

These salons rejuvenate the mind



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Classical music

Recitals appear to be in decline, symphony concerts seem to be stuck in a format rut. The only growth area in so-called classical music is in opera, where production values are many and the eyes as well as the ears can be engaged.

Or so I thought until venturing into the wilds of Markham a decade ago, to witness an experiment in concert presentation bearing the curious title Vitoris Salon.

Vitoris, I soon discovered, was a manufactured term, combining letters from the names of three cities, Vienna, Toronto and Paris. As for the word salon, it turned out to have nothing to do with hairdressing and everything to do with trying to recapture the atmosphere of a kind of elegant house concert once popular in the great capitals of Europe.

Inna Perkis and her husband Boris Zarankin experienced such concerts after emigrating from their native Russia in 1978 and arriving in Vienna. Concert pianists trained in St. Petersburg (in her case) and Kharkov (in his), they enjoyed the way the Viennese combined music, hospitality and cuisine.

And so, when they came to Canada a year later, they nourished the idea of starting a concert series of their own, in which they could celebrate music in a richer than usual cultural context. Settling first in Edmonton, then in Vancouver, they waited until coming to Toronto to realize their dream.

In Markham? Well, they happened to know Grace Lin, who organized concerts in the small recital hall of Euromusic on John St. in Markham and she offered them the use of that venue.

So they contacted local teachers to recruit outstanding young students to present prelude concerts before the main musical events, invited Alan Walker, a McMaster University professor and distinguished biographer of Franz Liszt, to offer pre-concert or mid-concert talks, found a woman who baked diet-dooming pastries (Kaiser-



For a decade Inna Perkis and Boris Zarankin have hosted gatherings mixing classical music with speakers on related cultural matters.

Schnitten, Schokoladecremekuchen, Nüssfüllekipferln and the like) and the unique combination of all these features proved enticing enough to lure even a sweet-toothed scribe from 1 Yonge St. northward.

The concerts billed as the Off Centre Music Series, not to mention the pastries, were such a hit that the Zarankins soon had to move south to the larger Arts and Letters Club and then to the CBC's Glenn Gould Studio, where their 10th anniversary season begins next Sunday afternoon with a French salon.

In the 19th century French, or more specifically Parisian, salons were where Frederic Chopin preferred to play. He mingled there with the leading poets and artists of the day, among them the notorious cigar-smoking Baroness Dudevant, known to the literary world as George Sand.

At earlier salons, Alan Walker talked of Sand and her amorous links with Chopin and of many other things, but as the seasons passed and the Zarankins refined their format, other voices joined in the conversation, the

name Vitoris was dropped and the programming grew more systematically thematic.

What remained was the belief, virtually unique in local concert presentations, that the experience of music can be enriched by its presentation in a cultural context.

Examples? A Beethoven murder mystery, presented in January 2001, in which Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata* was performed by violinist Erika Raum and Zarankin, alongside readings from the Tolstoy novella in which a husband kills his wife and her lover, who have themselves been playing the *Kreutzer Sonata*.

Then, the following year, there was a so-called Faust-fest, in which actor-director Joe Ziegler read excerpts from Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus* and Zarankin played the Beethoven *Op. 111 Sonata*, which had inspired the author.

For a French salon in 2002, curator Gloria Groom of the Art Institute of Chicago spoke about the art of the Post-Impressionists, actor-director John Van Burek offered read-

ings from the contemporary literature and Toronto Symphony concertmaster Jacques Israelievitch joined bass-baritone Olivier Laquerre and soprano Frédérique Vézina in performing the music of Debussy, Chausson, Ravel and Fauré.

And for last season's Doctors and Music program, Toronto psychiatrist Dr. David Goldbloom (now chairman of the Off-Centre board) spoke of the relations between the bones-and-rattles fraternity and famous composers such as Mozart, Brahms and Rachmaninoff, between performances of their music.

The French and German salons have become annual. So have the Schubertiades, celebrations of the music of Franz Schubert at which the Zarankins typically play music for piano, four hands. But this season promises a new innovation, following the decision of one of the world's major musicians, the Russian conductor Valery Gergiev, director of the Kirov (Mariinsky) Theatre in St. Petersburg, to become the Off Centre Music Salon's honorary patron.

A fellow student of Inna Perkis's in St. Petersburg (or Leningrad, as it was then known), Gergiev not only played piano, four hands with her, he reportedly failed his history of communism exam on the same day. After renewing their acquaintance, Gergiev came to the Zarankins' house for dinner following a concert at Roy Thomson Hall (where he and his amazing Kirov Orchestra will perform again next April 21).

Upon learning of the Off-Centre Series, he not only agreed to be honorary patron, he offered to make his artists available for two Russian salon concerts per season, beginning Nov. 7 with his company's star soprano Olga Trifonova, in her Canadian debut, and continuing April 24 with the Kirov Orchestra's virtuoso Brass Quintet.

Yes, it has been a long road, actually a decade-long road, from those first concerts on John St. in Markham to collaboration with Valery Gergiev. But the salon concerts have proven their value, not only to Toronto but also to music in general. Long may they and their pastries thrive.