

# Student and teacher make beautiful music together

**Sholom Wargon**  
Special to The CJN

**T**he teacher was adamant: "I'm sorry, I'm fully booked. I can't take on any more students."

The mother wasn't taking no for an answer.

"Let me hear her play a little," relented Eli Kassner. "Then I'll decide."

The "audition" took mere minutes to become lesson one. In lesson three, Kassner assigned his precocious pupil a page of *Asturias* – an intricate, graduate-level piece. She returned one week later with four pages.

Liona Boyd was 13 years old.

"Why waste time putting a PhD candidate through kindergarten?" says Kassner. "She was – and is – a special talent."

Fifty-one years later, Boyd has put out multiple gold and platinum recordings, received the Order of Canada and played close to 1,000 concerts worldwide. She has such a mastery of her instrument that in 1975 she earned the moniker Canada's First Lady of the Guitar.

Student and teacher are back where it all started, in Kassner's Toronto studio. Peers now, they're comparing notes and reminiscing.

"Eli was my mentor. He allowed me to grow," Boyd said.

Unlike some music teachers who are possessive of their prize pupils, Kassner facilitated Boyd's exposure to other influences and mentors, including several world-class guitarists. At his suggestion, she enrolled in a master class given by Julian Bream, the very virtuoso whose performance in the seventh floor auditorium of Eaton's College Street had first ignited Boyd's passion for classical guitar.

For teacher, as for student, age 13 was a watershed year.

It was Vienna, 1937. Kassner's par-



Liona Boyd and Eli Kassner. "Eli was my mentor," Boyd said. "He allowed me to grow."

ticipation in the Hanoar Hatzioni (Zionist Youth) Movement affords him an opportunity to make aliyah. The diminutive musician — a guitar player since age seven — brings none of the physical prowess deemed prerequisite to life on an agricultural kibbutz. But he alone among the "prospects" speaks Hebrew with the modern Sephardic pronunciation, which allows him to converse with the shaliach in charge of the selection process. ("My father insisted I learn. I was his only hope for a yeshiva bocher in the family; my brother Edward had no interest in religion.")

It's aliyah selection day. One by one, the names of the 50 chosen olim are called. Kassner's is not among them. At name 50, his fast-eroding hopes are extinguished. Whereupon the shaliach

turns to him: "And you can come too."

"My knowledge of Hebrew probably saved my life," intones Kassner. Without the rapport established by mother-tongue dialogue, he would in all likelihood have stayed in Vienna and perished at the hands of the Nazis along with his sister Charlotte. (Brother Edward survived and went on to enjoy great success as a music publisher, including a prescient purchase of the rights to Bill Haley's *Rock Around The Clock*).

An aspiring visual artist on his 1951 arrival in Canada ("for me the guitar was just a hobby," Kassner hoped to earn a living by selling his paintings. Slow sales led to his plan B – a job at Whaley, Royce & Co., the iconic instrument and music dealer on Yonge Street. One fine day, as he strummed a Bach

gavotte (in-store playing was good for sales), a customer approached and asked for lessons.

"I've never taught before, but if you'd like to be my guinea pig, I'll be happy to try," volunteered Kassner.

The rest is history. Over the next half century, Kassner was to play a vital role in the advancement of guitar studies. According to Carl Morey, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto's faculty of music, Kassner "virtually single-handedly created serious guitar studies in Toronto, if not in Canada," according to *Guitar Canada*.

In 1956, Kassner co-founded the Guitar Society of Toronto, of which he served seven years as president and 39 years as artistic director. In 1959 he began teaching at the Royal Conservatory of Music and the University of Toronto. In 1967 he established the Eli Kassner Guitar Academy, resigning from the RCMT but continuing to teach at the U of T. He has also taught at the École Normale de Musique in Montreal and Queen's University. He composed and performed for the CBC-TV series *The Nature of Things*, winning the Bell-Northern Prize and the Monaco Award for the film *The First Inch*. For this and other *Nature Of Things* films, he not only composed the music but also contributed his own microphotographs. Today, at age 89 – though slowed by a stroke and macular degeneration which has rendered him virtually blind – he continues to teach at his Toronto home, where he lives with his wife Ann.

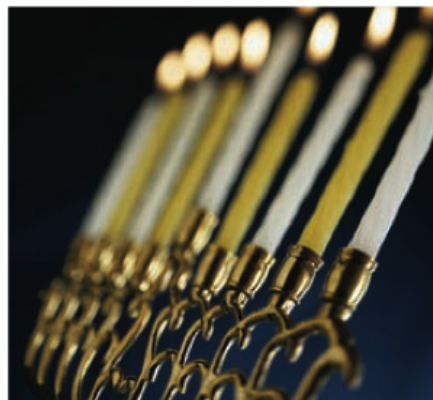
Though Kassner's brush and palette were usurped by his guitar, evidence of his visual artistic talent remains. Adorning one wall of his home is a series of illustrations of the chassidic figures that populated the Vienna of his youth.

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# Making beautiful music together

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While Kassner was redefining the art of guitar instruction, Boyd was fulfilling her early promise on stage and in studio. In 1974 *The Guitar*, her first record, was produced by Eleanor Sniderman, wife of Sam Sniderman. In 1995, she dedicated a self-composed Canadiana suite of recordings — *My Land Of Hiawatha* — to Kassner.

In 2003, Boyd was diagnosed with task-specific focal dystonia, a condition stemming from excessive repetition of specific muscle movements. Common to guitarists, it often leads them to stop playing altogether.

Not Boyd. By dint of sheer determination and an underlying conviction that she could and would play again, Boyd used a six-year hiatus to reinvent her playing technique. That process included, temporarily, using a pick with her right hand.

And she began to sing. And write. Not just experimentally, but for keeps.

From her first album as a vocalist and composer, released in 2009 (*Liona Boyd Sings Songs Of Love*, with Srđjan Givoje) to the just-released *The Return... To Canada With Love*, Boyd has demonstrated that she of the golden hands has a set of vocal chords to match.

No one is more impressed than Kassner. "Liona never ceases to amaze me," he exudes. "To sing is one thing. To sing at a level commensurate with her guitar playing? Unbelievable! Liona solves all her own problems."

Single since her 2004 divorce from California real estate developer John Simon, Boyd is nevertheless smitten — with the native land to which she returned in 2011. Thirteen of the 15 compositions on *The Return* are lyrical odes to Canada: its places, its landscapes, its people. In content and execution the material is spectacularly new. If a breakthrough album is supposed to happen only once in one's career, someone forgot to tell Boyd.

Never once during the long road back did Boyd view herself as a "reclamation project." To her the comeback was an evolution, a renaissance. "I feel more complete musically now than ever," she beams. The quicksilver speed that once earned Kassner an admonishment from the legendary Andrés Segovia — who felt that Boyd was playing "too fast" — has slowed an iota. But to measure the cheetah by a stopwatch alone is to miss the beauty and grace of its gait. The sound is still unmistakably, mellifluously Boyd: riveting and precise. The same sound whose clarity, in 1962, made squeezing in one more student the easiest decision of Kassner's career.

Today, at age 64, Boyd continues to tour, accompanied by guitarist Michael Savona, and to record, with producer Peter Bond. She and Kassner, who now reside in close proximity, enjoy an ongoing relationship of mutual respect and fervent admiration.

"Eli doesn't just teach guitar, he personifies it," says Boyd. For Canada's First Lady Of The Guitar, Eli Kassner is the de facto first man.



Eli Kassner is also a visual artist as this painting of his of two Chassidic Jews attests.



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