

# *Pnina Salzman*

Regarded as “the First Lady of the piano in Israel”, Pnina Salzman was the first Israel-born pianist to achieve international fame and conquer concert stages around the world since the 1930s, even before the establishment of the State of Israel.

Salzman was born in Tel-Aviv in 1922. Showing an early aptitude for the piano, Salzman gave her first recital at the age of eight. At around the same time, legendary French pianist and teacher, Alfred Cortot, heard her playing during a tour to Palestine and invited her to Paris to study with him at the École Normale de Musique, writing of her: “Cette enfant est la musique même” (that child is the music itself). Subsequently, Salzman traveled to Paris and soon became one of Cortot’s favourite pupils, graduating from the École Normale in 1935 with a diploma granting her credentials to teach and perform at the age of thirteen. Salzman then continued her studies with Magda Tagliaferro, who invited her to take place in her class at the Paris Conservatoire, where she received the Premier Prix de Piano in 1938, aged 16.

It was through the violinist Bronislaw Huberman that she first developed a lifelong association with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Huberman, who heard Salzman perform in Paris at the time wrote an urgent letter to the management of the orchestra he has only recently founded in Palestine, asking them to invite her to play as a soloist immediately, stating: "It's a rare thing in an artist's life to go through an experience like the one I had when I heard this girl." In her debut performance with the orchestra, Salzman played three piano concerti at one evening (Chopin 1&2 and Liszt’s first). She went on to perform worldwide in recitals, chamber music, and as a soloist in the world’s most prestigious venues to glowing reviews, playing with major orchestras alongside conductors such as Paul Paray, Charles Munch, Malcolm Sargent, Joseph Krips, Anatol Dorati, Carlo Maria Giulini, Igor Markevitch, George Solti, Neville Marriner, Colin Davis, Lawrence Foster, Zubin Mehta and others.

During World War II, Salzman regularly performed in Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine; and also gave extended concert tours in South Africa (1944), Australia and New-Zealand (1945), which included dozens of daily performances of different solo and orchestral programs, for which she gained outstanding reviews:

"Only once more in my life has a young artist inspired me to such an exultant enthusiasm: Yehudi Menuhin. ... Thus Pnina Salzman. ... I have to say it after all: Pnina Salzman must be declared a pianistic genius. She can already today be counted as one of the five greatest pianists of our time, and surely as the very best, the most perfect, the most sincere, the profoundest, and most dexterous (technically) and the most clever (intellectually) of all living female pianists." (C. de F., the Johannesburg Trek, 1944)

The well-known British critic Neville Cardus, who followed her career in Sydney and later in London, wrote: “The future of this gifted artist must be jealously watched. She must never be allowed to become a routine performer to uncritical audiences. But I fancy an innate sensibility and vitality of musical mind and feeling will preserve her from all that.” (The Sydney Morning Herald, June 1, 1945)

Soon after the war, Salzman toured throughout western Europe to the acclaims of audiences and critics alike, impressing with her “natural technique, uncommon strength, rhythm and musical insight” (Paris, La Depeche de Paris, H. J. M.); her “extraordinary will, virtuosity, dramatic climax, maturity and vision” (London, Daily Telegraph, R. C.); her “poetry, emotion, temperament... and artistry” (Istanbul, L. E.); and regarded as “not only a great artist but an accomplished master” (Stockholm, A. T.) and “one of the greatest artists heard here” (Oslo, Dagbladet, P. M.).

Nevertheless, Salzman chose to pass on tempting offers abroad, as she wished to set her life back in her homeland. The year 1947 marked her marriage to Igal Weissman; her only daughter, Yaira, was born in 1953 (named after Salzman's only brother, Yair, a distinguished violinist who returned from his studies in Paris to fight in Israel's War of Independence, and was killed in 1948).

After her marriage, Salzman continued to perform worldwide. Among numerous concerts and tours, she made her New York debut in 1960 under the conductor Carlo Maria Giulini, with whom she continued to tour through France, Canada, and Japan; In 1963 she became the first Israeli to be invited to play in the USSR, and in 1994, the first Israeli pianist invited to play in China.

In addition, Salzman contributed to the Israeli classical music scene not only through the high artistic standards of her performances, but also through her musical collaborations with other highly regarded Israeli musicians. Besides performing as a soloist, Salzman was a member of some of the top Israeli chamber ensembles, including the Bergman-Salzman trio and the Israel Piano Quartet. Esteemed by many Israeli composers who wrote for her, she also premiered, performed and recorded Israeli pieces by composers such as Paul Ben-Haim, Marc Lavry and Mordecai Seter, to note a few.

Salzman was also a Professor and the head of the piano department at the Tel-Aviv University where she continued to pass on the legacy of her unique musical and interpretative approach, which was shaped by her studies with Cortot. She belonged to a lost generation of performers who exhibited individuality of style and tone. She stressed the idea that the spirit and the caractère of a specific piece determine its interpretation, and that the meaning of the music was achieved by depicting an image behind the notes, which became crucial in the master-classes she gave internationally. Salzman maintained a busy schedule of teaching and performing worldwide. She served as a prominent faculty member in the Tel-Hai International Piano Master Classes (Israel) since their inception, and as a jury member of some of the most prestigious piano competitions, including the Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Master Competition (Israel) since it was established; Clara Haskil International Piano Competition (Switzerland); Santander (Spain); Leeds (England); Dublin (Ireland); Beijing (China); Sydney (Australia); "Marguerite Long" (Paris); and the Tchaikovsky Competition (Moscow). In 2006, she served on the first jury of the "Pnina Salzman" piano competition for young pianists, which was founded in her name. That same year, Salzman became the first Classical performer to have been awarded the Israel Prize, for her vast contribution to Israel's musical life.

By placing her music above career considerations and insisting on living in Israel only, Salzman did not gain the international recognition she has truly deserved, to judge by reviews from her concerts worldwide. Neither did she issue many commercial recordings on LPs or CDs, mainly because of limited opportunities for recordings in Israel. Following two early RCA and CBS vinyl recordings, the first international CD recordings of her music were issued in 2003 in the United States, in a series titled "Legendary Treasures" – dedicated to the masters of the past, placing her among performers such as Heifetz, Richter and Menuhin.

The Israel Broadcasting Authority holds over 130 recordings of Salzman's live concerts. Playing for a relatively small audience, as is the case in Israel, caused her to constantly broaden her repertoire. She played many chamber music pieces and over forty concerti—an uncommonly large number compared with that of other performing pianists, who usually focus on a smaller number of pieces which they then recycle for concerts of large audiences. As an artist who lived for her art, this purely artistic achievement was more important to her than international fame.

In one interview, she expressed her sense of designation, saying:

"I received a gift from God, and I need to take advantage of it. I play under a supreme order."