

AN INTERVIEW WITH URSULA BAGDASARJANZ, FEBRUARY 2012

by David K. Nelson

The Gallo label has released a series of five CDs featuring concert and radio broadcast performances from the 1960s and 1970s by the Swiss-born violinist Ursula Bagdasarjanz. These discs feature a wide range of important repertoire, including authoritative performances of the music of Othmar Schoeck (Fanfare 32:5 and 33:5). Her discs can be sampled on YouTube; as quick introductions to her art, I'd suggest her disciplined and exciting unaccompanied Bach, her elegant and pure Nardini sonata movements, and the meltingly lovely, eye-moistening slow movement of the Schoeck Violin Concerto. (YouTube has taken on the role classical and "educational" radio once played in exposing American listeners to music and musicians they should want to get to know better.) She also maintains a website, bagdasarjanz.com, worth visiting in both the English and German language versions.

My old colleague Bob Maxham interviewed Bagdasarjanz in Fanfare 33:5, and much of their discussion dealt with violinistic matters, Bagdasarjanz's own compositions (featured on YouTube and Volume 4 of the CDs), and her violin pedagogical work. With the recent release of Volume 5 (CD-1352), containing Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata and Brahms's Sonata No. 3 from a 1964 concert, and Mozart's G-Major Sonata, K 301 from a 1963 broadcast, Joel Flegler thought it would be interesting for me to come out of my Fanfare retirement to visit with the artist about other matters: her musical life and thoughts, stories from her performing days, and additional memories of noted musical colleagues and friends, including her great teachers.

Without rehashing Maxham's fine interview, a bit of background is in order. Ursula Bagdasarjanz initially studied with her mother, and made her debut as a 10-year-old in 1944. She has a distinguished pedigree of esteemed teachers: Aida Stucki, a pupil of Carl Flesch who also taught Anne Sophie Mutter; Marcel Reynal at the Paris Conservatory, where she was awarded the violin first prize; Max Rostal, another Flesch pupil whose recordings are prized by collectors; and two much-recorded quartet leaders: Sándor Végh (a pupil of Hubay and personally associated with Bartók and Kodály) and Joseph Calvet in Paris — names, in short, that convey a broad swath of 20th-century violin mastery and style.

When I write that I "visited" with Bagdasarjanz, understand that our visits were conducted via a dozen or so e-mails. The e-mails soon took on the tone and manner of genuine conversations: Questions would generate stories or memories or asides, which in turn suggested other or better questions in a day or two, and later e-mails would add to earlier responses. Since the visits never did follow any "Q and A" format, I have tried to summarize my points of inquiry and then present her various responses as a connected narrative. My thanks to Bagdasarjanz's daughter, Christine Naegeli, a pro-

essional translator, for helping out when Ursula felt more at ease writing in her native language. As she modestly put it, “I only speak well German, French, and Italian: our Swiss languages!” But then she casually mentioned also speaking Spanish, and her English is quite good.

Among my many inquiries, I mentioned that for European collectors, her discs might remind some of them of a concert of hers that they fondly remembered, or a broadcast they enjoyed on the radio, but for most Americans the recordings would be greeted with a sense, frankly, of discovery. Bagdasarjanz did not want the “commercial” aspect of the recordings to be what this interview is all about, but Fanfare readers are naturally curious about such things, and her way of answering ended up connecting many diverse threads of conversation:

“On the day of the terrible assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, on the Swiss radio, all our radio stations played my Bach Sonata in A Minor, which I performed in 1963 at Radio Lugano. That was my first ‘contact’ with the U.S.!” (The performance is on Volume 1, CD-1248).

“You’ll see on my website a short video from a film, Die Geigen von Appenzell, where you see me performing Bach on many great violins. Sitting on a chair is the owner of all the great and wonderful Stradivari and Guarneri instruments, Rolf Habisreutinger. He had the idea to bring me to the U.S.A. for many concerts, to pay the costs for the trip, the orchestras, and so on. He was so proud of me! I told him that for me it would be impossible, because my son was only six and my daughter three years old. I would never leave them alone with an au pair girl. My husband had a lot to do as a lawyer with his own office, and my parents were too far away. Today, I would react in the same manner: You have children or not, and you can only do everything if you have not. Children are our future! I’m very strict.

“And you see: Stefan and Christine surprised me with the first four CDs, the fourth of which is actually the new Volume 5, which they created for one of my birthdays. We all went on a cruise to Italy and at the day of my birthday, they presented the CDs in the shop of the ship, and wrote ‘available June 30’! Even the cover photos were the same as now! They made them from copies of the radio performances they found in a cupboard in the cellar. I was very pleased with them and I decided to go to a good studio to do the remastering, Soundville Recordings Studios, Lucerne. I have excellent team work with my label, Gallo, and because of the wonderful success of the discs, together we decided to come out now with Volume 5.”

Record collectors are often interested in what recordings musical artists listen to on their own, and what other musicians they find to be interesting. Bagdasarjanz offered up some examples:

“If I’m listening to recordings, I prefer chamber music, such as the Végh Quartet’s Beethoven quartet integral set on Auvidis-Valois. For symphonies, conductors like Leinsdorf, Solti,

Haitink, Abbado, and Rattle. Pianists like Pollini, Schiff, and others. For the last 10 years I have gone to the opera house in Zurich much more than to concerts; our opera in Zürich is outstanding. For violinists, I always prefer to go to concerts (live!) in Zurich or Lucerne. One of the good young violinists certainly is Sergey Khachatryan. I have his CD with Sibelius and Khachaturian (I also performed Khachaturian, once, in Zürich, but with piano — the music for the orchestra wasn't available). Unfortunately, Khachatryan's CD has not the best sound. Today, there is a boom for old vinyl discs. If they are remastered, the sound is much better than on today's CDs — it's the same with my remastered radio and live concerts."

"With recordings you may have quantity but not quality — you may buy some, and after a certain time you throw them away. I never listen to artists on YouTube unless I find recordings there that you don't find anymore. My own YouTube channel is a lot of fun, but it is like an adventure to me!"

More than once in our e-mail exchanges, Bagdasarjanz mentioned "our best and close friend" Erich Leinsdorf and his family, so I asked more about him. Leinsdorf is, of course, a name known to all serious record collectors. Her Leinsdorf stories invoked still other memories:

"Erich and Vera Leinsdorf invited me and my then-husband to accompany them in 1989 on an unforgettable month-long tour of America with the New York Philharmonic. We attended many of his concerts in Avery Fisher Hall in New York. I also had the good fortune to attend Erich Leinsdorf's concerts in Berlin, Vienna, Munich, Amsterdam, The Hague, and of course Zurich. He had an apartment in Zurich and several times conducted at the Tonhalle."

"What I found most interesting was to have the privilege of attending all the rehearsals. I learned so much. For example, Leinsdorf once asked me, 'Ursula, why does the Vienna Philharmonic sound softer in tone than the Berlin Philharmonic, even when I — the same conductor — conduct both orchestras?' That's how I learned to hear that every orchestra has its own soul, its own sound, no matter how many musicians with various nationalities play in it. Leinsdorf asked me, 'Who is mainly responsible for the tone?' As a violinist, I replied immediately, 'The string players and their bowing techniques.' After all, the tone colors are produced with the bow arm. 'That is exactly what I was hoping you would say,' exclaimed Leinsdorf. It explains why it's not easy for a conductor to let the string players sing with all orchestras. It depends on how things are."

"I'll tell you a funny story that took place during a Leinsdorf concert in Avery Fisher Hall in New York. I was sitting with some of Leinsdorf's friends and his wife, Vera, in his box in Avery Fisher Hall, when suddenly during the concert an unpleasant, disturbing, high-pitched whistle was heard throughout the hall. The problem was pointed out after the intermission and the audience was asked to kindly turn off all electronic devices. But the high-pitched whistle stayed with us. After the concert Leinsdorf's friends got together in the soloist room. And what do you think happened? The whistle came along with us! One of Leinsdorf's best and oldest friends had put his hearing aid in his trouser pocket and forgot to turn it off! That made Erich laugh out loud."

When Robert Maxham interviewed Bagdasarjanz, they discussed in some detail the influences of her teachers who were pupils of Carl Flesch (1873–1944). Veteran readers might recall my review of a two-disc set of Flesch recordings and performances on Symposium (Fanfare 12:4). Flesch’s systematic scale publication and his thoughts about violin fingerings remain powerful influences on what we hear from today’s violinists, with the possible exception of period performance practice specialists. And longtime readers might also recall my enthusiasm for the stern and insightful unaccompanied Bach recording of another of her teachers, the remarkable quartet violinist and conductor Sándor Végh (Fanfare 21:1), and for two discs of valuable sonata recordings by the great violinist and teacher Max Rostal (Fanfare 14: 3). I asked about Végh both as an influence and for any memories his name, and that of Max Rostal, invoked, and again that simple inquiry opened up deeper areas of thought and discussion.

“I’m very grateful that you asked me about the great musician and philosopher Sándor Végh! The icing on the cake of my studies was an intensive, two-year collaboration with Végh. I went to him to Basel each week. Because of him I immersed myself in spiritually elevated dimensions by learning to be more creatively aware, to breathe, to phrase.”

“Végh was one of the most severe musicians. On a single line of a piece of music he sometimes practiced with me for two to three hours, until the whole line was perfectly phrased and I could then grasp the whole piece of music. Because of his quartet playing, Végh had become a chamber-music violinist, and through him I discovered a refined bowing technique that makes phrasing possible at any given point on the bow.”

“I was well prepared for Végh, first by my violinist mother, together with Aida Stucki, and the next very important step was the Paris Conservatory. At that time, Paris was the best conservatory, together with the Moscow Conservatory, which I visited in 1968–69. I had learned what was basically legato bowing at the conservatory, where I had graduated with a premier prix. I thus had the repertoire and the technique to be able to immerse myself in the spiritual dimensions of a Végh.”

“Sometimes it seemed as though I was being carried by wings to the universe when I played the violin! During my time in Paris (I was 17 years old) I was exploring Buddhism, inspired by Herrigel’s Zen in the Art of Archery and for other reasons. For me this meant devoting an extreme degree of discipline and willpower to accomplish this: ‘It’s playing,’ not, ‘I’m playing.’ This development was just right for Végh, who kept telling me, ‘Ursula, when you’re playing the violin, you should be as calm and focused on the inside as a Buddha, but on the outside, in the movement of your arms and fingers, very lively!’ It was a privilege for me to be able to continue developing myself in peace, which takes time.”

“At this time I had already given many concerts in Switzerland and abroad, and had made many radio recordings, all naturally and effortlessly. I also had the privilege of sometimes turning down concert requests made by my agency. They agreed to everything I said.”

“Max Rostal was an admirer of Flesch’s scale system. I attended one of his summer schools at Gurten, near Bern. He was like a schoolmaster; we were sitting on chairs and he was speaking about Flesch’s technique to us. There were, I remember, two members of the Turku Symphony looking for a soloist for their concerts, which were also to be heard on Helsinki radio. They heard all the violinists during one week. At the end they chose Ursula and not Rostal’s best students from Germany. Rostal told me, ‘Ursula, you are performing this Mozart concerto really better than the others, and also, you are looking beautiful.’ It helps!”

“I appeared with Arthur Grumiaux. Isaac Stern and his wife invited me to a dinner in Zurich; the violinist Joseph Szigeti and his wife, Wanda, wrote letters to me, just as Végh did. Do you know of Rudolph Barshai? Several years ago, in August 2000, he made me a nice present: a copy of Bach’s Sonata No. 1 with notations from Leopold Auer. I was and am a friend and musician/violinist colleague of great musicians all over the world. You see, music is an international language, and musicians who share the same views all know each other.”

“The Strad from October 2011 has comments from Norman Lebrecht, that sensationalism has replaced music at the summits of violin playing, and that there is no string player today who commands the global reach of past masters. That’s why I have to say something about the music ‘industry’ of our time. It’s not about becoming famous as quickly as possible, but about training yourself to become a serious musician. It’s not about presenting yourself as a classical performer, as though you were in show business. Such an approach takes away from your credibility, and success achieved that way is not really success. Unfortunately, these days the music ‘industry’ sometimes takes a direction that I don’t like — all the more reason that an artist must sometimes be able to say no to all that.”

“I decided myself about my direction. I had more time to practice — at least five hours a day, always, and I was not in a hurry to fly from concert to concert. I am thankful that I belong to an earlier generation of violinists, and thankful that I was able to feel that I had a lucky star up above that watched over the development of my musical life, and it is still there!”

“The archive on my website shows how many radio stations in the U.S.A. and Canada are pleased with my CDs. And in Switzerland: Zurich, Lugano, Rete Due in Italian; in Romania, where I gave three master classes for violin in Targu-Mures (2001, 2002, 2004); near Klausenburg, Cluj (where Végh was born — destiny?). Last week, I got a handwritten letter from the Paris Conservatory. Now is the best time for me to have this comeback. What Nietzsche once said applies to me, too: Without music, life would be a mistake. And the readers from Fanfare will see and hear the big difference that makes, if they like to hear serious musicians on CDs.”