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RockMusic: Making Diamonds Sing

It's an out-of-this-world idea that—appropriately enough—first hit Gabi Tolkowsky on an airplane. “I was talking to my wife about diamond cutting,” remembers the famed cutter, who is best known for fashioning the 273-ct. “De Beers Centenary.” “I said, 'Diamond cutting has so many aspects to it, so many variations, it's like making music. Then it hit me. Music is a wonderful thing. It's the language of the world. Why can't a diamond give off music?' ”

Most people would've blamed the idea on oxygen deprivation, but the more Tolkowsky thought about it, the more it made sense. “What is light but waves?” he notes. “So can't a diamond send back sound waves, too?” Apparently, it can—with the help of technology. As improbable as it seems, the bushy-haired Belgian has found a way to produce music from diamonds. He premiered his first “compositions” to a rapt audience at The JCK Show in Orlando.

How did he do it? Last year, Tolkowsky approached Gemprint, the Toronto company that gives a distinct “fingerprint” to each stone. “Gemprint captures the light refraction on paper. I wanted to capture it in sound,” he says. Company chairman John Shepherd recalls Tolkowsky asking him if it was possible to convert light into sound. “I said, That's a perfectly valid scientific concept,” Shepherd recalls. But even he didn't expect the second part of the proposition. “It took my breath away,” he says. “I'd say the reaction was one of pleased astonishment. But there was no reason why it couldn't be done.”

Within two months, Gemprint engineers created software that matches degrees of light intensity to notes on the musical scale. The parties won't give more specifics on the technology involved, since the idea is being patented. But Shepherd does say, “Gemprint puts laser light into the diamond and then picks up reflections, which show up as points of light. They appear as a bit-map, which we digitize for the Gemprint database. Then we use software to take that bit-map and create sound out of it.”

So far the Gemprint-Tolkowsky alliance has created a number of preliminary melodies. Tolkowsky says that when he heard his first diamond-derived compositions, “I never jumped as high as I jumped.” The diamond songs are played by computer-derived “bells,” which Tolkowsky chose because they sound like diamonds. “I wanted it to sound like angel music,” he says.

And, in a way, it does. While you won't likely be hearing Tolkowsky's tunes on the radio anytime soon, they are certainly striking. The compositions are spacey, discordant—and, in their own way, beautiful. “It's the kind of music that makes you sit down and dream,” he says. Best of all, the variations are endless. Since no diamond is the same, each has a unique “melody.” Gemprint, meanwhile, thinks the music can be further refined. “Those tones could be translated into some form of harmony as we develop further engineering,” Shepherd predicts.

Retailers who heard Tolkowsky's melodies at The JCK Show thought that the idea had incredible implications, from the fanciful to the commercial. Some fantasized about selling not just a diamond's specs and certificate, but also its song. “The more you romance a diamond, the

easier it is to sell,” notes Hoyt Perry of Perry’s Jewelry, Awards and Gifts in Fayetteville, Ark. “And if you presented a diamond with its special music behind it, how could anyone say no?” Others were similarly struck. Outside the “Touch the Future” exhibit, where Tolkowsky appeared, someone scribbled “Gabi is king.”

For now, Tolkowsky isn’t sure what he wants to do with his discovery but would like U.S. retailers to tell him how they could use it in their stores. (You can fax him at 011-32-3-226-9459.) “We don’t want this to be just a gimmick,” he says. For all the razzle-dazzle behind the idea, it has a serious purpose: to return diamond retailing to its roots in romance. “Everyone thinks that diamonds shouldn’t be sold as a commodity, but as objects of beauty,” he says. “This uses modern technology in the service of emotion.”

And Tolkowsky has another dream: He wants blind musicians to hear his diamond symphonies. “Imagine a blind person being able to appreciate the beauty of a diamond by listening to it,” he says. With his new invention, Tolkowsky has showed us that just about anything’s possible.

Gabi Tolkowsky’s Extravaganza in Savannah

The first live public performance of a piece of “diamond music” took place in March in Savannah, Ga.

It was part of a “Savannah Diamond Dinner,” designed to fête Gabi Tolkowsky’s new “Savannah cut.” Tolkowsky invented the cut while visiting a local jeweler to tout his “Gabrielle” diamond. He took a tour of the local Lucas Theater and was struck by its recently renovated dome.

Forty-five minutes later, he had a new dome-inspired cut, which he dubbed the “Savannah” as a tribute to the city. “Cutting this diamond for the people of Savannah is an honor for me,” he says. “It gives me a chance to show my sentiments to these people who have given me so much wonderful hospitality and friendship. When I was giving a lecture, I asked if I should create a new cut and name it after Savannah, and everyone applauded.”

The dinner featured not only the introduction of the new cut but also the music of a 3.43-ct. example. Also on the program was a more conventional musical performance, as the Savannah Symphony played Rachmaninoff. Afterward, the large Savannah and two smaller ones (1.5 cts. each) were auctioned off, with proceeds going to Savannah Onstage, a local arts festival, and the Matthew Reardon Foundation for Neurological Disorders, which treats children with brain diseases. All proceeds from the dinner went to Savannah Onstage.



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