

Two concert pianists are wowing audiences with a new kind of musical entertainment, and offering serious competition to traditional concert series

By Noam Ben-Ze'ev

hen she was eight years old — and already showing great promise as a pianist — Astrith Baltzan had a dream. In it, she was sitting at a piano surrounded by a crowd of listeners, simultaneously playing and telling a story. When she told her father, a man she describes as “a man of words,” about the dream, he responded by saying, “There isn’t any way to combine the two; there’s no middle ground. You’re going to have to choose.” Baltzan chose piano. Nearly 25 years and much frustration and disappointment later, Astrith Baltzan realized her childhood dream of putting on a “talking concert.”

Under the title of “Classical with a Personal Dimension,” Beltzen plays music and talks, enchanting the

audience with the rhythmic lilt of her voice, regaling them with the history of the composers and their works, eliciting waves of laughter and cries of exclamation, and, by the way, attracting masses of fans. This year, her series have drawn 5,000 subscribers for a 10-concert season — a staggering figure compared to other classical music series in Israel. Beltzen sells far more subscriptions than entire symphony orchestras (the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra has 3,000 subscribers, the Ra'anana Symphonette has 2,000). Her one-woman series sells more subscriptions than all the large chamber orchestras and chamber music series in Israel put together, including “Authentica” the successful early-music series, which has 1,000 subscribers.

Baltzan operates this huge enterprise on her own. She works out of a tiny apartment in Ramat Aviv Gimmel, which is crammed with a grand piano, three computers and shelves that strain under the weight of myriad files, books and records. Every concert by “Baltzan Industries” — as she is called, with a certain degree of jealousy, in classical music circles — fills the large hall of the Tel Aviv Museum to capacity. Five such concerts are offered each season, in addition to those she gives in Jerusalem and Haifa. Within the trade, the size of the audience Baltzan attracts is so phenomenal that it seems to threaten the traditional concert hall; or perhaps it is merely a symptom of its decline.

It was not easy for her to cross the line. “I was taught to



Astrith Baltan: I need to communicate with the audience at another level.

play the instrument, give a recital, and afterward do a doctorate," she says. "Still and all, it wasn't easy for me, because even at the conservatory I was one of those bewildered people who simultaneously sign up for every single department. I knew that I wanted to play, but I also wanted to know what music is, what this wonderful thing was all about. Play she did: judges at international piano competitions in the United States and Canada determined that she could do so very well, and awarded her first prizes. Their opinion was shared by organizers of prestigious chamber music festivals in Banff and Tanglewood, who invited her to take part, as well as her instructors at the Manhattan School of Music, where she received her doctorate.

As Baltsan tells it, when she returned from New York in 1985, she found a dismal situation awaiting her. While she landed a faculty appointment at Tel Aviv University's Rubin Academy of Music, the future did not seem at all promising. "People would ask me, 'Why did you come back?' After all, there are no jobs at the university or on the concert stages. Professor Herzl Shmueli, the dean of the arts faculty, told me, 'If you don't find yourself a millionaire to endow you a chair, you'll never get tenure.' And when I wanted to do what I had learned to do — give recitals — the Tel Aviv Museum told me, 'Are you crazy? Who's going to come? There is no audience, it's a waste of time. Come back five years from now. If you are famous then, maybe we'll give it a try.'"

But Baltsan didn't need five years. A small performance she managed to arrange for herself at the Haifa Museum was her turning point. It was a pro bono performance, she recalls. "They even quibbled over my travel expenses." The concert was scheduled for 10:30 A.M., and the entire audience consisted of 40 drowsy senior citizens. After 10 minutes of playing the piano, Baltsan started talking.

"It was music by Schumann, and the story of the person behind it, how he fell in love with his wife Clara, her numerous pregnancies, and his attempts to strengthen his fourth finger, which led him to tragedy. In my state of utter despair, I played the music and began to talk with myself, trying to understand, out loud, why I loved Schumann — and it worked.

"Driving back in the car, I whistled the whole way home, because I had solved something. I felt it was a real achievement, because up to that moment, it had been made very clear to me here that I was not needed. The Academy had made it clear to me, the audience walking in with its dead eyes made it clear to me. Even in Haifa, I realized that I was no Horowitz, and that I needed to look for something else."

Baltsan was asked back to Haifa, and this time, the hall was full. The single concert grew into a series, and the series became four series, at which point the Tel Aviv Museum acceded to demand and invited Baltsan for the recital she had wanted so badly. It took place at the time of the Gulf War, and the recital was an abject failure for Baltsan, not only because the hall was practically empty.

"I came and I played — and what can I tell you? I didn't enjoy myself. I did everything I had been taught to do, had an encore, and in Tel Aviv, too, but I felt awful. I felt I wasn't enjoying it, not expressing myself, and that it wasn't happening for the audience either. This wasn't the profession I had dreamed of. It turned out to be my last recital."

Her trauma, she explains, has to do with a problem that also afflicted Leonard Bernstein. "Performers are not supposed to talk, musicologists are not supposed to play, and neither is supposed to like light music. And what if you get up on the stage of the Mann Auditorium and would like to wish the audience a good evening? What if you want to smile? The worst sin of all is to compare the Beatles to Beethoven, even if it's true, and anyone who starts knitting the two categories together gets a slap on the wrist. For 20 years, Leonard Bernstein suffered the same fate — every Sunday morning, the weekly review in *The New York Times* would dole out the same criticism. In the same way, they would ask me, 'How dare you? It's vulgar.'"

The Tel Aviv Museum was unable to ignore the great success of Baltsan's 'talking concerts' in Haifa, and offered her a similar series in its large performance hall. The concerts were an instantaneous success, but did not bring Baltsan any respect or approval in academic circles.

"I was completely ignored by my colleagues and the

professors. If they had been at the concerts, they didn't say they had been there, they didn't refer to them when I met them in the hallways or in the library, even for the sake of courtesy. But it's not surprising. When did you ever see people from the academic world at concerts? In fact, professors are downright proud of the fact that they haven't been to a concert in 20 years."

In 1992, an angry, hurt Astrith Baltsan resigned from the Academy of Music. "The fight for tenure entailed a series of humiliating factors — claims that there was no faculty position available, no compensation package, no maternity leave, no right to vote for the head of the academy. All of this came under the banner of 'there is no money,' so that there would be no one to blame, and all this was going on at the same time as they were creating another endowed chair, another ivory tower, assigning another professorship, awarding another grant, writing yet another article that no one would read." The same year, she also left other institutions where she had worked and taught: the Nova Music group, the Rimón school of jazz, and the School of the Arts, a primary school. Baltsan would now devote all her energies to her series at the Tel Aviv Museum.

Gradually, however, it became clear the museum was not the bed of roses she had hoped it would be. Here, too, the problem was related to money. "At the museum, I found out that success can also be a problem. When all the seats for all the series had been sold out a year in advance, I told them, 'Let's open another series. Pay me another NIS 600 per concert. They responded by saying, 'You're being egotistical.' I said they should be putting up posters, but they told me there was no need, because, after all, the series was full. When I held my ground, and told them it was quite enough that the Academy was trying to keep me down, they began to say, 'Astrith wants her name up in lights, she wants to be famous.' It was then that I decided to ask how much money my concerts earn for the museum each year. The answer they gave me threw me for a loop — I couldn't believe how much they were making."

Baltsan says that her concerts brought the museum revenues of NIS 380,000. Yet the institution "was so stingy, it spent only NIS 1500 on each poster." She decided to go into business for herself, and became a one-woman marketing campaign. "I do it all by myself, here, in these 30 square meters. I rent the concert hall at the museum, and they don't mention me in their annual program or publications. They made me into a businesswoman: That is what anger can do to a person."

Responds Avigail Ernheim, director of musical programs at the Tel Aviv Museum: "The problems that cropped up between us were natural disagreements over the division of revenue. In fact, we were the ones who proposed the solution, according to which she would produce her own programs and rent the hall from us."

Ernheim states that at the start, no one could have foreseen the magnitude of Baltsan's success. "Not even Astrith herself. And during the second year, she was late and wasn't ready in time with her new series, so the dates were no longer available. In fact, I was the one who initiated the third additional series, and nobody accused her of being on an ego trip. The opposite is the case: I asked that she give up her other commitments so that she could appear here."

If so, then why didn't the museum print any advertisements?

"When you have full halls, without a single vacant seat," Ernheim says, "it's no disgrace to economize on the publicity campaign. Why shouldn't we do that?"

Critics say that Astrith Baltsan's performances do not stimulate audiences to seek more intense music-listening opportunities (read: serious concerts). But Baltsan does not propose to make any changes in what she is offering.

"I think of my 'talking concert' as a genre unto itself, not as preparation for another concert," she says. "In general, the hard core — classical music — dominates about 90 percent of each concert. The rest comes only at the end. It's a symbiotic relationship: I'll make a move in your direction, if you allow me to give what I have to give. And I will always leave something light-hearted for the end, because it's not in me to send an audience home without a smile on their faces. Aside from that, I will never forget what one of the professors at the Manhattan School — who was on the



Astrith Baltsan: I need to communicate with the audience at and

panel when I defended my dissertation — said: 'Always respect the ignorance of your audience.'"

Baltsan's success has spawned imitation. The Israeli musical landscape is now blooming with an additional series, entitled "Conversational Concerts," by pianist and lecturer Tomer Lev. Lev, 31, heads the music seminary at Levinsky College and is a senior lecturer at Tel Aviv University's music academy. He offers a similar play-and-talk format — live music accompanied by explanations — but the concept and especially the atmosphere is very different.

Lev does not hesitate to serve up difficult and demanding works by Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Scriabin and Stravinsky, along with explanations of their historic, cultural and social context — to 2,500 people over a season.

Nursing a glass of beer in a Tel Aviv pub late one night, Lev outlines his opinion of this revolution in the classical music field. "When you think about it, what is a concert

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