

In the Clouds—Universal Theater Springing From a Jewish Impulse

Russian-born composer Mátti Kovler dreams big in the Berkshires

BY CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN



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At first glance, it may appear that composer Mátti Kovler has his head in the clouds. After all, his Brooklyn-based theater company is called [Floating Tower](#), its name based on the kabbalistic image of a tower materializing out of thin air, suggesting something that can only be felt, not touched.

Kovler has a dream: to establish a center for the

development of a new Jewish musical theater, right here in the Berkshires. And that dream is firmly based in the down-to-earth reality that the Berkshires is a world-renowned cultural mecca.



Mátti Kovler performs at TurnPark, where he serves as artistic director, in an interactive installation by artist Shami Shinogi.

PHOTO BY BEAU BERNATCHEZ

He should know. Since receiving his doctorate from the New England Conservatory in Boston, Kovler has been the recipient of many prestigious awards and commissions, including positions as both fellow and composer-in-residence at Tanglewood. During his time at the Music Center, he fell in love with the area, and he has been spending time here every summer since.

The Russia-born, Israel-bred Kovler composed his first opera at the age of 17. He then studied as an undergraduate under the famed composer and musicologist Andrei Hajdu. A specialist in Jewish music, “Hajdu was very much the outsider in the music world,” says Kovler. “In the Jewish world he was religious, yet religious Jews were always skeptical. He was also highly educated and a student of philosophy and was very inspirational for all of his students.”

Hajdu had a core group of students who became interested in the world of Hasidic music. Kovler was one of them.

“This is where I got my interest in Hasidic nigguns, or melodies. I connected to the nigguns mostly musically, not necessarily trying to find spirituality. The nigguns were unlike any other folk melodies that I was looking into.

“We worked in a team, in a very collaborative, very creative process. This is where I got the idea to do unusual musical theater that is inspired by Jewish narrative but yet doesn’t sound like any of what you normally call Jewish music.”

One of the first plays Kovler produced with his fellow students was Quill of the Soul. “The idea of the original Quill of the Soul was to take the Hasidic nigguns in completely different directions, inspired by Gershwin, Bartok, Sephardic music, Moroccan tunes, whatever.”

And in different directions it did go. While serving as the Elie Wiesel composer-in-residence at Boston University, Kovler recreated the opera. The texts in the play are now in Hebrew, Sanskrit, and Farsi, and its musical numbers “begin as a niggun and then become a text by [Sufi master] Rumi, both with the same meaning about the soul that descends. And then it becomes a song in Sanskrit with very similar meaning. Then, at the end of the performance you realize how universal is the human need to express the soul.”

Although Kovler comes from what he describes as a “highly secular Soviet background,” he continually draws upon the power of music to evoke emotion. And while many of his productions spring from a Jewish impulse, they aim to speak to a universal audience. He founded Floating Tower in 2011 with the mission to create and produce musical-theater experiences that transcend boundaries of language, geography, or history.

His works have been performed throughout the United States and in Israel, the Netherlands, China, and Russia, and range from chamber music to opera, with orchestral works, chamber music, film, and dance in the mix. Ami and Tami, a Jewish take on Hansel and Gretel, recently played at the Edinburgh Festival, while political satire *The Drumpf* and *the Rhinegold* played last summer to packed audiences at West Stockbridge's TurnPark Art Space, a new sculpture park and cultural hub Kovler serves as its artistic director.

[TurnPark](#) may seem an odd place for a world-traveling composer, but when he met its founders, Igor Gomberg and Katya Brezgunova, at a Boston fundraiser, their dream of creating a sculpture park resonated. The couple approached him and asked him to do some musical events at their venue.

As he describes it, “They came here five years ago and looked around for locations and found that the Berkshires were a cultural center—very much like when Koussevitzky came here and saw the birch trees and Tanglewood, only a hundred years later. They saw the same birch trees and wanted to create a community. I said yes.”

“I’ve always thought that there is a future to Jewish musical theater beyond *Fiddler on the Roof*. With *Floating Tower*, I wanted to do things inspired by my work with Hajdu, yet are more theatrical in their essence and also can speak to audiences. You don’t have to be Jewish to appreciate it.”

Kovler envisions “a little laboratory” where new Jewish musical theater can be developed, “a big umbrella that can bring together these different inspirations: Hasidic music, Yemeni music, Moroccan music, different types of vocal styles, traditional theater texts, and Jewish mythology.” And, unlike Brooklyn, “The Berkshires are quiet, perfect for composing. You can just work on something, and there’s no phone service.”



TurnPark

Inhabitants of the Childhood, Exhibit by Uta Bekaia, opening reception with Matti Krovler's *Floating Tower*, July 1, noon.

Popular Science Cycle of Lectures, The first lecture in this series, "The Jewish Genes," by Dr. Maxim Frank-Kamenetskii, professor of biomedical engineering at Boston University. July 7, noon.

Phoenicia Flea, This nomadic market of makers and merchants runs August 3-4, 11 a.m.-6p.m.

"We Are All One" Contemporary dance performance by Gina Bashour, August 25-26, noon and 3 p.m.

*This article appears in the [July 2018](#) issue of [TownVibe Berkshire](#)
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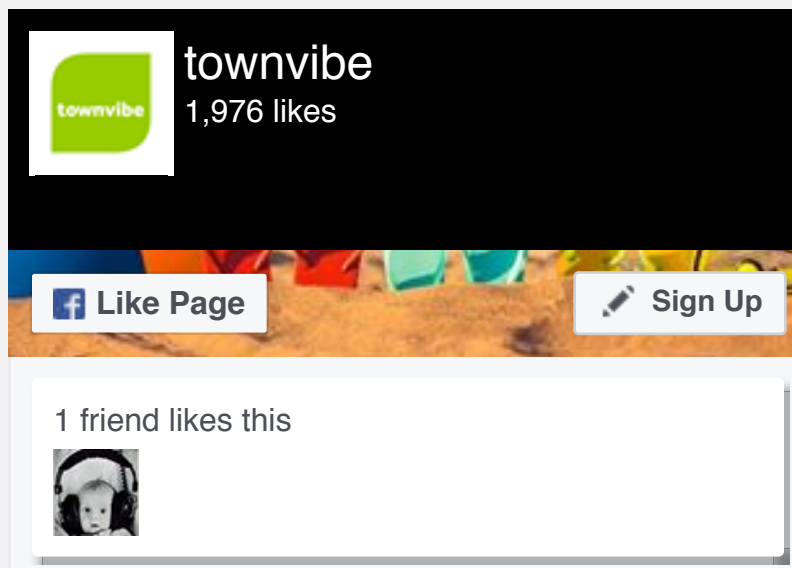
Artist Stephanie Jaffe painstakingly turns shards into exquisite art



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10:00 AM - 11:00 AM	Walking Tour: The Revolutionary War	▼
10:00 AM - 5:00 PM	TibetFest 2018	▼
10:00 AM - 4:00 PM	Lyndhurst Mansion Tours	▼
10:00 AM - 3:15 PM	Rockefeller Estate Tours	▼
10:00 AM - 4:00 PM	The Culper Ring: The Spies of George Washington	▼
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM	Grand Opening of Little Free Library at Lake Waramaug	▼
10:00 AM - 12:00 PM	Little Free Library Grand Opening at Lake Waramaug	▼
10:00 AM - 4:00 PM	Garden Conservancy Open Days Program Tour - Fairfield County	▼
10:00 AM - 12:30 PM	Free Outdoor Power Yoga Class	▼
11:00 AM - 5:00 AM	Mayday by Barbara Vaughn	▼
11:00 AM - 3:00 PM	Up Close & Personal with MARvelous Mar Jennings at Green Isle	▼
12:00 PM - 6:00 PM	Connecticut Taco Festival	▼
12:00 PM - 5:00 PM	Gallery 25 Features "Our Towns" Exhibit	▼
12:30 PM - 5:30 PM	Oswaldo Borsani: Designs for Tecno	▼
4:00 PM - 6:00 PM	Carol Brightman Johnson Art Opening	▼
5:30 PM - 8:00 PM	Her Window to the World - Greenfield Hill Art Pop Up	▼
7:30 PM - 3:30 PM	Daniel's Art Party Performing Arts Festival	▼
7:30 PM	SHAKESPEARE ON THE SOUND—A Midsummer Night's Dream	▼
8:00 PM - 10:00 PM	Bobby Sweet	▼

- 8:00 PM - 10:00 PM | **Unspoken** ▼
- 8:00 PM - 9:30 PM | **DR. K'S MOTOWN REVUE** ▼
- 8:30 PM - 10:00 PM | **Songs for Charming Strangers** ▼
- Sister Act, Westchester Broadway Theatre** ▼
- Expressionism in Print: The Early Works of Richard Haas, 1957 - 64** ▼
- FTC Comedy Presents: Mark Normand at StageOne** ▼
- Kiss Me Kate** ▼
- ComicConn** ▼
- Bedford Area Fireworks** ▼
- 9:00 AM - 1:00 PM | **Great Barrington Arts Market** ▼
- 9:00 AM - 9:00 PM | **OWL Reads! 2nd Annual Adult Summer Reading Program** ▼
- 10:00 AM - 5:00 PM | **Carol Brightman Johnson Opens in the Loft Gallery** ▼
- 10:00 AM - 5:00 PM | **Garden Menagerie** ▼
- 10:30 AM - 5:30 PM | **"Burn Baby Burn" exhibition opens June 28th** ▼
- 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM | **Short on Time Book Club** ▼
- 7:30 PM - 9:00 PM | **Orange Star Smasharoo! Country Western Dinner Theater Farce** ▼
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