woman's voice, Lissek said.

She, too, used to hear her father's voice in her head as she sang. "People were hearing my voice coming out of my mouth, but I heard him. Over the years, I have become more comfortable hearing

mine. The Conservative movement has worked to make room for women, and become more egalitarian, and I have gone through that change as well, slowing allowing more femininity.

"It is a challenge – I want to preserve the traditional sound of Judaism, but as a woman I can't imitate it.

"When I taught a class about the High Holy Days at Park Avenue, I kept playing amazing moments from male cantors, and the class kept wanting to hear women."

She played some early recordings; the women "were sisters of cantors, or daughters of cantors, and they were imitating them. They sounded like men." The class found it hard to believe, in fact, that those were women's voices. "They said no, that's not what we want. We want to hear women."

But cantors today don't sing only traditional chazanaut, she continued. "We're American Jews, and the sounds that open our hearts aren't the same sounds that opened hearts in Europe. We as Jews always are inspired by the sounds around us."

When she sings in Emerson, the pianist will be Dr. Arbie Orenstein, who has his own family connections both to the shul and to Lissek.

Orenstein – who is, among many other things, a professor of music at Queens College, a specialist on the life and music of Maurice Ravel, a preconcert lecturer for the New York Philharmonic, the editor of the academic journal *Musica Judaica*, and an active and committed synagogue member on Long Island – is the uncle of Rabbi Debra Orenstein, who leads B'nai Israel.

He gives concerts benefiting synagogues – usually his own, but now his niece's as well – about four times a year. The program at this concert will be accessible, he said; it will include Hebrew and Yiddish melodies; works by Puccini, Mozart, Debussy, and Schubert, as well as by Canadian Jewish songwriter Kenny Karen; and some Broadway and popular classics, including Rogers and Hart's "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" and Irving Berlin's "What'll I Do?"

Arbie Orenstein met Shira Lissek's father when the two men were on staff at Camp Ramah in Nyack. The facility, which for years has been a day camp, was sleepaway then; Orenstein, a graduate student, was a teacher that summer, and Leon Lissek, a cantorial student, was a waiter. The two remained friends, and their families are so close that they still travel together.

Although the concert will be heimische, relaxed, and informal, Orenstein does not compromise his standards. The pianos he rents to play at such events must be good

enough to produce exactly the sound he demands. Such pianos are not easy to find. They used to be available through Steinway, the company that makes pianos and sold them at its showroom on 57th street in Manhattan, but that showroom is gone now, Orenstein said. That was a blow. "But one of my students said that he knew a place in New Jersey," he said. That was Lindeblad Piano Restoration in Pine Brook. "As fate would have it, the fellow dealing with us was wearing a yarmulke. He was a religious Jew. We were talking

We're American Jews, and the sounds that open our hearts aren't the same sounds that opened hearts in Europe.

SHIRA LISSEK

Torah." As it turned out, the company lends pianos to religious institutions, which must pay only transportation costs.

Orenstein tried all the pianos and found two to be acceptable. Both, though, were sold before the concert; he made another trip to Pine Brook, found a third, and told the salesman, "I'm your good luck charm. I play them – you sell them." The salesman agreed that if he could sell the third piano before the concert, he would not ship it to its new owners until afterward.

"The idea of this concert is to set Jewish music in the context of a classical concert," Orenstein said. "It is a very nice afternoon; it gives a nice, warm, mispachadic feeling. "We're all making music together."

An afternoon of music

Who: Cantor Shira Lissek will sing, and Dr. Arbie Orenstein will accompany her on piano and explain the music.

What: A concert featuring Jewish, Broadway, and classical music. (And a dessert reception will follow.)

Where: Congregation B'nai Israel, 53 Palisade Avenue, Emerson

When: Sunday, October 27, at 2 p.m.

How: Reservations and information at the shul office, (201) 265-2272, or buy tickets at the door.

How much: \$25 per ticket



Shira Lissek and her father, Cantor Leon Lissek