

It's a baking afternoon in September 2006 and I'm sitting on the terrace of the YMCA in Jerusalem. Heat and a bright light are reflecting off the surrounding stone but a breeze is blowing and a small fountain is gurgling in the background. Tony Blair has just driven by with his motorcade on his way into the King David Hotel across the road and in three hours' time some of the stars of the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival will perform in the elegant surroundings of the hostel's concert hall. I'm drinking mint tea with one of them, Nikolaj Znaider. It's not a bad place to be.

Clearly Znaider thinks so too – back in 1998 it was the first high-profile festival he attended and he's been coming back to the festival regularly since then. What makes him return? He explains: 'It's not a parade to try to get as many famous musicians as possible, but to try to make good music. That's the main focus and that appeals to me. You can invite as many famous people as you want but if they don't share the same musical ideals then it looks good on paper but the result is not great. This festival has been true to that notion.'

It was this idea of bringing kindred spirits together to make music that led to the festival in the first place, an idea that was born ten years ago in a restaurant, to renowned pianist Elena Bashkirova and Yeheskell Beinisch, musician, lawyer and chairman of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Beinisch recalls: 'Elena and I decided that since we both have so many friends who are musicians we should try to merge them. We asked our friends to come to Israel to play, just for fun, for ourselves – private concerts. She brought her friends and I brought my friends. It was a very nice bunch of people that liked each other and it took off from the first concert.' Those friends include Gidon Kremer, Frans Helmerson, Mischa Maisky and Nobuko Imai, along with Bashkirova's husband Daniel Barenboim.

For Bashkirova there was even more at stake, though: 'We started it in the first place because this place needed something. Culture here in Jerusalem is in danger of extinction. Israel has a lot of things going on, especially in Tel Aviv, but Jerusalem has very little. It is like a haemorrhage – everything that is to do with secular culture is draining out. The moment I started the festival I realised how important it is for the public.'

As it turned out, it was so important that within a few years the festival had outgrown its original 250-seat hall at the Han Theatre, and the organisers were looking for somewhere bigger. They chose



DAN PORGES

Elena Bashkirova, whose musical friendships inspired the festival

# IT'S FUN TO PLAY AT THE YMCA

Held in the city's historic hostel, the Jerusalem Chamber Music Festival brings together kindred spirits to create not only great performances but also an electric atmosphere.

ARIANE TODES reports



COURTESY YMCA

The entrance of Jerusalem's YMCA hostel, where all the concerts take place



The plaque on the wall of the YMCA hostel, dedicated by Lord Allenby in 1933 as 'an international monument of peace and brotherhood'

the concert hall of the YMCA building, in whose neo-Byzantine surroundings all the concerts are now held, and with financial help from the Jerusalem Foundation they had it refurbished.

Bashkirova still has the needs of the public in mind in planning the future. 'I don't want to make a big festival,' she says. 'Jerusalem is a relatively big city, but it's a city where people live and work. It's not a beautiful village or little town where people come especially for the festival. The public for whom we play are working people who live here, so we can't have three or four concerts a day.' Nor will they look for a bigger venue, says Beinisch: 'We don't want to move to another place because of the atmosphere of the YMCA and because it's exactly the right size for chamber music – 600 seats.'

They may have to resist growing international pressure, though, as the festival gathers a worldwide reputation. Sounding somewhat bemused, Beinisch explains: 'A lot of people have started coming from abroad especially for the festival, from Luxemburg, Germany, the US, Australia. They find out about it from the internet or from friends and they order their tickets in advance and come.' There is also pressure to expand from the artists themselves. Bashkirova admits: 'The musicians like to come back so it gets bigger and bigger because I have no heart and no wish to tell them to stay away.'

PHOTOS DAN FORGES

This, despite the fact that they receive nothing other than food, accommodation and airfare ('Economy – nobody gets business class,' Beinisch points out). As Bashkirova says, 'They don't come here to be paid or to get a recording contract. It's not commercial – it's really for the joy of making music.' Which is lucky, as the festival receives no local funding and a minimal government grant, and instead relies largely on donations. Yet paradoxically, this is its great strength. As Beinisch explains: 'There are no arguments about who is getting what, because everybody gets the same. We bring artists who are good friends – they're not in it for the money. Either they like Israel or Jerusalem, or Elena or me personally, or they like to stay here to play with each other and to be with each other – not only for the concerts but around the concerts, going to the swimming pool or the Old City.' To prove the point, at the concerts that I attend a gaggle of artists can usually be found on the steps of the YMCA enjoying jokes together well into the night, long after most of the audience has departed for bed.

With time at a premium this camaraderie is essential to the musical excellence on offer. As Znaider explains, 'Chamber music festivals are difficult in a way because they don't afford you the time that you need. Therefore you rely on everybody being able to play the part really well when they arrive, as well as on collective spontaneity. And when you do that in chamber music it's >



Performers play for the love of it – none receives a penny: (from left) Gidon Kremer and Elena Bashkirova; Mendelssohn's Octet; bassist Nabil Shehata with Daniel Barenboim



Musical kinsmen: festival regulars include (from left) Amichai Grosz, Daniel Barenboim, Matthias Glander, Nikolaj Znaider, Kyril Zlotnikov and Frans Helmerson

important that everyone has a similar approach to the music. If you don't share that then you need a lot of rehearsal time to find common ground.' This is where the Jerusalem Festival succeeds: 'It brings together people who have a similar kind of musical philosophy. It's not necessary to rehearse too much because there's a kinship between most people here in their approach to music.'

Not that they skimp on rehearsal time, as Beinisch is quick to emphasise: 'We insist on four rehearsals for each piece at least. We don't compromise on standards — even if someone has played a piece thousands of times.' Nor does Bashkirova take shortcuts by using pre-formed groups. Quite the opposite: 'I try to put together people who don't normally have the chance to make music together. It's not for existing ensembles. On the contrary — we break established ensembles and put together people to make musical acquaintance.' For example, I get to watch members of the Jerusalem Quartet play in various trios, quartets and quintets, while they're only allowed to play in their own formation a couple of times. This isn't the only mixing that happens — one of the most exciting things to watch in concerts is the levelling of soloists, chamber musicians and orchestral musicians. Each species has its own strengths and weaknesses and the players seem visibly to derive great pleasure from the interbreeding. The results, although not always pristine, always teem with energy and musical life.

Every year the festival has a different theme. On my first night in Jerusalem I had heard performances of works by Schumann, Mozart and Shostakovich, in celebration of their various 2006 anniversaries. At this year's festival, which runs for two weeks from 31 August, the late styles of the great composers will provide the core of the programme, including Bach's *Art of Fugue*, Haydn's *Seven Last Words* and Shostakovich's *Quartet no. 11*. Bashkirova explains her process: 'First comes the programmatic idea for the whole festival, then come the pieces, and then I see who I can get and who would be better for what. It's a big puzzle which comes in many stages.'

One of the achievements of which she feels particularly proud is the development in sophistication of the audience over the festival's ten years. She describes it: 'In the beginning they were quite conservative. They didn't want "new" music. They'd say, "We don't want to listen to this Schoenberg." Schoenberg is a hundred years old — how can they say this? In the end I didn't go for it because one should not go down to the public's demands; one should bring them, lift them. And it has happened over the years. Now they are

absolutely keen and curious about new things. Because they have trust in the festival, that we will not give them anything that is not good. If it is in the programme there is some kind of reason for it.'

In this spirit, every year the festival commissions new work: the night before I had heard Gil Shohat's *Introduction and Presto* for mixed ensemble, a likeable score — though not one that particularly tests any post-Schoenbergian limits — that was enthusiastically received. In 2007 the premieres will be of a quintet by Avner Dorman and a trio by Christian Jost, as well as a new arrangement of the *Adagio* from Mahler's *Tenth Symphony* by Cliff Colnot.

And so at 6.55pm, I and 599 other people file into the concert hall. In the first half of the concert Barenboim and various members of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and Jerusalem Quartet perform Mozart, Webern and Schumann. Barenboim has flown in the day before and his musical and physical presence, which can be felt through the thick Jerusalem-stone walls, instantly pervades the whole festival, creating an extra thrill of anticipation. He and Nabil Shehata, BPO principal double bassist, perform Max Bruch's *Kol nidrei* in a heart-rending account that has the audience spellbound. In the second half of the concert Mendelssohn's *Octet* is performed by a mixture of BPO players and young professionals, with Znaider leading. The players are clearly having a ball and there's a buzz throughout the hall. The performance is full of life and joy, and afterwards, on a high, we all file out again into the warm, breezy night. Like I said, it's not a bad place to be. ■

*This year's festival runs 31 August — 12 September. See [www.jcmf.org.il](http://www.jcmf.org.il)*



Daniel Barenboim rehearsing with the Jerusalem Quartet's Kyril Zlotnikov

PHOTOS: DAN FORGES