**The Pianist /** Tzippi Kappel

Make no mistake, while he may look like an athlete, lifeguard, or musical-theater dancer, Eliad Sharoni (35) is none of these. This young man, crowned with a plethora of ebony locks, is a pianist, composer, writer, music arranger and producer. He has just returned from Germany where he lived for ten years, during which time he became a highly respected figure in the local music scene.

Following his many years abroad, Sharoni returned to Israel not only to find love, get married, and become a father, but also to try and replicate his success in Germany. Sharoni lives in a one-room bungalow in his mother’s backyard where a huge grand piano—beneath which unpacked boxes are stored—occupies most of the space. Surrounding it are an electric organ and meticulously filed documentation of his work and performances—posters, concert programs, newspaper reviews, and photos.

Sharoni returned home with a portfolio of works he composed for piano, works that combine classical music and pop and oriental rhythms. “I have hands, and they are my mouth,” he says, “and what the heart wants, the hands play without limitations of style. I’m a twisted man, and the piano straightens me out.”

**Westside Story**

**Have you been told that you look more like an athlete than a pianist?**

“Yes, and that’s because I’m one of those people whose obsessed with the gymnastics bars we have on the beach. Sure, I know that pianists are usually perceived as pale figures with delicate hands. On the other hand, my father is Shlomo Sharoni, who besides being Margalit Tzanani’s uncle, he’s also the mythological physical ed. teacher from Ussishkin high school. Still today, I’m treated with respect in that area, because I’m his son. He raised the soccer players Shalom Tikva and Benny Lam. He was national running champion in the fifties. All four of us, his kids, got his athletic talent. At school I was running and krav maga champion.”

**Are sports and music a good combination?**

“Sports gave me the balance between playing the piano and the need for a physical outlet. In sports there was the mental fortitude I need as a musician. In sports and music there is the same philosophy of continuity, endurance, perseverance, love, and breaking down the ego.”

**Was there ever a situation in which your achievements in sports overshadowed your achievements in music?**

“When I was in eighth grade. I had already played everything I wanted to play for my friends, and everything they asked me to play. Then the Greental Mountain Race [a local initiative of the Netanya Municipality] was announced. 150 contesters signed up from all the schools in the city. In the race itself, I was among the first fifteen in the lead. I was not especially fit, but I had the drive. When I envisioned the finish line at the end of the arduous mountain trail, it was my drive that kept me going, because that’s what it meant to be the son of an athletic father, to win. I went into first gear. My entire school, Beeri, was ecstatic when I won.”

**In high school, were you more an athlete or a pianist?**

“At Sharett high school in Netanya I was known as a musician, from age fourteen I played for money at hotels in the city, but I was also known as an athlete who won first place in the mid- distance runs, and as a member of the municipal dance group Hora Netanya. At first, I played music, I was the group’s saxophonist, and then, I also danced. Two years later everything changed.”

**What changed?**

“I was accepted to the Rubin Academy of Music and Dance in Jerusalem. I studied there for three years, and graduated with honors. I decided to put all my muscle into the notes. I wrote, composed, and played there, I fell in love with the school and it loved me back. I became their Bruno Martelli, the guy from *Fame*. I was happy. I hooked up with a student there who, in my mind, was a genius and he was my best friend. But he committed suicide. I wrote a piece in his memory. One of the dance students wanted to include it in a project she was working on. One day she called me and told me that her mother, who had heard the tape, said I was brilliant. The mother asked me to visit her at her suite at the Plaza Hotel in Jerusalem. That’s how I met Bernice Weston, the girl’s mother, and a director at one of the largest PR firms in the US, who said to me: ‘On Sunday you’ll meet Leonard Bernstein.’”

**Were you excited?**

“I didn’t know who he was. So I just said ‘thanks.’”

**Are you serious? You didn’t know who Leonard Bernstein was?**

“No. My friends at the academy said I was an idiot, a screw-up, that there was a huge hole in my education. After all, he’s the god of music. But how should I have known that. I slept through all music history classes and I liked completely different types of music.”

**Okay. Describe that Sunday.**

“I arrived at the King David Hotel, waited an hour. Then Leonard Bernstein came down, surrounded by his entourage, wearing a velvet cape, black with red lining, like Superman, and there I was, a mere student. I got up, approached him nonchalantly, shook his hand and introduced myself.”

**And Bernstein?**

“He said to his assistances: ‘we have one more passenger in the limo,’ and put me in the car. We arrived at Binyanei Hauma and I was seated in row five. You need to understand, this was the first time in my life that I attended a classical music concert. Who got me in? Leonard Bernstein. He conducted Dvořák’s ninth symphony, *From the New World*. For me it was a revelation. A royal entry into the world of classical music.”

**And later? Brush your teeth and go to bed, it’s a school night?**

“No way. I joined him for dinner with the president, Haim Herzog. Already throughout the evening, I could tell that Lenny (Leonard Bernstein to you) was always focused on the person he was talking to. In time, I came to realize that he really loved people unconditionally. My adoration and admiration for him were boundless. To me he was a son of God.”

**How did the evening end?**

“We drove to the Diplomat Hotel. At the time, Lenny was already 68 years’ old, but he danced belly dances there. I sat there motionless. Totally in awe. Conductors have a strong hand. He came up to me, grabbed my kneecap, squeezed it and said: ‘Dance.’ So I danced. I was amazed. The world-renowned conductor from New York is wiggling his bottom, and so am I. Toward morning we arrived at his suite. It was quiet after the noise of the dance music. I played the piece I had written in memory of my friend. He listened. Then he started asking me questions about music. ‘Do you know this one? And this? And this?’ I didn’t know any of them. Finally, he asked me if I knew *Westside Story*. I said, no.”

**You’re kidding.**

“That’s what Bernstein thought. He was shocked and shouted out: ‘Shit, you really know nothing.’ I thought that now he’d throw me out of his room, but he didn’t. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘next time you’re doing Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Chopin, and six Beatle songs, to keep an open mind.” He gave me his card. Letters and telephone calls followed. On my birthday, the school director came to the classroom and told me to go to the office where I had a telephone call waiting. ‘Hi, this is Lenny, congratulations Eliad.’ It’s hard to describe how happy and excited I was. He was the one who helped me realize how much I didn’t know. He assigned me musical projects, like a father. For four years, year after year, when he came to Israel, he listened to how much I had progressed.”

**A Halo Above Your Head**

And Eliad did indeed make progress. “I became extremely disciplined. Iron self-discipline. I played classical music six to ten hours a day. I snuck into the practice rooms, made friends with piano students at the academy, and finally made my way to the prominent piano teacher, Luisa Joffe. I said to her: ‘Leonard Bernstein gave me homework, and I want to study with you.’”

**Was Luisa impressed?**

“‘You should thank God for your talent,’ she said, ‘because I’m going to push you.’ She drove me hard. My life changed. My friends were jealous of the fact that Bernstein took an interest in me and nurtured me. They harassed me. I hardly ate. I lost weight. Since I sat most of the day playing, sweating, I developed a tiny boil on my rear end, which was so painful I ended up in the hospital. This was a period of time in which I fell asleep at the keyboard, I didn’t want to waste time away from the piano.”

When Bernstein returned to see Eliad’s progress, he was shocked. “He was amazed at how thin I’d become,” Eliad recalls. “‘I didn’t think you’d work so hard,’ Bernstein said, but continued to set goals for me. It is a known fact that Bernstein nurtured an entire generation of young Israeli musicians, but I was different, I was the only Yemenite among musicians from Russia and Romania, who were practically born with an instrument in their hands. In his eyes, I was a kind of Salt of the Earth.”

**And then he passed away.**

“That’s right, he was the greatest and most versatile talent to come out of America, and he was the pinnacle of openness toward music. He was a chain smoker and drank whiskey. That was his vice. When he died, I was a soldier, and by some uncanny circumstance, it was the first thing I heard when I switched the radio on to hear the morning news. I cried and mourned him because he was my musical father and he loved me like a son. He gave me the strength to believe that there is a spark within me. I was by no means just another one of the young musicians he was attentive to. It was a pure bond between two human beings.”

**But still, you went to study in Germany, not the US.**

“It was a matter of luck and coincidence. I was playing at an event sponsored by the Association for the Cultivation of Yemenite Society and Culture at the Netanya Cultural Center. The guest of honor was Dr. Hans Nielson, then German ambassador to Israel, who spoke perfect Hebrew. Sitting next to him was his friend, Dr. Ruth Zucker. They both looked at me in a way that seemed to say ‘Okay, we’ll take him under our wings.’ After the concert, Ruth said to me, ‘I saw a halo over your head.’ She hit me like a life-changing explosion.”

**Explain.**

“I was 23 at the time, and I knew that I wanted to study and develop abroad. It took a year until she made use of her good contacts on my behalf, and became my second mother, after my mother, Tamar, who has always been the greatest spiritual influence in my life.”

**Where did she manage to send you?**

“I participated in masterclasses with Peter Poischwenger at the international Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival. Soon after, I attended a masterclass with Giora Fiedman, the world’s most celebrated klezmer, an Israeli who is a star in Germany, a clarinetist whose music was part of the score for *Schindler’s List*. Freidman is partially blind and wears telescopic eye glasses. He can hardly see the musicians he calls on to play. One day he called on me, I played a piece of my own. He listened, and then said: ‘Now play with your tongue.’ I pressed a few keys with my tongue. Slowly, slowly, I played. I was shocked. It was the most intimate experience. When I was done, I lifted my face from the keyboard and stuck my tongue back into my mouth. And then he said, ‘Now play as if you have ten tongues.’ He taught me how to pray through playing. ‘Now pray for us,’ he said, ‘as if you’re in Jerusalem.’ I played, and the tune was like a knife cutting through the air. I cried. He guided me to such a high level of expression, which is more than just technique. It was a moment that defined me as a musician. A validation. We became kindred musicians. Soon after, we played a piece I composed together in concert. I accompanied him on piano.”

**Coming Home**

**In short, you stayed in Germany.**

“I thought I was going to Germany for three months. The next turn of events occurred at the first festival I participated in whose many sponsors applauded me. One of them approached me and said, ‘When you played, I saw a halo over your head.’ I remembered what Ruth had said. He proposed I play at an upcoming event in Palma de Majorca attended by people from the worlds of film, philosophy, music, and finance, including the [now former] German Minister of the Interior, Otto Schily. When the sponsor realized I was a Jew from Israel he said that the topic of the event was ‘the artist as a moral being,’ and asked that I not only play, but that I speak about my life in Israel, and that’s what happened. At the end of the evening, I was handed many business cards, all from the Hamburg area, and so it became clear that that was the direction I was going in.”

**How did you manage? Where did you live?**

“For a year I lived at Waterzen Castle, a 300-year-old fort. I lived like a prince, the house guest of a very wealthy man, a patron of music. I met a lot of people from the worlds of industry, trade, politics, and culture, most of whom did not know how to ‘swallow’ this black-haired boy, an Israeli of Yemenite origin, who, believe it or not, plays the piano. I assume that guilt feelings from the Holocaust motivated them to nurture me. I received scholarships, studied piano at the Hamburg Conservatory, and although I did not speak a word of German, I adapted quickly. Today, I speak fluent German. During the first five years, I performed, and gave radio and television interviews, but in 1997, when my mother phoned to tell me that my grandfather’s days were numbered, I decided to come back to Israel, because I had missed my grandmother’s funeral, I wanted a chance to say goodbye.”

**What did you find in Israel?**

“A well-known impresario. One day I went to meet him. I played for him, and then he gave me a heavy book, full of texts. ‘I’ve had this for five years,’ he said, ‘and I couldn’t find the right person to compose and arrange music for it. It was a play that had been performed many times in Israel before, but now he wanted to adapt it into an amazing musical. I took the book and went home. When I got there, I was told that my grandfather had died.”

**What did you think at that moment?**

“That it is a sign and that when my grandfather reached heaven, the gates opened for me. I called the impresario and told him. ‘Sit, write,’ he said. I wrote the music. He flew to my sponsor in Germany who was amazed by what I had written and decided to record ten songs. The lead soloists in the production of *Phantom of the Opera* in Hamburg are the vocalists on that disc. I took it to Broadway, and met with interested, enthusiastic parties who said, ‘come back with ten million dollars, a producer, and impresario, and it will be a hit.’”

**Did you?**

“You make me laugh. Where from? I’m anonymous in America. In Germany and America I’m what you call a ‘representative of the new generation in music’ and it’s hard to break ‘big time’ into the public awareness. It was frustrating.”

**So that’s it, you gave up and now you’re here?**

“Look, for ten years I lived in a mentality that is the complete opposite of the Israeli mentality. Ten years is practically a second childhood, and it is natural for me to speak German and act politely and cordially when necessary when I’m with closed and introverted people. But I had had enough. I was already starting to feel like a German who speaks Hebrew. The Germans like to hit the brakes and only sometimes, the accelerator. I’m the opposite. They’re all dear and calculated gentiles, and I’m a foreign, talented alien who has no other aliens like him to go home to at the end of the day. On the other hand, I toughened up because I took all the good things Germany has to offer. The precision, order, discipline, perseverance, together with my Israeli-Yemenite personality, made me a worldly man.”

**So you decided to come back?**

“Certainly. Germany lacks the *joie de vie* I need, the closeness and human warmth. I felt that I needed to return, to find my place here and continue to develop my musical career from here. I’ve been in Israel for some months now. Now I live on the sea and music. At the beach I work out, and at home I play, compose, and think. I am certainly seeking a new path here.”

**And what do you want most?**

“Besides falling in love and starting a family? To be ‘Fiddler on the Roof No. 2.’ To find success.”