

Well-tuned

What motivates international cellist Kristina Reiko Cooper is love. That's what led her to convert to Judaism and leave New York for Tel Aviv, and that's why she's maintaining a superb relationship with her cello, which she nicknamed Bonaparte

By Galit Hatan / Photos by Vardi Kahana

Cellist Kristina Reiko Cooper is accustomed to appearing before thousands of people and thrilling them with the complex works she plays, but she arrived nearly bereft of self-confidence for her "appearance" at her conversion test before four strict rabbis in Queens, New York. "It was about a year and a half ago," she says. "As I was waiting for my turn inside, the woman who went was in the room with the rabbis started to cry and scream.

"It turned out that they had failed her and informed her that she had to go back to study for another year, and during that time, she was forbidden to be in contact with her boyfriend – no telephone calls, no letters, no e-mails. I heard all this and thought to myself: 'What a nightmare.' I felt as if they were about to behead me.

"When I went into the room with my rabbi, the four rabbis were shouting at each other in Yiddish and didn't pay any attention to me. My rabbi began to present me: 'And this is Kristina Reiko Cooper, she plays the cello and she's about to marry Len Rosen (the managing director of Lehman Brothers Israel – *G.H.*) and they didn't listen to him at all.

"But then, suddenly, the oldest of the rabbis turned to me and asked, 'Cello? You're a cellist?' I shyly answered yes, and then he said, 'Oh, I like the cello very much. Do you know Dvorak's Cello Concerto?' and he started to hum it. I told him I had just been practicing it that very morning and that I was supposed to play it at a concert in a few weeks. He turned to the other rabbis and said to them, 'Did you hear that? She plays

Dvorak's Cello Concerto.' One of them asked, 'Dvorak? Did you know he conducted his symphony in Carnegie Hall?' and I answered yes. They were very nice to me after that."

Why did you decide to convert?

"Although I never had any connection to religion, I was always interested in Judaism – most of my friends were Jewish and Israeli. I met my husband, Len, six years ago. True, in the beginning we hardly found the time to see each other – two months went by before we had our first date because both of us were traveling all the time. But once the relationship got more serious, I began to look into Judaism in a practical way and for two years, I took private lessons with Orthodox rabbis."

Cooper, 36, passed the conversion test and shortly afterward married Rosen, who is 45. About a year ago, they moved to Tel Aviv where they live in Akirov Towers.

The rabbis may not have known this, but at the age of 22, Cooper had already been hailed as "sensational" by The New York Times. She holds a doctorate from the prestigious Juilliard School, appears in recitals and concerts all over the world, and has played with the Prague Chamber Orchestra, the Osaka Symphony and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, among others. In addition, so far she has issued about 15 CDs and DVDs, some of them with the successful Quartetto Gelato and the Intersection Trio.

Cosmopolitan

The interview with Cooper was conducted in English, mainly because she has almost no time to study Hebrew. "I have a teacher, and I'm supposed to be taking lessons but it always gets postponed in favor of other things I have to do that have a deadline," she apologizes. "I know I have to study more but it's difficult for me, besides which everyone here speaks excellent English."

Cooper's father is an American pianist and her mother is a violinist of Japanese origin – the two met in college, married and moved to New York so her father could study at Juilliard. "When he was studying for his master's degree, we moved to Baltimore,"

Cooper says, “and at the doctorate stage, we went to California.” She herself started to play at the age of 10 and tried out several instruments before she chose the cello.

“The piano was the first instrument I liked,” she admits, “but my fingers are small – you can see how small my hand span is – so I simply don’t have the hands for piano. Even more, my father is a pianist and I wanted to choose an instrument that would be mine so my parents couldn’t tell me what to do with it. When I was about 7 or 8, I went with them to a rehearsal where I came across a work by Schubert called the Cello Quintet. I sat there and read the score, and even then I thought it was one of the most beautiful works in the world. The truth is that I always liked the tone of the cello.”

The romance continued in France. “We went to Paris when I was 11, because my father had a sabbatical,” Cooper says. “For a year I studied at the Conservatory with an excellent cello teacher and when the time came to go back to California, my parents wanted me to continue to study with her. It was decided that they would go back, and I would stay on to study.”

All because of the teacher?

“I think they also wanted me to be more cosmopolitan and to know how to speak French. The truth is that despite the fact that I was only 12, I felt very mature ... but in reality it was pretty hard for me. In the beginning, I was supposed to live with a family, but it turned out that they had three huge dogs and I was allergic to them so I had to leave their house. So I found myself living alone.”

At the age of 12?!

“Yes, I really missed being home.”

How did you manage?

“For a whole year, I ate nothing but baguettes with Nutella spread.”

A total mess

Maybe because of their many years together, Cooper's relationship with her cello is reminiscent of a couple's relationship. "I call it Bonaparte," she reveals, "because it's small for a cello. It's an English cello made in 1786, and it has a very strong tone. Sometimes it's my friend, sometimes it's my lover, and sometimes it quarrels with me. But I always try to make up before I put it down."

When is the relationship most successful? Which appearance excited you the most?

"The appearance with my string quartet at Alice Tully Hall in New York gave me a wonderful feeling because we worked very hard on it and we played very beautiful music. I appeared with the same quartet in Japan, in the most famous temple in Kyoto – a giant stage, thousands of people in the audience, amazing lighting on the cliff that overlooks all the hills surrounding the city."

Cooper spends half her time in appearances around the world and the other half in Israel. "I love Tel Aviv," she asserts. "It has good energies, and it reminds me a lot of New York. It's a beautiful city with a sea shore and a port. People here are very genuine and open, as opposed to people in Japan and Scandinavia who are pretty cold."

With all due respect to the sea and the port, Cooper is primarily an active woman who likes to work. "When Len and I decided to move to Israel," she recalls, "I went to Harvey Krueger, the vice chairman of Lehman Brothers, who checked into where there was a vacant teaching position. That's how I got to the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance."

Is this the first time you've taught?

"The truth is that I taught a bit at Juilliard, as a teaching assistant and in master classes, but this is my first try as a real teacher. Last year I taught there once a week, and this year I'll be teaching twice a week."

What have you learned about Israeli students?

“That they’re very smart, very talented and much tougher than the Americans.”

How does this express itself?

“Americans, for instance, have a reflexive reaction of smiling when they suggest doing something differently. In the beginning, I smiled a lot but the Israeli students looked at me strangely. ‘Why are you smiling? You’re my teacher, and you’re just supposed to tell me what to do.’ All of that friendly stuff doesn’t work for them, so I learned to filter a bit.”

The Israeli spirit taught Cooper a few more things, like when she appeared at the Klezmer Festival in Safed with the musician Giora Feidman. “It was my first appearance in Israel and we were performing with a group of children who were very excited to be there,” she recalls. “The rehearsals were a total *balagan* (mess) – *balagan* is the first word I learned in Hebrew – and we were four hours behind schedule, nobody knew what anyone else was playing, nothing was ready and despite that, everyone kept saying, ‘No problem, no problem (*ein ba’aya* – two more Hebrew words that Cooper learned very fast), it’ll be okay. I said it would be a total disaster, but when it came time to appear, everything went like clockwork. It was excellent.”

In what other ways is your life different here than it was in the U.S.?

“The truth is that I’ve learned to cook. In New York my whole apartment was about the size of my kitchen here, and I used my oven to store files. But in the current apartment I decided to take advantage of the kitchen, and it’s so much fun! Every time I try something new, but I most prefer slow cooking – something you can throw in the pot, put on the stove and then go to practice the cello for seven or eight hours.”

Regards to Christina Aguilera

These days Cooper is working on a new disk to be called “Stone and Steel” that will be recorded in December. “Aside from the cello, it has piano and percussion – and that’s not an obvious combination,” she says. “We’re playing old music, for example, from the Baroque and Renaissance periods, but in a new way.”

As opposed to what’s conventional in popular music, each time you play in a different grouping and a different style. Why?

“It’s more fun that way. Playing solo is totally different from playing chamber music, a string quartet is different from a piano trio, and playing contemporary music is different from playing Beethoven, Bach and Brahms. I learn something new from each genre, and I bring it to another genre.

“If you play only new music, and you have no background in old music, then your playing won’t be complete. If you were to play only old music, you’d be missing something in range and color. On the one hand, when you play solo, your personality is very important – you’re center stage and you know that if you screw up, 100 people onstage won’t know what to do. On the other hand, if you’re playing chamber music, what’s important is the connection between the musicians.”

Do you also listen to music?

“Not as much as I once did; now I’d rather go to live performances. Beyond classical music, I very much like jazz and Leonard Cohen, but also Duran Duran and – I’m embarrassed to say this – also Christina Aguilera.”

What do you do to concentrate during performances?

“Before every performance, I run in the nearest park while listening to music, preferably Leonard Cohen. If I don’t run, my stage fright will be much worse – it helps me to regulate the adrenaline. Still, it’s better to be a bit tense before a performance – from my

standpoint, if I'm not tense it means I don't care enough, or that I don't have the energy to get on stage and give it my all."

You don't get rich from playing classical music.

"Indeed not. I grew up in a family of musicians – my grandfather was a composer, my great-grandfather was a haiku poet – so that money was never an important thing for us. I was taught that it's more important to do what you love."

How important is love?

"You can't be a musician or even truer, it's not worth it to be a musician unless you really, really love it, to the point where you 'have to' play. Music is something you do because of the passion for art, not because of the money. And it's not an easy life. You have to be a person with a lot of discipline, with perseverance and lots of patience."

And what about ego?

"In the modern world, to be a successful musician you have to know how to get along with people. You can't be a disgusting, repulsive person and succeed. Think about the most famous musicians, for instance, Yo Yo Ma. What's the thing most said about him? That he's the nicest person in the world."