

Profile



Musician extraordinaire

Pianist, composer and innovator Orit Wolf believes in the 'success of failure' **By Judith Sudilovsky**



Orit Wolf: 'You have to be very strong to fail and continue to strive'

THE FIRST time Orit Wolf failed in a musical performance she was 12 years old.

Already excelling as a young pianist, she had been invited to her first live recording, performing a solo piano recital at the YMCA in Jerusalem for a broadcast on IBA radio for the classical Kol Hamusika station, and her fingers froze on the keyboard as her mind blanked out.

"It was a very embarrassing moment, but also a very crucial moment," says Wolf, who today is among Israel's top and most active classical musicians, both as an international concert pianist and also as a lecturer in innovative thinking and leadership. "I was always taught how not to make a mistake, but I was not taught what I should do if I do make a mistake — which is to improvise. It was a transformational point for me. Improvisation is not merely a methodology, but rather a state of mind which enables you to get out of any 'trouble.' It also enables one to be in the 'now.'"

Although her top-notch musical education had taught her how to play the piano, she says, she had not been taught how to cope with failure.

"We educate for information, not for knowledge. And you can get information so easily today on Google. The best schools are those that give us tools, not knowledge," says Wolf, 42. "You can pick up a tune and [play] it in so many different ways."

Especially in today's world of Photoshop and Instagram, where everybody needs to look their best and can edit their on-screen image, the very idea of being seen as a failure, of having made a mistake, is the antithesis of how we want to present ourselves to the world, notes Wolf.

"This is the Facebook generation — everybody is always [presenting themselves] as beautiful and happy, and always traveling abroad," she says.

But Wolf has even learned to celebrate her mistakes sometimes, those little stumbling blocks everybody runs into at one point or

another. At times, those forced improvisations can turn out to be unanticipated successes, she says.

Indeed, she says, failure is her favorite subject.

“I truly think we are speaking way too much about success in Western society and too little about the power of mistakes,” she says. “When we realize that mistakes are part of growth, of a learning path, when we acknowledge that making mistakes means we jumped into the unknown, that we took a risk – then we actually put ourselves in a forward-moving position.”

Wolf has translated her long years of studies (at Boston University, The Royal Academy of Music of London and Bar-Ilan University) and numerous awards into a successful musical career in Israel and abroad. But, more unconventionally, the unexpected glitches she faced on stage – such as the time when she realized she would have to perform a concert on a piano missing the C-sharp key (the stage manager berated her for complaining about one missing key when there were so many others she could use) – have also been the impetus to launch herself as a sought-after motivational speaker. Combining her passion for music and her love of communication with the audience, Wolf creates a dialogue about the success of failure, overall sparking a change in the conversation pattern within classical music in Israel and abroad.

Despite her long list of achievements and awards, she is not afraid to talk openly about her own failures and rejections, and encourages others to do the same.

“True,” she says, “the list of awards on my résumé is long, but the list of prizes and concerts I failed in is much longer. We always talk about our successes – we never talk about our failures. You have to be very

strong to fail and continue to strive. There needs to be an obsession to be what we want to be, to really feel a real passion for what we are doing. When you’ve realized that you want something and you go for it, then you have succeeded. There is an art to the dream, an art to the fantasy.”

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Such as the time she was told, in a very short email, that her teaching position at Bar-Ilan was being terminated and she realized she would no longer be teaching her popular classes at the university’s Interdisciplinary Program for the Arts, where she had been successfully exposing a younger generation to classical music.

But it was from that disappointment that her current love was born. With the encouragement of her students and in a continuing quest to bring new audiences to the world of classical music, she began organizing a series of private concert lectures whose popularity has continued to grow. A decade later, she has two full series with over 900 subscribers at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and seven other successful concert series around Israel.

This year she will be inaugurating her Porter English Concert Lecture series,

“Music and Muse,” bringing her interactive communication concert style to the English-speaking community at the Weil Center in Kfar Shmaryahu. Hosting other musicians, the series, which is supported by the Dame Shirley Porter and the Porter Family Foundation, opens on October 30 with a salute to Broadway favorites. The series includes four more performances featuring Chopin masterpieces, mandolin Baroque sonatas, and Brazilian samba and bossa nova.

“We live in a new era of direct communication. Boundaries are out. Closeness is in. You can see it in the most elementary aspect: we can reach anyone and anytime,” says Wolf. “There are much less ‘formalities’ and ‘do’s and don’ts’ over communication ‘laws.’ So what was the natural boundary between an artist and the audience is collapsing. People like to ‘touch’ the performer and get to know other sides of his art, life and professional debates. It’s not the Facebook era which enables this, but rather a new age where we are allowing ourselves to approach anyone in a much more direct and fearless way – and I love it.”

She encourages a new form of communication in her series, not being disturbed by applause in what would be considered inappropriate places in other concerts by those new to the classical music world.

“I am looking to break the paradigm of classical music and how it is perceived. Maybe it is our fault it is difficult for audiences to relate [to the music,]” she says. “I see it as our job to [mediate] between the music and young people who didn’t have [a classical music education] and weren’t exposed to it. We are closing them off with only formal concerts. There needs to be more improvisation and audience involvement.”



Realistically, she said it is not an easy time for classical musicians and, in addition to being a performer, she needs to be her own manager and producer. She doesn't have the time to wait to receive formal support from the Ministry of Culture, she says. "I want my dreams sooner," she says.

The ministry has a "beautiful vision" of getting music and art into the periphery, says Wolf, but, unfortunately, she is not in the periphery nor is her type of music the very first choice of the ministry.

"That is just a fact. It doesn't mean that it is right or wrong, but I have to be aware of that," she says.

She does not want to discuss the political aspect of the controversial Minister of Culture and Sports Miri Regev, but notes, "It's not about who is in the ministry but about realizing as a society what place we want to give our artists as ambassadors. In Norway, the government sponsors artists. They have a salary to sit down and write music. There is a realization that your artists are the best ambassadors for your country. Two hundred years from now people will not remember who led the ministry; they will remember the artists who wrote the beautiful books, the composers who made the music and the playwrights who wrote the plays."

Wolf was born in Ramat Gan and grew up in Tel Aviv in a home full of music, though neither of her parents were musicians — her mother is a professor of Ethics at Bar-Ilan University and her father is a chemist with his own company.

Yet the thing she remembers coveting the most as a six-year-old girl was her friend's piano.

"My mother told me they would buy me a piano only if I showed them how serious I was about it. I used to go over to her house all the time to play on the piano until

finally her mother said, please, buy your daughter a piano," says Wolf, who today lives in Pardes Hannah with her Norwegian journalist husband and their two children, Shenhav, 11, and Yasmin, 7, none of whom have musical leanings.

"My kids love the music, but it also bothers them. They are not happy with it because for them the music means mommy is home less or away at work, or that mommy is going to play music right now," she admits.

With the ever-reduced class offerings at schools, no one is teaching Beethoven and Bach, and the younger generation is not being exposed to the beauty and complexity of classical compositions, music which has been proven to improve performance in mathematics, she says.

"Music is really architecture. It helps us to connect better to our desires and emotions; there are so many colors, instruments and shapes. Everything trying to be out there if we have the sensitivity to listen

Orit Wolf takes a break from the piano to serenade her audience

attentively," she says.

"We as musicians are there to touch our audience and give them the tools to understand and appreciate music in a better way. Conversing on stage enables this so beautifully. It helps the artist, the audience and the music itself to be better and easier understood," she adds. "Like in the Renaissance period, we can do more and more. It's not either this or that. I, at least, always search for an artist who does more than one thing, who can give more sides to a performance other than merely playing beautifully. It does not mean that every concert must be accompanied with an interpersonal conversation but we must have the opportunity to choose, to alter, to be less rigid in forms. The main lesson is that there is no one way to deliver music — especially not the music of the great masters." ■