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SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



IN CONCERT : Adventures in Concerto Land - Acclaimed Israeli-born and now U.S.-based pianist Alon Goldstein is the guest soloist at this season's final Santa Barbara Symphony program

By JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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SANTA BARBARA SYMPHONY, WITH ALON GOLDSTEIN

When: 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: The Granada, 1214 State St.

Cost: \$32 to \$125

Information: 899-2222, thesymphony.org

For the final concert program of the current Santa Barbara Symphony season, this weekend at The Granada, a certain Israeli root system holds sway. In separate corners of the program's cultural-musical equation are maestro Nir Kabaretti, an Israeli now living in Italy; the guest soloist, pianist Alon Goldstein, an Israeli now living in Maryland; and Israeli composer Avner Dorman, currently teaching at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, whose new-ish "Lost Souls" piano concerto will have its West Coast premiere in town. Adding to the link between the musical parties is a less-than-six-degrees linkage with famed Israeli conductor (and former Los Angeles Philharmonic head) Zubin Mehta, as colleague and mentor.

Dorman's concerto, written expressly for Goldstein and to be heard in only its fifth performance to date, will be the meat in a concerto sandwich, surrounded by the comfier stuff of Dvorak's "Carnival Overture" and Brahms' Fourth Symphony to end the concert, and the season. **But the presence of a new piece on a symphony program, and not just a concert-opening confection, is this program's real claim to fame and curiosity.**

Goldstein has performed with the Santa Barbara Symphony before, during the transition years between former music director Gisele Ben-Dor and Kabaretti's current regime. But that was then and there — playing standard repertoire in the inferior orchestral acoustic interior of the Arlington Theatre. Here and now, Goldstein finds himself in the much more sonically friendly Granada and in the rare context of a brand new piano concerto as a main course in the program.

Those unable to be in the live setting at Saturday night's performance can listen to a live simulcast on KDB-93.7 FM.

Goldstein, 40, studied at the Guildhall School of Music in London and at the Peabody

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Conservatory with the legendary Leon Fleisher, and has the distinction of having made his orchestral debut with the Mehta-led Israeli Philharmonic, when the pianist was 18. **He has gained acclaim, and worked with many noted orchestras and situations, but also maintains a passionate connection to humble circumstances and the power of connecting through music.**

Recently, for instance, he enjoyed a powerfully memorable experience working with a Youth Orchestra in Guatemala, similar to the famed classical music program in Venezuela (made better known here thanks to Venezuelan L.A. Phil conductor Gustavo Dudamel). Goldstein, who blogs about his experience on his website, recalls being asked by a young musician to play something that the pianist could identify with.

On the phone from his home last week, he said "I sat down at the piano in the center of Guatemala. One needs to see this deserted, ugly-looking office building where everyone is there just to have some shelter, with a honky tonky piano and so many hundreds of kids around you, who have not much in life but music, which saves them. I was sitting there and playing the last movement of the Schumann Fantasy, a 15-minute, slow meditation, a prayer for some better future or something. That was such an incredible moment, sitting there."

"I asked the kids 'why did I choose that? Why is this something that I wanted to play?' One said 'this is how you want the world to be.' Another said 'because you see the gates of heaven, with angels leading the way.' They had so many beautiful answers, of internal dialogue that these kids made with the music. It was extraordinary."

In the same discussion with the young Guatemalan musicians, Goldstein recalls that "people asked questions like 'what is your favorite piece and your favorite composer and piece, dah dah dah?' My answer, which is completely honest, is that I spend so many hours with every piece I play, if it's not my favorite, then why would I do it?"

"I spend so many hours by myself and it's quite lonely, or can get quite lonely. It gets very lonely if you don't like the piece. As a pianist, you don't have to take second-rate music. You don't have to take second tier. You can live your life with only first-tier music, masterpieces. So I don't have a favorite. I have favorites. On the 15th and 16th of May, my favorite is going to be the Dorman Concerto No. 2, 'Lost Souls.' Otherwise, I wouldn't sit for so many hours with it."

To hear Goldstein tell it, "Lost Souls," originally facilitated by conductor Michael Stern and his Kansas City Symphony, is an accessible, multi-stylistic, serious yet ironic and fun concerto. Tracing its earliest stage, Goldstein comments "when I spoke with Avner, we had this interesting conversation, which I remember so vividly. One of the things I told him is that when I am asked to play a concerto with an orchestra these days, the concerto most recently written would probably be the Bartok Three. More often, it will be Schumann or Beethoven or Mozart or Rachmaninoff.

"Hasn't there been any good piece written since then? There is a wonderful Lutoslawski concerto, and a very good Corigliano. But I can't really call them repertoire pieces, pieces that have entered the repertoire. So I asked him why that is.

"He decided to write this concerto that kind of asks this question, allows the souls of the concerto to pose questions. Is the genre obsolete? Is the music not good enough? This is why the concerto's first movement is called a 'Séance,' because the orchestra is gathering around and calling on the voices of the past to come and present their case."

Throughout its intentionally varied and polystylistic design, Goldstein says, "there is a certain element of this concerto which is very much of our time. We can have dinner at my house and I can invite just people from the street where I live, and we would probably have someone from Korea, someone from Israel, someone from America and maybe Afghanistan. Put the flags on the table and we would have a little UN. There are certain elements in this concerto where you have these different cultures clashing, or playing with each other."

"I remember Michael Stern, the conductor who was so instrumental in bringing this piece to life, told the percussionists 'you have to feel that you're sitting in the Oak Room in New York, having martinis with Rachmaninoff.' It has these mixtures — jazz with Rachmaninoff and Bach with Frank Zappa."

Even as Goldstein finds himself traversing the usual routes and musical scenarios of a respected concert pianist, he admits that "two of the most extraordinary experiences I had this year were very unexpected. One was this Youth Orchestra in Guatemala. Why do I have to go all the way to Guatemala to see there can be a musical program of five hours a day for kids, without the kids missing on any other education? I went to China and had four concerts there. In every city I played, a whole range of audiences, from 500 to 1,500 seats, and normally, they were 90-percent capacity full. Every time, in a given place, most of them were children."

But, as we know, the strong Chinese connection with classical music — in terms of young musicians and audiences — is a special case in the classical music world at the moment.

"I want America to be the special case," Goldstein exudes. "That's my country. So the special case is Venezuela, Guatemala, China? What happened? We used to be the special case. I became a U.S. citizen, so I really care about these things now. I cared before, but now I am fanatic about it."

Presently, Goldstein's varied life as a musician, educator, orchestra soloist and other ventures makes for a life in career midstream which he describes as "very exciting, very diverse. In some ways, it's unpredictable, but I like it like that. I try to make it not predictable. I'm getting to a point where I try to learn how to say 'no' without feeling guilty, just because I need to take some time for my own contemplations and thinking. But it's very difficult to say no, especially when you want to spread this love of music and the gift of music."

"Being able to play that slow movement of the Schumann Fantasy for people from Guatemala who have no home to go to — wow. I felt like the luckiest person in the world, to give them this gift. It was such an extraordinary high moment." He adds, with a laugh, "I was on drugs for a moment."