Swiss Violinist Ursula Bagdasarjanz Reflects on Her Influences

BY ROBERT MAXHAM

Ursula Bagdasarjanz, the daughter of Samuel Bagdasarjanz, who combined Armenian and Swiss ancestry, and Margrit Weiss, born in Switzerland of Austrian and Swiss parents, gave her first concert at the age of 10, playing Beethoven's Romance No. 2 in F Major. She received the *Premier Prix de Violon* at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris. Championing the works of Othmar Schoeck, she recorded his violin sonatas with his daughter, Gisela. Recently, Gallo released four related recordings: Gallo 1248, recorded in the 1960s, includes works by Bach, Nardini, Mozart, and Bartók (reviewed in *Fanfare* 32:5); Gallo 1251 includes her *Sept Poésies pour Violon et Piano*, played by violinist Melanie Di Cristino, as well as sonatas by Mozart, Handel, Nardini, and Paganini played by Bagdasarjanz (*Fanfare* 32:5); Gallo 1250 offers Bagdasarjanz's live performances of Schoeck's Violin Concerto as well as Glazunov's (*Fanfare* 32:5); and Gallo 1249 is composed of Schoeck's Variation Sonata, op. 22, and his violin sonatas, op. 16 and op. 46. At the same time, two didactic violin works have appeared, the second of which, outlining, and providing study material for, a nontraditional but well thought-out approach to learning the violin (starting not from first position, as has been traditional through several centuries, but in third position, which a young—or even older—beginner might very well find more natural and comfortable). Bagdasarjanz graciously provided me with a copy of the fascinating second volume, which works rigorously through the five positions that beginners encounter in the first years of their study, and which, according to Bagdasarjanz, provides "a good technical basis, leading directly to the standard methods of Flesch and Galamian," both of which develop violin technique through a thoroughgoing study of almost every conceivable scale pattern in almost every conceivable setting. Yet Bagdasarjanz's method isn't at all joyless; in fact, she insists that "curiosity, interest, and joy in the technical part of playing the violin can be awakened at an early stage."

In the course of the interview, I asked Bagdasarjanz to comment on some of the influences on her musical development, including the importance of her family, her love for which seeps through everything she's written about herself. But we began with her admiration for Carl Flesch's method.

RM: Your biography suggests that you're at least an indirect violinistic descendant of Carl Flesch. I've always had a great reverence for his two-volume study of violin playing, not perhaps invariably because of the answers he gives, but because he wrote so thoroughly and so penetratingly on every aspect of his art, artistic as well as technical. And his memoirs provide just about the most penetrating analysis of violin playing by the great artists of his time that I've ever encountered. A. E. Housman once commented that he went to Matthew Arnold for illumination; I've gone over the course of the years for the same kind of inspiration to Carl Flesch.

UB: Yes, I treasure the fundamental works of Flesch and Galamian so much, and appreciate Rosenblith's and Rostal's new editions of Flesch's books. Aïda Stucki was a student of Flesch at the time when she was teaching me, allowing me to become well acquainted with Flesch's scale system at an early age. I was extremely fortunate! Later, when I studied at the Conservatoire National Supérieur in Paris, scales and double-stop scales were practiced in a somewhat different manner—although with tremendous discipline—just as at the conservatory in Moscow, where I had the privilege of visiting teachers and students for two days in 1969. To answer the question, I'd like to say that many roads lead to Rome, but there is one that is unavoidable, necessary, and vital: target training. This is true whether in music or sports. For musicians this means that the better your technique is, the more you can express the full range of tonalities in a joyous, warm, and personal way.

RM: I've noticed with chagrin that many contemporary students of the violin, at least in the United States, have lost a sense of the instrument's history—violinists like Oistrakh and even Heifetz have been almost forgotten by many. Is the situation as bleak in Europe?

UB: No. Many students of the violin in Europe have not forgotten great violinists such as Oistrakh, Stern, Heifetz, and Menuhin, whose recordings are still very much appreciated.

RM: What violinists most profoundly influenced you during your formative years? Did you listen to recordings? Do you remember any that particularly struck you when you were young?

UB: Actually, I didn't listen to recordings during my formative years. I didn't need to, as all the great violinists played in the concert halls of Zurich and Winterthur. And I heard them all, together with my mother, who herself was a violinist. I was even so lucky as to see Ginette Neveu in concert. At Arthur Grumiaux's wish, I played Bach's Double Violin Concerto in D Minor with him for an illustrious, private circle of people. During my three years of studies at the Conservatoire National Supérieur in Paris, I heard all the great violinists play, live in concert! At the time, I didn't want recordings of other violinists to influence my own playing. I owned only one LP, a wonderful recording of Mozart's Rondo in A Minor, K. 511, by the pianist Arthur Schnabel. Even today Mozart remains my favorite composer—and not only because Mozart's grandmother, the mother of Leopold Mozart, was Anna Maria Sulzer, whose family lived in Baden, Switzerland, but was originally from my home town, Winterthur!

RM: You suggest that violin students begin in third position. I remember reading, almost 50 years ago, that the best place to start was fourth position because the palm of the left hand rests naturally against the violin in that position, so starting elsewhere than first position isn't entirely revolutionary, though these alternative ideas haven't been fully explored—perhaps until your work.

UB: Violin teachers have long accustomed themselves to thinking first from the open strings of the violin and then placing one finger after the other onto the strings, i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4. In my books 1 and 2, I have tried to break this train of thought. [Book 1: *Stories from the Violin.* Book 2: *The Other Way.* Edition Kunzelmann/Edition Peters; GM 1777a and GM 1777b.]

RM: David Oistrakh once remarked that Georges Enescu relied on his right arm more than on his left hand for articulation and that his "student," Yehudi Menuhin, did so as well (it's even been suggested that both suffered physically for that manner of playing).

UB: I often heard Menuhin play in Paris. He had great difficulties in leading his bow arm roundly and softly, especially in the lower registers. Apart from this, his interpretations were always interesting and valuable.

RM: Was your training in the position and employment of the bow arm influenced in any way by the Russian school?

UB: My training in the position and use of the bow arm was not influenced in any way by the Russian School.

RM: Shoulder pads came into vogue, I think, in the early 1960s; Stern, Francescatti, Milstein, Oistrakh, and Heifetz didn't use them. Do you advocate their use in your teaching? (I know that fellow Stucki student Anne-Sophie Mutter doesn't play with one—and she uses a Flesch-style over-the-tailpiece chinrest.)

UB: Actually, it isn't important whether a violinist uses shoulder pads or not. What is important is that he/she feel comfortable and have a relaxed posture.

RM: You mention Flesch's contention that beginning violinists should emphasize the establishment of a reliable technique. Are you aware of Suzuki's method, now dominant in the United States, in which students supposedly learn the violin as they learn language—in this case, making music without reading notes and without explicitly acquiring a bedrock technical solidity? Has the Suzuki method penetrated Europe?

UB: The Suzuki method hasn't taken hold in Europe. I recommend teaching groups of no more than four small children in order to be able to respond to each individually. In this way I have had many good results.

RM: Your Poésies *reveals an interest in composition that seems rare among violinists nowadays. Even Kreisler, perhaps the last noted violinist-composer, wrote no concertos (except for his pastiche on Vivaldi) or sonatas; and Szigeti, Elman, Milstein, and Heifetz, though they made striking arrangements for the violin, didn't compose anything original (supposedly Heifetz wrote some pop music—under the pseudonym Jim Hoyle, I think).*

UB: It seems that contemporary violinists, after they retire, are more interested in conducting than in composing. I myself love to write verse and invent stories, be it in words or in music. The

individual pieces of *Sépt poésies pour Violon et Piano* just flew to me. They had no titles (headings) until only after finishing the composition. In Menuhin's summer school concerts in London, the students play short but interesting pieces. Such school programs are always in need of new compositions because there is a real lack of imaginative, short pieces for students at a high level. Of course they can be used as encores at recitals.

RM: Did you compose Dracula *for a specific occasion or did you find the occasion after you composed it? It's a witty little piece that I think would delight many audiences. Especially now. Did you know that vampires have become very chic recently in the United States after a deluge of books and movies about teenage vampires?*

UB: The composition *Dracula* is based on a special personal story, and its title was selected after the piece was finished. You must know that Dracula had nothing to do with vampires! King Vlad the Impaler (Dracula) was born in 1431, probably in Sighisoara, a city in Transylvania. Because he used to punish people by impaling them, his name became Vlad the Impaler. He was crowned three times as Voievod (king) of the Romanian people. [Bagdasarjanz gave master classes in Targu-Mures, Rumania, in 2001, 2002, and 2004.]

RM: How did you come to be a champion of Othmar Schoeck's music?

UB: The Swiss composer Othmar Schoeck headed the symphony orchestra in St. Gallen, Switzerland, from 1917 to 1944, when my mother was a violinist in that ensemble. A lifelong friendship between our families developed. I naturally grew into the musical world of this great Swiss composer. The collaboration with Gisela Schoeck, the daughter of the composer, and the numerous performances in which I played Schoeck's Violin Concerto, deepened my understanding of this wonderful music.

RM: How did you become connected with Gallo?

UB: In 2008 I exhibited my CDs and books at the Musikmesse Frankfurt [International Trade Fair for Musical Instruments, Sheet Music, Music Production and Music Business Connections]. Gallo was there and we got to know each other. As a native Swiss I am pleased to have a Swiss label for my CDs and a Swiss publisher for my books.

RM: I've noticed throughout your publicity materials and in the notes to your CDs that you seem to have a great love and reverence for your family members, past generations as well as future ones. The poet Wordsworth called the child the father of the man, but the traditional family seems to be breaking down here in the United States. I grew up in a musical family—the three generations preceding me were violinists and violin makers—and I can't help wondering whether without a nurturing familial matrix, love of and devotion to music and the violin can still be passed quite as successfully from generation to generation.

UB: Yes, my family is the most important part of my life. Daily life in Switzerland is different from that in the United States. At least once a day members of a Swiss family eat together while the children still live at home. Children come home from primary school for lunch every day, a custom that builds family ties. Sports and music play an important role, too, as do friendships. All this strengthens the sense of well-being and security within the family. I have great love and reverence for my family, past and present. I talk a lot about my grandparents and great-grandparents to my children and grandchildren so that they understand where their roots are from. Love and devotion to music can certainly be passed on from generation to generation. However, it should not be done with pressure. A child has to develop a certain love for an instrument and cannot just love it because the mother and grandmother play the same instrument.