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May 8, 2006 22:15 | Updated May 9, 2006 13:20

## Cooper's cultural continuum

By [BARRY DAVIS](#)

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There's an old joke about Sammy Davis Jr. that describes the crooner-comedian responding to a moaning pal: You think you've got problems? I'm black, got only one eye and I'm Jewish." While Dr. Kristina Reiko Cooper isn't quite in that "predicament" her multicultural roots, are to say the least, impressive.

Cooper, a classical cellist and sometime professor at the prestigious Juilliard School of music and dance in New York, is here to perform in a concert at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance (JAMD) on May 10. The event is a sort of warm-up act before she takes on a one-year teaching position at the Jerusalem establishment in October.

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Both Cooper's parents are of Japanese origin and she was born and raised in the States. If that weren't enough cultural baggage, she recently converted to Judaism, largely because her partner is Jewish. Rather than feeling encumbered by such a diverse ethnic milieu Cooper says this has worked to her advantage.

"I love being all kinds of things. Obviously the Jewish influence is much more recent, but I feel it enriches my perspective on life." Her natural and acquired cultural breeding, she adds, may have helped to keep her focused on the job in hand. "I think Asians and Jews produce so many wonderful classical musicians because they are so family oriented. That keeps the children concentrating on their practice and their music."

Cooper is also looking forward to taking on even more cultural influences during her time in Israel. "It has been fascinating learning about Judaism over the past couple of years," she says over salad at the Jerusalem Cinematheque, fittingly overlooking the walls of the Old City. "I'm only sorry that, due to concerts and other professional obligations, I didn't have enough time with my tutor. I expect to be picking up more about my new religion while I'm in Israel."

There was never really any doubt about what career path Cooper would take. With a pianist mother and violinist father as a young girl she naturally gravitated, or was directed, towards both instruments. It was only when, as a teenager, she opted for the cello that she found her own musical voice and the freedom to embark on her own artistic explorations. "With the cello I knew I wouldn't be told what to do," she recalls. "That was my instrument, not my parents."

Now 35, you couldn't really say Cooper is a product of her times. In musical terms, she grew up almost exclusively in a classical world. "I never watched TV and I didn't listen much to commercial music on the radio," she notes - although she didn't quite live in a cocoon. "I know who Duran Duran are," she offers.

Cooper comes here with impressive credentials. She has a doctorate in music from Juilliard where she has also taught and has performed across the globe, from Japan and China to El Salvador, Germany and, of course, throughout the States. She has 15 albums and a clutch of DVDs to her name and has worked extensively in TV and radio, including commercials. "It was sort of weird, to begin with, to do commercials, with all the make-up, props and lighting, and all that other stuff. But I actually enjoy it." Presumably, it also helps to pay bills. "Yes, it's quite well paid work," Cooper acknowledges.

While legendary Spanish cellist Pablo Casals was known for his masterly reading of Bach's Cello Suites, and Mstislav Rostropovich is recognized as one of the best



Classical cellist Kristina Cooper, an American of Japanese descent, explores new identity as a Jew.  
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interpreters of works by Benjamin Britten and Prokofiev, Cooper takes the eclectic route. "I don't have a favorite composer," she says, "or even a favorite style or period. I play contemporary works as well as pieces by Haydn or Mozart. It doesn't matter to me who wrote the work."

Cooper is eager to take on her teaching duties at the JAMD, and says she is as keen to listen to her students and other local musicians as she is to impart her own acquired knowledge. "I would love to learn more about ethnic music from the Middle East, and to see what I can do with it," she says. "This is going to be a great year."

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