

“Music is the breath that composes my life”

A Violinist from Herrliberg

Until the 1990s, Ursula Bagdasarjanz was one of Switzerland’s leading violinists.

Her success was no accident.

Although her name has an exotic ring to it and conjures up foreign lands, Ursula Bagdasarjanz was born in Winterthur, in 1934. It was her father, an immigrant from Romania with Armenian–Swiss roots, who gave the violinist her melodious name which the mother of two retained even when her marriage ended.

But it is to her mother, Margrit Weiss, that Bagdasarjanz owes her musicality. An excellent violinist herself, Weiss was part of numerous orchestras, including the City Orchestra of St. Gallen under Othmar Schoeck. The Swiss composer and conductor (1886–1957) would later have a great influence on the musical career of the daughter. Although Bagdasarjanz would not normally have considered playing Swiss compositions of that time, the discovery of Schoeck’s violin work came as a shock. “It became my specialty, especially after my mother urged me to play with Schoeck’s daughter Gisela, a pianist,” the 86-year-old musician recalled in her living room in Herrliberg. Today she is considered Schoeck’s most prolific violinist.

Worked harder than the others

But back to the beginning, when Ursula at the age of five began playing the violin with her mother as teacher. At the age of ten she gave her first serious concert, Beethoven’s *Romance in F major*. Determined and self-assertive, Ursula instinctively understood that she wanted to be a violinist. The sound of the violin, the tone, the look, all fascinated her then as now. Today she says, “I summon my energy from music, which is the breath that composes my life.”

Thanks to her mother’s contacts, Bagdasarjanz had the good fortune to meet people who could further her career. She was soon studying with Aida Stucki, who would later become Anne-Sophie Mutter’s violin teacher. When she was 17 years old, Bagdasarjanz told her parents that she wanted to go to Paris to join the class taught by Marcel Reynal at the renowned Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique. Bagdasarjanz remembers how the other students went to a cafe after the lessons, while she would rush back to her cold room to practice. No less than five hours a day – three would simply not have been enough. Her discipline paid off. After the three-year program, and at just 21 years of age, Bagdasarjanz returned home after being awarded the “Premier Prix de Violon.”, Bagdasarjanz continued to take masterclasses, and she traveled the world, with Winterthur as her base. She gave guest performances in a number of European cities and was much in demand in Switzerland as a soloist. After playing with the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra and various other orchestras, Bagdasarjanz made radio recordings in Berlin, Paris and Zurich. She didn’t earn much, but the experience gained while recording was invaluable. The tours were not remunerated either. “The best we could expect was for them to pay for the flight and the hotel. In those days I wasn’t treated as a celebrity, unlike today, where anyone who performs in a schoolhouse is already a star.”

When Ursula Bagdasarjanz married in 1961, she planted vegetables in her garden at her home in Feldmeilen and later in Feldbach. She sold her vegetables at the Volg market, because “We weren’t even able to afford coffee.” At that time her husband wasn’t earning enough to support the two of them, despite his doctorate in law.

Late tributes from America

But all of this was a long time ago. In the 1990s the violinist decided to give up her intensive concert activity. "Practicing five hours a day was exhausting me," she explains. In her opinion, the violin is one of the most difficult instruments with regard to posture. With increasing age one tenses up, which has an effect on the quality of the fingering. "As a soloist I did not want to inflict this embarrassment on myself."

In 2005 Bagdasarjanz published her compositions, *Sept poésies pour Violon et Piano*. She says the themes came to her during her daily walks. She is especially proud of a rarely given and therefore special award in America. In 2013 and 2020 she was honored with a Special Music Treasury Show at Stanford University in California, one of the most prestigious departments of music in the world. She received this award for her interpretation of various violin works, in particular, those of Othmar Schoeck and Alexander Glazunov. This honor is preserved in a two-hour radio broadcast, with personal comments by music director and classical music expert Gary Lemco. He placed the virtuosity of the violinist from Herrliberg on the same level as that of the great Nathan Milstein or David Oistrakh.