

ALUMNI Are Forever

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Focus on Faculty: Zvi Plesser

Who even knew that Johann Sebastian wrote a series of suites for the cello in the 1700s? - Not many people; at least for two hundred years after he died. The suites were abandoned almost entirely; in a couple of European conservatoires they were used as practice pieces and considered too difficult for the concert stage. Then, just over a century ago the great Catalonian cellist Pablo Casals discovered the manuscripts and dusted them off; since then any cellist worth his bow has moved his fingers furiously to perfect the six movements of each one.

Professor Zvi Plesser was only a little boy when he heard Casals' magical rendition of the six suites; and the experience arguably changed his life. "I was the third of four children," he smiles, "and my scientist father, who was also an amateur musician, decreed that we all had to learn an instrument." The violin was already taken, the family apartment was too small to house a piano; Zvi played the recorder. His teacher recognized his connection to the lower registers and offered the cello; Plesser recalled Casals and agreed.



Prof. Zvi Plesser

photo: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco



Zvi and his students on the road

It was an inspired choice: at only 17 Plesser debuted on the world's most famous stage at a birthday bash for Isaak Stern; the youngster played Carnegie Hall alongside the legendary Stern and Pinchas Zukerman. Three years later he was back – this time under the baton of Zubin Metha with the Julliard Symphony Orchestra. And all this before he was legally allowed to have a beer to celebrate.

Plesser, who started teaching at JAMD when he was in his late twenties chaired the Strings Department and directed the Nazarian Chamber Music Program. He is a Master Cellist and sought-after soloist as well as a Chamber Musician and Music Director who, in pre-Covid days, buzzed around the world making music in Washington and London, Shanghai, Mexico, Australia and Thailand and almost everywhere in between. A graduate of the Julliard School in New York he gives Master Classes and workshops in a multitude of exotic

locations, appears in concerts and festivals frequently, teaches in too many places to mention, including the Perlman Music Program in the US, plays on the radio and on TV and regularly records with the world's top labels. His accolades would fill five newsletters but he is most proud of his Covid challenge of taking his students on the road for a series of socially distanced concerts on Kibbutzim in the north, between lockdowns.

As for those Bach suites – go on and Google them. There's conspiracy (did he really write them or should credit go to wife Anna Magdalena?) and there's detail and there's majestic description: the compositions have been called "Monophonic music wherein a man has created a dance of God."

Zvi Plesser brings God's dance into men's ears. And women's.

May we all be dancing and concerting and travelling and thrilling to live music very, very soon.

Prof. Zvi Plesser performing at the "Violins of Hope" Concert with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra:

<https://youtu.be/UfpEJgVvGfM>

The Cello class of Prof. Zvi Plesser at JAMD:

<https://youtu.be/JEiX-LLXzvM>

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Here's a little known factoid: the word "alumnus" originally had two meanings in Latin: 'foster son' or 'pupil.' It comes from the Proto-Indo-European *h₂el- (grow, nourish), and is closely related to the Latin verb alo (to nourish). Separate, but from the same root, is the adjective almus (nourishing), as in Alma Mater, a title for an enriching institution in every lucky person's life – the university.

Alumni Associations are cozy-wozy constructs that keep past and present students connected and give them a friendly push on the path to success. Some are obviously more famous than others: Princeton's Alumni Association boasts two Presidents of the United States and three honorable Justices on the US Supreme Court. Harvard, Stanford, Oxford and others have equally distinguished graduates, who show their appreciation to their nourishing motherhood by donating scholarships, mentoring students, providing networking and facilities, and more.

The Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance stands proud with the best educational facilities in the world when it comes to satisfied, well-trained, professional and stand-out students. And yet, up until recently, there has been no Alumni Association; no framework in which graduates could share success stories, invite peers to plays or concerts, hear news of new students needing a boost, or just chat. Not to mention move a little money in the direction of the Alma Mater, to boost a struggling student, or donate a new classroom or chair.



Claudio Marcelo Kogon, Chairman of the JAMD Alumni Association and Deputy Director at Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance and Theatre

photo: Avi-Evan



Adv. Amina Harris, Chairman of the JAMD International Board of Governors virtual conference

photo: Ziv-Hadashi

Enter Amina Harris, Attorney and Chairman of the JAMD Board of Governors. "The idea of an Alumni Association had been bandied about for years," she says. "I decided it was time to get it done." The Board concurred; President of the Academy, Professor Yinam Leef, gave his blessing. Professor Michael Klinghoffer, Vice President and professor of Double Bass was co-opted to run the coordinating team and Claudio Marcelo Kogon, an Academy graduate and today Deputy Director of the Tel Aviv Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance and Theatre, happily accepted the offer to head the organization.

Klinghoffer and Kogon, and JAMD's indefatigable, efficient administrator Shir Taieb, reached out to some 2 000 graduates from the last ten years; over 300 have responded already. The goal is to get to everyone who has strummed a violin or tuned a cello in the hallowed halls of the Academy; everyone who has pirouetted or sung in syncopated time. It is simply a matter of obtaining emails and contact details from decades ago – the search is on. As alumni sign up the activities will expand: the first newsletter has already been circulated.

"We want to create a community where we can offer great performance venues, solutions for artistic issues, networking opportunities and take care of specific needs for example like in this time of Covid," explains Prof. Klinghoffer. Kogon concurs. "JAMD is like a greenhouse," he says. "We have small classes which breed very intense relationships. For four years we study together, sweat together, laugh and cry together for eight hours a day. Despite often going on to study at other institutions abroad, the Academy remains our treasured space."

Kogon, who is a trained dancer, worked for twelve years with the Israel Association of Community Centres and knows firsthand that lots of the teachers working with today's youth are graduates of JAMD. "After you receive you must give back," he suggests. "We aim to create a community that can take care of each other, create opportunities for all, and enable people to drop in and say hello to each other – for example at the Suzanne Dellal Centre."

Ideas for the future include alumni donating 30 shekel a month towards a scholarship fund, providing exhibition and rehearsal spaces, and opening doors for each other.

Kogon, who as an Arts Administrator and today "dances around his papers," has a lot to say about closing theatres while 400 people were allowed to fly to the Seychelles in a plane for six hours. "Artists are the voice of the people," he claims. "And that voice is not always a welcome one for the Government."

But that's another newsletter.



From the Alumni Association virtual conference