

The Language of Passion

Ursula Bagdasarjanz and the Violin

“I’ve always gone to sleep laughing, sometimes just because I told myself a joke,” says Ursula Bagdasarjanz, laughing. She’s always doing that, this happy, amiable woman, with an uncommon vibrancy, the heart of a child: curious about the world, with alert, clear eyes and an open heart. In conversations she is fidgety, restless, tells three stories at once, hops around merrily, as though she were in a meadow resplendent with summer wildflowers. But it is easy to listen to her because she is so enthusiastic. About music, people, life.

The violinist was born in Winterthur in 1934, because she “probably wanted it that way,” as she says herself, laughing again. She was the eldest daughter of an Armenian-Swiss father born in Romania and a mother with Austrian-Swiss roots. A sister (five years younger) and a brother (ten years younger) followed. The family lived in Wülflingerstrasse, then later in Breitstrasse and Sonnenbergstrasse. On her website there is a picture of her as a ten year old standing on the balcony with her violin in hand.

“That was soon after my first big concert, when I played Beethoven’s *Romance* in F major,” she explains. When



“... Powerful bow stroke, crisp passages, pure intonation, even in the upper registers,” wrote the *Landbote* in 1958 about Ursula Bagdasarjanz’ violin mastery.

(Archive Ursula Bagdasarjanz, 2010)

she was five years old she began taking violin lessons from her mother, Margit, herself an outstanding violinist who as a youngster played with the St. Gallen

My love of music

“Music to me means making music in a way that represents my essence. Singing, designing, breathing and phrasing. To let the music be interpreted and to flow in a wide, generous line in accordance with the waves of the given composition. To feel the immortal resonance of pure music, which I convey to the infinity of the universe through my instrument,

Symphony Orchestra and later in the Winterthur Symphony Orchestra. In St. Gallen her mother played under Othmar Schoeck, who would have a significant influence on the daughter’s musical career. More on this later.

The sound of the violin

Her mother taught not only her daughter but other children as well. “If she was sick I would teach her students, even in primary school. She also played in a quartet and whenever I felt like it I was permitted to play the violin part. We rehearsed at home. In the evening they placed my bed with me in it near the living room door, so I could fall asleep hearing music.

as a deeply felt interpretation of a work and as my personally experienced musical energy. In the end, this is detached from and independent of my person, stepping out of myself while playing, consciously observing what’s happening.”

Ursula Bagdasarjanz

Once I was asleep they would push me back to the nursery. I was always surrounded by music, and that stays with you,” says Ursula Bagdasarjanz. The love of music has in fact been something essential in her life from the very beginning (see box). She was always fascinated by the sound and tone of the violin. Young Ursula played wherever she was able to: evening recitals, art exhibitions, even private hospitals on Christmas. And yet no photo material exists from this time. In those days, taking photos during a performance was frowned upon. Photos would have distracted the musician, she says. But accounts of every recital were published in the newspaper. Ursula Bagdasarjanz is also a little sad that today only a few of her performances have been preserved as audio recordings. Many were deleted because magnetic tape was all that existed in those days. Thus she was very pleased when several concert producers later sent her copies of the recordings. Swiss radio stations in particular had archived her recordings. The five CDs that resulted from those archives and were issued under the Gallo label have been very successful.

Off to Paris

For the self-assured and determined violinist, it was clear from an early age what her future life path would look like. “I didn’t want to attend high school. That was completely out of the

question for me. I told everybody that I just wanted to be a violinist. Right after school I would go straight home to play my violin,” she says. Through her mother’s contacts, Ursula Bagdasarjanz was lucky to be able to meet people who furthered her career when she was still quite young. She soon started taking lessons from Aida Stucki, who would later be AnneSophie Mutter’s violin teacher and who had studied under violin educator Carl Flesch. When Ursula Bagdasarjanz was only a child she became familiar with his scale system, a foundational work for violinists to this day. When she was 17 years old she attended a concert performed by the Zurich Music Conservatory with a fellow musician. On that evening an exchange student from the Paris Music Conservatory played and made a lasting impression on the young Swiss woman. “She was so great, with unbelievable technique. I went home and told my parents that I was already smart enough and didn’t need to attend school anymore, but that I wished to go to Paris,” Ursula Bagdasarjanz says, laughing. So they located the exchange student’s teacher, Marcel Reynal. He said he was willing to give her lessons, so she went to Paris to enroll in the prestigious Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique. “I rented a room from an elderly couple in NeuillysurSeine. It was right on the street, but that didn’t bother me then.



“I never wanted to just run through the pieces. I wanted to tell stories with my music,” says Ursula Bagdasarjanz.

(Archive Ursula Bagdasarjanz, 2010)



Ursula Bagdasarjanz (right) with Gisela Schoeck (left) in 1961 for radio recordings in Berlin.

(Archive Ursula Bagdasarjanz)



Ursula Bagdasarjanz with the book *Viorea și maeștrii ei de la origini până azi*, by the Romanian Professor Dr. Ion Sârbu, in which he praises her pedagogical work and places her as a soloist on the same level as the great violin virtuosos. In July 2001, 2002 and 2004, Ursula Bagdasarjanz gave master classes for violin in Târgu Mureș (Transylvania, Romania).

(Antonia Baumann, 2016)

Excerpts from her publications *Die Geige erzählt*, *Der andere Weg* and *Sept Poésies pour Violon et Piano*.

(Archive Ursula Bagdasarjanz, 2010)

Today I wouldn't be able to stand the noise and the cold. There was no heating, thin window panes, 13 degrees in the winter." What was also hard for the young woman to cope with then was money. "Life was suddenly so expensive. I never went to a café and didn't eat much for lunch. I was only allowed to take a hot bath once a week and I had to pay extra for that, which surprised me. I pinched pennies and always managed to return home with half of what my father had given me."

The goal clearly in view

Ursula Bagdasarjanz also stayed true to her principles during her demanding studies. "After the lessons, while the other students sat in a café and

discussed fingering, I went home and practiced. Talking about it wasn't what I needed." She said it was difficult for her to assert herself in a class with only French students. And then there was the solfège music education method, which involved reading musical notation. "As a child, my piano teacher or my mother played the pieces for me and then I knew how to play them. In Paris no one played anything for me. So I started looking for a solfège teacher and took private lessons. I practiced reading scores every evening. In the exam we had to read in seven keys and the key changed every two measures. They thought as a foreigner I had not had enough training in solfège, but at least I could play the violin, and that

is why they let me through," Ursula Bagdasarjanz remembers. Once she had made up her mind to do something, she did it. After her first year of studies the director called Ursula to his office, she relates. "He wanted to forbid me from skiing during the Christmas holidays because he thought it was too dangerous. He thought I might break something. But my father was a ski instructor and I had learned skiing just as well as playing the violin. But the director was still against it. I went cross-country skiing nevertheless and simply didn't tell him about it." In the end I didn't break any bones and all my work paid off. After the three-year intensive course, she graduated when she was just 21 years old.

She was awarded the Premier prix de violon distinction, which helped pave the way for her future concert career.

Végh, Schoeck and Stanford

Back in Switzerland, Ursula Bagdasarjanz attended master classes taught by, among others, Sándor Végh, Joseph Calvet and Max Rostal, and from Winterthur she traveled around the world. She gave guest performances in Germany, France, Spain and Finland, and she was a soloist in the Finnish Symphony Orchestra of Turku. But Ursula Bagdasarjanz was much in demand as a soloist in her homeland as well. She played with the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra and with the city symphony orchestras in Winterthur, St. Gallen, Glarus, Uster, Aarau, Solothurn and Olten, as well as the Radio Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana. Then came radio recordings in Berlin, Paris and Zurich, for which she “didn’t earn very much, but nevertheless had a tremendous experience,” she says. She also didn’t receive fees for tours; in those days one was lucky if the organizers paid for the flight and the hotel. “My parents made all this possible for me. I would not have been able to afford it otherwise.” I wasn’t treated as a celebrity, not like today, when anyone “who plays in a school house is already a star,” she says. But if not Ursula Bagdasarjanz, then who? For the ZDF documentary, *The Violins of Appenzell*, about Rolf Habisreutinger’s Stradivarius collection. she stood in front of a camera in 1969, playing a Stradivar-

ius violin in one sequence. And later she was also able to apply her enthusiasm and commitment to classical music as a distinguished jury member in a number of national (Tonhalle Competition) and international (Constantin Silvestri Music Competition, Romania) music competitions, to good effect.

But back to her origins, to the twisting paths that life often takes – and to Othmar Schoeck, the Swiss composer and one-time conductor of Ursula Bagdasarjanz’s mother. “When he first suggested that I play with his daughter Gisela, who was a pianist, I didn’t want to. In those days Swiss composers were out of the question for me. But when I got to know Gisela, we immediately felt a rapport and suddenly Schoeck’s violin compositions became my specialty,” says the

musician. Together with Gisela Schoeck she recorded all the violin sonatas. To this day she is the only violinist who has regularly performed Schoeck’s complete works. This year, on the occasion of the Othmar Schoeck Festival in Brunnen (September 1–11), she posted a video production with historical recordings on the internet.

Another musical highlight of her career came in 2013, when Ursula Bagdasarjanz received a very rare distinction for the rendition of the works of others and her own, including her interpretation of Othmar Schoeck’s violin concert. She was honored with the Special Tribute Treasury Show presented by Stanford University (California). In any case the musician had a special connection with the United States early on.



The musician in her study in Langackerstrasse, next to the portrait of her father, Samuel Bagdasarjanz, drawn in 1938 by Gustav Weiss.

(Antonia Baumann, 2016)

“My former husband and I were close friends with the unforgettable conductor Erich Leinsdorf and his wife, Vera, for many years. So in the late 1980s, Erich Leinsdorf and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra invited us to accompany them on a fascinating four-week concert tour through the States,” she recalls.

Career and family

When she turned 50 she decided to definitively give up her intensive concert work to concentrate more on her own family – her husband and two children – and to be a teacher herself. “Practicing five hours a day was tiring, but just three hours a day would not have been enough. You can’t do everything in such a short time if you are conscientious. I had stood on many stages and had done enough traveling. All I wanted to do was teach because I love children.” She published three books, including her compositions for violin and piano (*Sept Poésies pour Violon et Piano*) and two method books for violin students. In 1968 the family moved to Herrliberg, where she first lived in Grütstrasse and then in Busenhardstrasse. Today Ursula Bagdasarjanz lives in an apartment in Langackerstrasse. After her separation from her husband, she would not have enjoyed maintaining a huge house on her own. She didn’t get to know her husband by accident. “His father was the director of the Rieter company and my father was chief engineer there. His father also played the violin and often

had me break in his new instruments. So it wasn’t long before we invited the whole family to visit us,” says Ursula Bagdasarjanz.

Untiringly creative

If you think there’s nothing more for Ursula Bagdasarjanz to do, you are mistaken. The violinist’s musical work is still in demand, like next year in Cornwall, where some of her compositions will be performed. She is also working tirelessly on projects such as the successful collaboration with the Australian artist Ian Barton Stewart. With him she has produced videos in which his richly colored oil paintings are accompanied by her music, a pleasing combination. The violinist has always had an affinity for painting: “My father often took us to museums, and on bicycle trips we had to take along a sketchbook and pencil. Wherever we stopped we would try to capture the landscape.” She said she would have found other creative outlets if she had not become a musician. “It would have had something to do with movement,” she says. “Maybe I would have given gymnastics lessons.” But actually there was never any doubt about her calling. “I never wanted to just run through the pieces. I always imagined something about them, images that were created in my mind. I wanted to tell stories with music.” Ursula Bagdasarjanz been doing that ever since.

Sarah Stutte

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