

For the Love of Music

BATTIPAGLIA BRINGS MUSIC TO THE MASSES

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How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Well, some say practice, practice, practice, but if that doesn't work, try being born a musical prodigy like Diana Mittler-Battipaglia. Battipaglia, 59, started playing piano concertos at the age of seven, and has not only played Carnegie Hall as a child, but has played around the world. She has the chops to go after big fame and fortune on the international concert circuit, but truth be told, she would play for free... and does.

As co-founder and executive director of the Con Brio Ensemble, a nonprofit professional chamber music organization that performs mostly free concerts around New York City, Professor Diana Mittler-Battipaglia stays busy. But the Ensemble isn't her only contribution to music. Aside from The Con Brio Ensemble, she also teaches music classes and directs the Chorus at Lehman College in the Bronx.

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Attracting crowds of 150 to 200 people in small venues such as the Hewlett-Woodmere Public Library, the Flushing Library, and the Donnell Library Center, the series has proved to be quite a success. They have performed five chamber music concerts since the beginning of their 22nd season in September 2000 and at least an additional five concerts throughout April 2001. "We always have a full house at these concerts. Sometimes we even have overflow," she says.

In addition to the free library concerts, the Con Brio Ensemble has also performed at the Lehman College Recital Hall in the Bronx, The Church in the Gardens, and Flushing Town Hall in Queens. Concert tickets are priced at about \$10, and \$5 for students. Other funds for the trio come from donations from organizations and businesses such as the Decentralization Program, the Chase Manhattan Foundation, SMARTS Regrant Program, public funding from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Lehman College CUNY Association for Campus Activities. Altogether, funding for the concert series' 22nd season totaled between \$8,000 and \$9,000.

She says she is particularly proud of the work the Ensemble does to bring classical music into communities that are normally not exposed to it or simply cannot afford to attend a concert at venues such as Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall. "You need outreach, or you end up playing for the same group every time," she says.

Besides the restrictive costs of concerts, she blames the media for making the music seem more exclusive than it should be. "There really is a tremendous interest in this kind of music, it's just that the mass media have done a very bad job on us. They've made us out to be some kind of nerds with no spirit and no life. The truth is there is a lot of [spirit] and temperament involved," she says.

Battipaglia's love for chamber music began when she had her first piano lesson with her mother Regina Mittler at age seven in their Queens apartment where she grew up. Battipaglia recalled, "I enjoyed playing the piano ... no one had to force me to practice." After receiving degrees from Juilliard and the Eastman School of Music, a friend convinced her to teach music for the Board of Education, yet cautioned that the only music teachers it tends to hire are chorus teachers. "...[singing] never crossed my mind" she says. Nonetheless, she chose to go into the teaching profession because of the more stable income and life style. She remembered how often her father, himself a musician, had to travel around the world in order to make money, and she didn't want that for herself. So she began taking voice lessons, and by the age of 21 began teaching at the William Cowper Junior High School in Maspeth, New York. She taught vocal and general music classes, and was the choral director.

In becoming a music teacher, Battipaglia was following in the footsteps of both of her parents, who were not only accomplished pianists, but music instructors themselves. Her mother was a music teacher who had studied music under the tutelage of Battipaglia's father, renowned Austrian composer and poet, Franz Mittler. Her parents, both Jewish, left Austria around 1939 after Nazi Germany annexed the country. Her father, on tour in Holland when the annexation occurred, had to flee Austria so abruptly that he had to make the heartbreaking decision to leave over 400 of his musical compositions behind.

Her mother's escape from Austria was more dramatic however. "One day after the Nazis came into Vienna, my mother was giving a piano lesson when she got a phone call from her mother saying that the Gestapo had come to the apartment looking for her." Besides the fact that her parents were Jewish, Battipaglia's mother was also affiliated with The Social Democratic Party at the time, a party that posed a threat to Nazi dominance. Anyone affiliated with the party was targeted for extermination by the Nazis, according to Battipaglia. Her mother had to resort to hiding in neighbors' base-



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ments until a contact at the American Embassy in Vienna arranged for her to come to the U.S. Unfortunately, Battipaglia's grandmother was taken away to a death camp, where she later died.

Her parents' traumas had a tremendous impact on Battipaglia's outlook on life, and continue to fuel her motivation for the work she does today.

Though her father continued his music career in the U.S., losing the bulk of his musical compositions as well as his homeland were things he never seemed able to get over. He shut down emotionally, and died in 1970, never having recovered most of the music he had created. Her mother's trauma was almost as devastating. "My mother is 91 and still has nightmares about those times. You don't get over these kinds of things, but it gives you a real slant on life, the preciousness of life and how important it is to be a decent person. I think that's why I spent so many years in the school system and always tried to present opportunities to people," she says.

More than anything, Battipaglia is motivated to give back to the community by sharing something that is precious to her: her father's lost works. A series of events led her to return to Vienna and Salzburg in 1995 and 1998 to recover the works her father left behind as well as perform con-

certs in his honor. So far, she has been able to retrieve almost all of her father's compositions.

After spending many years teaching music in the city's high schools, Battipaglia began working for Lehman College in 1986. She decided that working in a college would allow her more time to practice the piano, conduct an orchestra and perform complete choral works. Given that she is such an accomplished musician, why work at Lehman College in the Bronx rather than, say, Juilliard? "Prestigious schools can be a hornet's nest as far as faculty is concerned because the egos can be so big. It's not like that here. The faculty here is wonderful, and the students here are so thankful for the work that we do. When you feel appreciated, it makes a difference," she says. She may be a heavy-weight talent, but she does not have the "diva ego" to go with it, which is probably why she is not concerned about gaining fame and fortune. "It is not about winning at cut throat competitions ... people [should be as] free to be as good as they want," she says.

Fortunately, being free to be as good as she wants and enjoy music is what it's all about to Battipaglia. As a result, hundreds of people around New York City are able to enjoy classical music in the convenience of their own community.