

Not of this world

Evgeny Kissin recited the Declaration of Independence with raw Zionist pathos and then swept the audience away by playing Chopin.

By Ariel Hirschfeld

Last week, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem awarded an honorary doctoral degree to the famed Russian-Jewish pianist Evgeny Kissin. Kissin was one of 10 scholars who were similarly honored this year by the university.

I will not, at the moment, relate to the question of honor - either in general or in particular. I prefer to write about Kissin's presence at an event in the festive Mexico Building on Mount Scopus, before the actual degree-conferral ceremony (traditionally held in the campus amphitheater).

The first event consisted of a string of speeches and short lectures delivered by the award recipients. Most of the remarks consisted, naturally, of flowery words of gratitude befitting such an occasion. The exceptions were the riveting comments by writer Ronit Matalon (though this is not the place to discuss them) and the remarks by Evgeny Kissin.

Following several well-known, brilliant, sharp-tongued scholars whose words were laced with skeptical irony, it was Kissin's turn to speak. A youngish man with a boyish face and thick mane of hair, he did not read from a prepared text, but - like a boy who has learned his lines for some sort of dramatic pageant - delivered in English with a thick Russian accent an emotional speech of love for Israel and for Jerusalem.

At peak moments he switched to Hebrew: These included recitation of a lengthy passage from Israel's Declaration of Independence and Psalm 137 ("If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. / If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy"). He uttered the words with great pathos and in the same thick Russian accent, sounding exactly like the emotional speech-makers of Zionism during its heroic times, particularly in the years after World War II and around when the state was being established.

The resemblance to the voices of those speakers, especially to that of Ben-Gurion, was deep, precise and harrowing. Anyone who did not notice this (because of his young age or lack of familiarity with the memories of this place) thought the speaker was an eccentric. I also saw people stifling a sudden guffaw.

But anyone who noticed the similarity felt an astonishment that was not without fright, in the face of something whole, salient, abounding in emotion and sincerity, belonging to a different world that existed more than two generations ago (but was actually played out in the 19th century) - suddenly uttered by a young man, very much alive, drawing on his life, the Bible, Zionist history and the press. Ancient Zionism. Naive. Emotional and totally personal. There was nothing "right wing" about this. It was pure Zionism and, at the same time, totally apolitical.

Upon concluding his amazing remarks, Kissin sat down at the piano which had been opened for him (a big Steinway, usually reserved for accompanying university ceremonies), and without a pause or transition stretched out his hands to the keyboard and played Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor.

Even the most extremely thrilling words dissipate like empty shells in the face of this. It was fiery playing, a spectacular and extraordinarily interesting rendition of the scherzo; mature, very tasteful and bold. The person who emerged from this work was something between a lion and a young girl. The range of powerfulness and of the tones produced by this pianist was extreme. He moved from the stoniest textures to the thinnest and airiest, with complete naturalness, utterly convincing. Or, even better: He illustrated by his playing that it is possible.

If only we could have heard what this piano whispered to itself during those minutes. A mute presence at the back of the stage during most of the year, it was suddenly called upon to produce a tidal wave of sound, was stretched to the limits of its ability. Never did it bear witness to such gentleness. A spirit of sublimity passed through the hall. The playing shattered the ceremony. When it was over, the whole audience stood up, overwrought.

I am not glorifying this performance at the expense of the achievements of the scholars who were there. But in those moments they were far from their moments of enlightenment, and like the entire audience were caught up in a ceremony, which like every festive event is stultified by politeness and rules of decorum that have absolutely nothing in common with the heavenly tempestuousness of feeling that is innate in art. Those minutes were a rare lesson in the surprising, destructive, mocking, cutting power of art when it is suddenly revealed in all its fullness, in the way it slashes vertically through life's being.

When the applause ended, Kissin returned to his seat. A youngish man, odd, with a boy's face and a thick mane of hair. The program was then resumed.

What are we to make of this spectacle? The strange speech, which seemed to come from other times, and the playing, which above all was daring. And even if the music dates back almost two centuries - nothing in it is old or not up-to-date. It was totally contemporary playing of Chopin. Kissin does not return to familiar modes of interpretation, nor is he eccentric in the least; a clear personal note

sounds in his playing. If he can be compared to any of his great predecessors, then he recalls precisely the young Rubinstein of the 1930s. Not Rachmaninoff, not Horowitz, not Michelangeli. But Kissin has a clear note, a force and even a forcefulness which could transform his playing into crude extroversion, were it not interwoven with extraordinary nobility - a nobility that is stronger than forcefulness.

Furthermore, Kissin's speech did not belong to the ordinary world of ideas, rather to the special realm that deserves to be called the world of ideas of the musicians, as distinct from the world of ideas of writers, poets and also philosophers. It seems to me that we can discern the clear influence of music on their consciousness; theirs is a true, idealistic way of being. Theirs is an innocence which is manifested in gestures in which there is no place for irony, the naive as defined by Friedrich Schiller: a completeness, like Achilles or Hector in "The Iliad." The musicians, who every day live the scores of Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Brahms, bring to the world of words something that exists only between the chords: total sincerity.

Without the playing, the words (including the political views) of Toscanini, Walter, Lehmann, Casals, Barenboim or Kissin would resemble those of Dostoevsky's idiot: ideals divorced from any contact with the ordeals of existence, politics, passion, folly and wickedness. In tandem with the music, however, one suddenly understands not only why they speak in this way, but also that the music lends their words a conceptual anchor - or, really, a kind of basis within which such verbalizing is perceived to be possible.

Without the playing, Kissin's words would have been embarrassing; alongside it, they were daring.