

# THE JERUSALEM POST

Jazz pianist Alon Nechushtan veers into a variety of musical directions.



By BARRY DAVIS 08/14/2014 16:30

Alon Nechushtan has covered some ground to get where he is today. Nechushtan has been living in the US for around a decade and, by all accounts, appears to have made the most of his time there. Following sage advice from fellow Jerusalem-born pianist Yitzhak Yedid, Nechushtan enrolled at the prestigious New England Conservatory in Boston and studied with such masters as pianists Ran Blake and Paul Bley, who had also tutored Yedid.

Opting for NEC was something of a seismic career and artistic shift for Nechushtan. "I had no idea what contemporary improvisation was before I went to NEC," says Nechushtan. "When I was at the academy, all I knew about [outside pure classical music] was third stream." The latter is a term coined by composer Gunther Schuller in the late 1950s, which relates to a fusion of classical music and jazz.

"I took a klezmer course, too," he says. "That definitely broadened my horizons. Before that, I thought it was Eastern European music played at weddings. I never thought I could seriously

study klezmer repertoire." While at the Boston school, Nechushtan got some hands-on experience of the genre and played in the New England Conservatory Klezmer Band. "That is one of the most acclaimed klezmer ensembles in the world, alongside the Klezmatics," he notes.

World-famous Jewish New Yorker trumpeter Frank London, a member of the Klezmatics, will present a workshop at the annual Klezmer Festival, which will take place in Safed from August 18 to 20, and will also perform at the Jerusalem Sacred Music Festival early next month.

The breadth of Nechushtan's stylistic hinterland certainly comes across in his latest release, *Venture Bound*, which came out a couple of months ago. The nine self-penned tracks cover expansive sonic and dynamic ground. In "Dark Damsel," the pianist delves deep into Middle Eastern territory, enlisting the help of Moroccan-born oud player Brahim Bigbane. And there are several quotes from "Morenica," an old Ladino song best known for the versions by Esther Ofarim, Ofra Haza and Habreira Hativit.

The "Haunted Blues" cut on *Venture Bound* is just that, and the melody is steeped with heady blues textures and rhythms, with the odd rock-inclined departure. The closing number of the album, "Serpentrails," references one of Nechushtan's primary sources of inspiration – iconic bebop pioneer pianist Thelonious Monk. Nechushtan has clearly ventured far and wide since his days at the academy in Jerusalem. "When I told people there that I wanted to do a master's degree in improvised music, there were quite a few raised eyebrows," he recounts. "Most of the people there thought that if you started studying in a particular direction, you should complete it." Mind you, that doesn't mean that the pianist has forsaken his musical roots. "I continue to write classical music and orchestral works," he says, "but I also incorporate jazz and improvised sections. It feels right to delve into different areas, and it feels more complete." Nechushtan says it is very much a two-way street and that he plies his offerings across all kinds of domains. "I include improvised passages in my classical works and, of course, there are many written parts in jazz works. I am considering releasing an album in the near future with [trumpeter] Roy Campbell and [bassist] William Parker." The pianist says that he increasingly goes with the flow.

There are out-and-out avant-garde artists whose work is generally considered to be too challenging for people who prefer to get their musical kicks from the commercial and mainstream areas of entertainment. But Nechushtan swings – frequently literally, in a musical sense – all ways. "I write and play very communicative music and also noncommunicative music and written music and music without a written score," he notes. "My upbringing in classical music and jazz enables me to enjoy the best of all worlds." *Venture Bound* represents a degree of closure and summation for Nechushtan. "The CD is a sort of homage to the almost 10 years I have spent in New York, so the album is a salute to pianists whom I have heard in New York and pianists and composers that have influenced me," he explains.

"One of them is [late French pianist Michel] Petrucciani, and there's Thelonious Monk as well, whom I strongly reference on the album. I have lots of influences, including Israeli and Jewish influences. It all flows through me and infuses my music."