**Leonard Bernstein’s “Musical Son” / Tali Sapir-Kastleman**

*Please welcome: Eliad Sharoni, a born Netanyati, 36, professional pianist with a magnificent resume, Martin Erlichman’s (personal manager to Barbra Streisand) new protégé.*

Nothing about the appearance of this bronze-skinned good-looking guy, with his toned muscles and long hair tied back in a tidy pony tail, gives away his profession. If I had to speculate what Eliad Sharoni does, pianist or great musician would certainly not be on my list; more likely, physical trainer or swimmer.

 Eliad, 36, originally from Netanya, is a professional pianist with a magnificent resume and warm recommendations from leading pianists and musicians around the world. Although sports are not foreign to him—indeed, his father was a renowned physical ed. teacher in Netanya, and Eliad himself a prominent athlete—first and foremost, he is a gifted musician.

 We met at Café Basel in Ensino. Noticing the piano there, I could not resist asking him to play something. I caught a glimpse of awkwardness in the young virtuoso’s eyes, but he finally succumbed to our—café owner, Ruchale Notea joined me—pleas for a taste of his talent. He sat down at the piano, closed his eyes, concentrated, and began to play. Suddenly, it seemed like he was in another world.

 **I noticed that before you start playing you close your eyes for a few seconds, is that meditation?**

 “For me an open piano is like an open bible, I sense the sacredness. I feel as if I am a type of conduit from the universe to the keys. The closing of the eyes is a kind of meditation, deep concentration. When my fingers float over the keyboard, I feel a sense of piety.”

 Eliad began his musical path when he was just five years old: “My parents decided to give all of their children an opportunity to play an instrument, I was ‘hooked’ on the keyboard and from an early age I would organize sing-alongs for family and friends. Only when I was older did I get a piano.”

 At age 15, when Eliad returned home after a running contest at school, he saw movers unloading a piano from a truck into his apartment. “At that moment my life changed. Until then, I stood out as an exceptional athlete. From that day on, I devoted myself entirely to playing the piano and I began to perform at hotels in Netanya.”

 A year later, at age 16, Eliad was accepted to the Rubin Academy of Music and Dance in Jerusalem, where he studied for three years and graduated with honors: “During my studies, I dedicated my life to music, I wrote and composed, I was in love with the school.”

 While at the academy, Eliad met the great composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein, whose most famous work is *Westside Story*. “He became my musical father,” Eliad says.

 **The late Leonard Bernstein?**

“A fellow student, whose mother knew Bernstein, set up a private meeting with him at the King David Hotel; we ‘clicked’ immediately. Already at that meeting he listened to me play, and from that time until his death, four years later, our relationship became stronger: he assigned me different musical projects and followed my progress.”

 **It must be flattering to have a musician of Leonard Bernstein’s stature take you on as his protégé, why did he choose you? And believe in you so much?**

“Leonard Bernstein saw how much I invested in my playing, he saw how I disciplined myself during that period. When I was completely immersed in my playing, I hardly ate, I lost weight, I sat for most hours of the day, playing, perspiring. I played until I fell asleep on the keyboard, I didn’t want to waste time away from the piano. Leonard loved me because I was a rare bird, Israeli, Yemenite, from a different background. Unlike the other musicians he nurtured at that time, I did not come from a family of musicians or from a musical culture. He loved me as a human being.”

 In the army, as a truck driver, Eliad, who was disciplined to practice eight to ten hours a day, was forced to neglect the piano. Shortly before Eliad was discharged, Leonard Bernstein passed away, but despite feeling “musically orphaned,” he continued to grow musically.

 “I was very lucky. I played at an event of the Association for the Cultivation of Yemenite Society and Culture at the Netanya Cultural Center where the guest of honor was the German ambassador to Israel, Dr. Hans Nielson. He was there with Dr. Ruth Zucker, a famous author and Holocaust survivor who was 90 at the time. Together they decided to help me develop my career. We are still in touch. Ruth is like a second mother to me, after my biological mother, Tamar, who is a magnificent personality in her own right, an author and poet, my spiritual guide and best friend.”

 **You spent ten years in Germany?**

“I thought I was going for a few months, but right after the first festival I participated in one of the sponsors approached me and suggested that I play at another festival in Palma de Majorca. From then on, many doors opened for me, and it went on and on for ten years.”

 After ten years in Germany, Eliad returned to Israel. Adjusting was not easy at first, despite the fact that he had plenty of work: he composed the music for Mirit Shem-Or’s theater-musical adaptation of the play *HaDybuk*.

 Eliad plays a touching track, “Make me a Miracle,” from the musical. “It’s the part of the play in which the rabbi who’s treating the possessed Leah, asks God for a sign and for help.”

 **Why L.A.? You could have developed your career in Israel.**

“When I came back to Israel, I spent many hours composing and practicing, and then, one day, a neighbor’s brother heard me playing, took samples of my work and gave them to a friend of his in Germany, who passed them on to a Jewish businessman. From there the material made its way to Martin Erlichman, Barbra Streisand’s personal manager, a dear man who’s passed 80. He heard my work and was impressed, so he invited me here, and that’s how I came to L.A. Erlichman believes in my abilities and wants to promote me because he thinks I deserve it.”

 Eliad arrived in L.A. two months ago. He’s staying with his friends (“who are like brothers”), Shauli Ben-Avram and Elitzur Nissim, teaches piano in his free time, and meets up with “good people who really want to help me here.”