

ISRAEL

Vanunu Concert now a protest

BY MICHAEL VALPY

Anton Kuerti will think Beethoven today as the television images flash around the globe of Mordechai Vanunu's expected release from Israel's Shikma Prison. He will think Florestan — the political prisoner of Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, held chained in a dungeon.

He will be thinking about what he and his wife, cellist Kristine Bogyo, will play at their concert in Toronto early next month, honouring the man who spent 18 years in a cell for telling the world that Israel had nuclear weapons.

"It will be all Beethoven, of course," said Kuerti, one of the world's foremost interpreters of Beethoven and Canada's internationally celebrated pianist. "There will be the Beethoven cello sonata [*Sonata in A Major for Cello and Piano*], at least."

And because he is Anton Kuerti, perhaps as passionate about his political and moral beliefs as his music, he will think "despicable outrage" — the words he used in an interview the other day to describe the post-imprisonment restrictions placed on Vanunu: a proscription against talking to foreigners, coming within 100 metres of a foreign embassy and leaving Israel.

Kuerti had written to Vanunu six weeks ago, the last correspondence between the two men, to invite him to attend the May 9 concert. And while he didn't expect Vanunu to show up, "I thought he might be happy to receive the invitation.

"I was hoping the concert could be a celebration. Now [as a result of the new restrictions on Vanunu announced by the Israeli government], it will be something of a protest."

Vanunu, 50, a technician at Israel's Dimona nuclear plant until he was laid off in 1985, became gradually aware that Israel was constructing components for nuclear weapons, a program the government shrouded in secrecy.

Vanunu took photographs. He left Israel. He told his story in 1986 to *The Times of London*. Before the article could be published, a comely Israeli agent named Cindy lured him from London to Rome where he was captured by Mossad operatives, drugged and smuggled out of Italy back to Israel.

He was tried for treason before an in-camera court and sentenced to 18 years in prison, nearly 12 of them in solitary confinement.

Based on his descriptions and photographs, foreign experts estimated that Israel had the sixth-largest stockpile of nuclear weapons.

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Although Vanunu has said he has nothing more to disclose about Israel's nuclear-weapons program, the post-imprisonment restrictions on him were announced just before his release. He is challenging them in court. He had planned to move to the United States.

In Beethoven's 1805 *Fidelio*, Florestan, secretly imprisoned because he is hated by the tyrant Pizarro, sings: "In the springtime of my life, my happiness has fled. I bravely ventured to tell the truth and these chains are my reward . . . my heart's sweet solace is that I have done my duty."

The Austrian-born Kuerti, 65, who moved to Canada from the United States in 1965 because he refused to pay taxes for the Vietnam War, has been a lifelong campaigner against nuclear weapons, as well as an anti-war and environmental activist. A Canadian citizen and an Officer of the Order of Canada, he ran unsuccessfully for Parliament for the New Democratic Party in 1988.

Through the 1990s, Kuerti made speeches comparing Vanunu and Florestan, and sent the text of one of them to Vanunu along with two of his CDs.

To his surprise, he received a reply in 2001, complimenting him on his playing and telling him he had listened to a lot of opera during his time in solitary confinement, "especially *Fidelio* and, of course, it was like Beethoven wrote it especially for my case, but I am here 15 years waiting for that great wonderful, heavenly Finale, still to come. So I heard it many times."

Kuerti said he last heard from Vanunu more than a year ago. "It was amazing how together and wholesome he sounded."

Kuerti conceived of the concert to raise funds for Vanunu to help him start a new life.

"It's always touchy, mixing politics with a serious concert," Kuerti said.

"The mood is quite different when you float a political idea." A taste of which he has experienced. In 1990, interrupting a recital at a Montreal concert hall, Kuerti delivered a speech condemning anti-Semitism in which he referred to controversial remarks made about Jews by Quebec press magnate Pierre Péladeau. Péladeau, who owned the concert hall, was in the audience.

The incident ignited a media tempest.

The May 9 concert takes place at Willowdale United Church in Toronto's suburban North York. Tickets (\$30) available at This Ain't the Rosedale Library, 483 Church St., or by telephone at 905-849-5501. An extra \$30 admits concertgoers to a post-performance reception that will be attended by Kuerti and Bogyo.