

An interactive multimedia classical-music evening

By Michael Ajzenstadt

Astrith Baltsan doesn't mind if you talk during her concerts. In fact, she expects it.

Unlike today's more traditional concert setting, in which the audience sits quietly while the conductor and musicians go about their work on stage, Baltsan performs to an intimate audience and encourages feedback throughout her concerts.

She is one of many musicians, spanning all parts of the world, who are trying to change the so-called fossilized structure of the concert hall. And through her special concert lectures, she has opened the world of classical music to a much wider audience.

Baltsan hosts interactive multimedia evenings which are neither real lectures nor traditional concerts. Rather, these evenings provide the audience with information about the artist while enjoying his/her music.

With some 6,000 subscribers to her series, Baltsan has trouble believing how an idea she had 10 years ago has become so successful.

"It's hard to believe," she says. "It all began at the end of 1990, when I created a special Mozart evening in which I was playing and actor Moshe Beker read a text that I prepared for him... Beker was sure we would be very successful. I was more skeptical, I didn't believe we would have more than the usual sparse classical-music audience interested in this."

Baltsan recalls that she was nine months pregnant with her daughter, and that Beker had suggested that after she gave birth they would figure out if and how they wanted to



when she taught the same course for seven years, Baltsan frequently changes the topics of her concert series.

"I still suffer from the trauma I had from lecturing... the same course year after year.



continue.

That Mozart concert would go on to be presented more than 100 times in two years. Then Baltsan decided that the time had come to do something new.

"AT THE end of 1992 I had a professional crisis," she says. "I wasn't sure at all where I was heading. Until then I had aimed at being the 'good gal' who does what is expected of her: teaching at the university and the academy, playing piano recitals etc. just like everyone else. But I had had enough of that. I felt that with the Mozart evening I had given birth to something new which combined all that I loved doing."

So, at the end of 1992, Baltsan left everything and turned her attention to these new concerts.

"To create something new, I needed the time to create. I knew this was my dream and the time had come to make the dream come true. I couldn't allow myself to remain stifled in the world of academic music."

Slowly but surely the word began to spread about Baltsan and her concerts.

"In 1996, I felt the time had come to take more control and to produce my concerts myself, and be responsible for all the technical aspects of the performances as well as for the marketing and having direct contact with the audience."

That year she had four series in Tel Aviv, four in Haifa, and two in Jerusalem. She soon found herself speaking to larger audiences in Jerusalem and Haifa. Today, she has seven series at the Tel Aviv Museum, two in Haifa, and one sold-out series in Jerusalem.

In fact, the Baltsan concerts are so popular that it is difficult to get in.

IN JUST over a decade, she has become a cult figure. Subscribers vie for the opportunity to hear her special brand of informal concerts where the musical side is always augmented by an extra-musical curriculum.

And unlike her years at the university

It was awful," she says. "At least for myself I needed to do new things all the time. And as at least 50 percent of my audience returns year after year... I realized I had to really fall in love with the material [I use]."

Baltsan also makes sure that she plays in the concerts. "It would have been much easier to invite visiting pianists, but I think both I and the audience need to have this connection and identification between me and the instrument... Because I perform the music, I really hear it every time anew, every time in a different way."

Her newest season opened recently with a Chopin solo evening devoted to the preludes he wrote in 1839 and to his relationship with George Sand.

As for the future, Baltsan hopes 10 out of the 100 programs she has made through the years will be recorded on video.

"It will not be easy because if I want to record I will need to have a very clear framework for the program. In the live concert I can change things from one evening to another. On video it will have to be fixed and it will have to be at its best."

She also talks of touring Switzerland and the US with some of her programs.

"Before I go abroad with a program I always do some performances in English here in Israel, usually in Kfar Sava and Ra'anana."

Baltsan's concerts run three hours. She is, however, trying to cut them down to 90 minutes.

Baltsan's Chopin program can still be enjoyed today (10 a.m.) and tomorrow (8:30 p.m.) at the Churchill Auditorium at the Technion in Haifa, and Sunday (8 p.m.) at the Rebecca Crown Auditorium at the Jerusalem Theater.

The next program will be devoted to Beethoven, and runs from December 24 until January 13 at the Tel Aviv Museum, Haifa and Jerusalem with further programs focusing on Bach, Stravinsky and the Bible. For more information and subscriptions, call (03) 642-0847.



Astrith Baltsan's concerts give new life to old-school classical music.