

A classical act



ORIT WOLF'S goal? To bring the younger generation into the fold.
(Haim Kimchi)

Musings on pianist Orit Wolf

• By JENNIFER GREENBERG

Orit Wolf has finally created an accessible lecture series for Israel's English-speaking audience.

"Please turn your phones ON."

This is the counterintuitive instruction that esteemed classical pianist Orit Wolf gives at the beginning of her lectures, or as she likes to call them, "conversations."

"I want [my audience] to feel free to tweet, take photos, record videos, and send SMS's," Wolf explains wholeheartedly.

The established musician comprehends that the use of technology during a performance or lecture series is considered an outrage to her generation, and the classical community especially. However, unlike her peers, Wolf is not exclusively concerned with the stereotypical "season ticket-holding" demographic that swarms the intimate Tel Aviv Museum of Art concert hall for any

given classical performance.

On the contrary, her goal is to bring the younger generation into the fold: "We don't see many young people at classical concerts these days. For me, the most important thing is to listen to the digital generation," which includes tech-savvy individuals like her brother. Eleven years her junior, he exposed her to the all-too-familiar modern archetype who is always glued to their phones, and always impatient.

For that reason, on top of encouraging the use of cell phones during her lectures, Wolf has also chosen to shorten her concerts to 75 minutes each, rather than three-hour events with drawn-out walker-and-wine-infused intermissions.

"I'd even pare them down to an hour," she admits. "Much like how people no longer sit for one-hour meetings, sadly, no one has that kind of time to devote to Mozart, Beethoven," or Wolf for that matter. "It's a matter of efficiency. Less is more when your audience is listening attentively," says the

43-year-old piano prodigy.

While reeling millennials into an auditorium can prove harder than herding the White City's stray cats, Wolf has been tackling the impossible head-on since first grade.

Without a sixteenth-note of music in her genetic makeup, a six-year-old Wolf scheduled her own piano lessons with her best friend's Russian teacher in Ramat Gan; practiced ever day without any parental pressure; studied rigorously under Hanna Shalgi, who "brought up a generation of talented young musicians – she was a real live Madame Sousatzka: not just a piano teacher, but a teacher of life"; received full scholarships to study at the Boston University College of Fine Arts and later on the Royal Academy of Music in London (where she now teaches). Not to mention her PhD from Bar Ilan University, as well as eight years of lecturing at Tel Aviv University.

Wolf shares that "after nearly a decade of teaching, I was shocked to receive an e-mail explaining that due to budget

considerations, the university would have to let me go."

Any other person would consider this a failure, and perhaps give up altogether. Wolf, on the other hand, had learned a lesson far more valuable than any left-hand fingering or arpeggiated series while under the guidance of Shalgi: "that there is no possibility to cry over failure. When I made a mistake, like the time I completely blanked on a live recording in front of an audience of 1,000 when I was 12, [Shalgi] would tell me, 'Ok, you didn't get it. Now get up and start again tomorrow.'"

And that is exactly what Wolf did upon receiving that devastatingly impersonal e-mail from Tel Aviv's most notable educational institution. With the help of her students, who reassured her that what she did was "truly something else," Wolf managed to pull herself up by the bootstraps, despite initial hesitations that she was not enough of a businesswoman.

Two students in particular helped her rent

out a beautiful gallery space in Jaffa for a private series, and it was an upward glissando from there.

"I started with 35 people in two weeks' time. Within three years, we had grown to hundreds and had to move to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, which has become my second home. I now perform for over 4,000 people, with eight concert series in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Ashdod, Rehovot and all over the country."

Her mission was simple: to not merely play, but rather share and converse with her audience members, who were predominantly Hebrew-speaking. That is, until this autumn, when Wolf introduced her newest addition to the ambitious docket: Music and Muse, a concert lecture series at the Weil Center in Kfar Shmaryahu, held entirely in English.

Wolf felt that "this community never had the full means to enjoy classical music that Hebrew-speakers did."

Wolf has already completed two of the five lectures within the series, which hosts international artists from Israel and abroad, covering topics such as: how to run a rehearsal, how musicians disagree during rehearsals, different dictations, as well as expanding to a more global context by providing insight into the world of historical composers' lives, then seamlessly bringing their themes, motifs and most accomplished works into the modern age.

For instance, Wolf's most recent program, titled "Making Love with Chopin," married Chopin's most famous nocturnes and mazurkas with bossa nova and jazz improvisation.

"People were finally listening to Chopin in the 21st century, and enjoying it," Wolf gloats.

Her upcoming concert, "The Magic of Mandolin," invites one of the most prestigious mandolin players of all time, Shmuel Elbaz, on stage for a trip to Italy, Spain, Romania, Armenia, and an interactive exploration of the folk music of these Romantic European countries.

"I'm not Wikipedia," Wolf interrupts, a natural cadenza to her melodious speech. "The format is 70% playing, 30% speaking, and I do not work in 'lecture mode' either. I converse – with the audience, the artists. I never set out to 'teach,' rather I prefer to share my interpretations, my thoughts, my challenges with them; ideas, questions, contexts, different ways of playing a single piece."

As indicated in the series' title, Wolf strongly believes that "music is not just an end, but a means for inspiration – for you to go out and do what you're passionate about in other fields.

"I don't want you to be a musician," she states. "I want music to inspire you in your high-tech company, your start-up, your creative writing. If after 75 minutes, music is your muse, then I have succeeded."

Orit Wolf will perform at the Weil Center in Kfar Shmaryahu on January 29 at 20:00. She will also be giving a TED talk at the Mann Auditorium in Tel Aviv on the power of failure this spring.

For the full program, visit www.oritwolf.com.