



JUDI HERMAN finds out how exceptional talent is nurtured in Rosh Pinah, in the north of Israel – not in an institute or academy but in a comfortable house

“Most children who learn here would never play any instrument without this project”

So says cellist Leat Sabbah. She’s one of the high-profile musicians who have taken a leap of faith to establish a project to train and nurture ‘Musicians of Tomorrow’. They work with musically gifted children, often from disadvantaged families, in Rosh Pinah in the Galilee, an area of Israel starved of classical music.

The project was founded by celebrated violinists Maxim Vengerov and Anna Rosnovsky in 2006, its young students have played in concerts all over Israel and overseas. As they prepared to tour Britain at the end of June, Anna and Leat and two of their students told me more about the project and how it has changed the lives of these extraordinarily gifted young musicians.

The teachers

Anna came to Israel more than 40 years ago from Russia, and New York-born Leat in 2010. Anna’s father and his parents were violinists, though he bought her a piano at age five. She rejected that for the violin, complaining “the piano is a very cold instrument and I don’t like it!” And from that

moment I was all my life with music, concerts and musicians.”

Leat’s grandfather “had the first ‘house’ music school in Israel, in the early 1950s. So my mum as a kid was forced to play violin. Her father died when she was nine so she put the violin away but swore that her kids would play. So when my brother and I were about five she took us to the local music school. She chose the cello for me.”

The two met by chance in Tel Aviv and “just connected”.

“The North of Israel is a problematical economic area, between three borders, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, with no high-level music teachers, no opportunity for children of exceptional talent”, says Anna. She explains that for 90% of their students, who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, life is hard, they might be short of money, from one-parent families, or have disconnected parents. “But they never talk about it. To some we give grants to buy falafel and bus tickets. They have no money at all.”

Anna was excited by “the new, modern education Leat brought, a special way to play and teach modern music as well as classical.”

Leat has moved up north with her boyfriend. “I had a dream of living in a picturesque countryside place. Anna is a great team leader, she’s got the experience, the understanding and the wisdom. And sometimes I come in with the funky crazy ideas! My background is also classical but for 15 years I’ve been venturing into other styles of music so together we’re able to bring the students to extremely high

standards and a lot have been experimenting with improvisation.

“A lot of these children have no background whatsoever in music. It’s like teaching Chinese. It’s really starting from the basics. But the heart is there so it’s really not difficult.”

It sounds refreshing, exciting, challenging to teach from scratch – “All of those!” agrees Anna. “Their families are very excited and proud. Children who never saw a piano or cello or violin, once they begin their journeys prove very gifted. And they have great initiative. They take the time to study symphonies and operas when the only music that’s popular round here is Arabic music. These gifted children feel music is an important part of their personality. So nobody has to push them. They need it like they need to talk”.

The students have to start by learning three instruments, cello, violin or viola plus piano. “We encourage them to learn piano whether they stick with it or not,” says Anna. “It’s a good basis to learn music because the piano has many voices; strings have only one voice.”



Leat Sabbah



Anna Rosnovsky

Thanks to Skype, Leat and Anna take me on a tour of the school, pointing out the neat beds with colourful bedspreads where students can lie down and rest when they arrive from school. As she opens a door, chamber music pours out and I get a virtual concert from extraordinarily accomplished pre-teen students. They are part of the younger group of 10 students who come every day after school. Five older students come two or three times a week because of pressure of schoolwork.

The floors are bright with coloured

rugs, every door has Indian hangings, it looks comfortable and welcoming. Leat ‘takes’ me outside through the garden and down into her chamber music studio in the cellar. There are more rugs, couches and easy chairs “so the kids can hang out. We try to encourage them to listen to each other’s lessons. They learn a lot more that way. They get to go out and play concerts too. So they understand that they can actually work in this profession.”

Do they all have a career path in music? “Everyone has a possible career,

though not all of them might go on to become players. Maybe some will be great teachers of young kids. And there are other avenues, like music therapy.”

And the future for the project? “We want to find a bigger space to house more teachers of different instruments, for example clarinet. But the goal is to keep it small. The project is for extremely hard-working talented students. Not just for everybody who kind of likes music as an afterschool thing twice a week. It’s a big commitment.”

Erez

18-year-old Erez Fogel lives in a village near Tiberias. He’s a gifted cellist. Although he’s been playing for only three years he’s already represented the project overseas several times. He is also a very good teacher of beginner’s violin.

There had been no music in his family when the project visited his school. “I heard the violin for the first time and I wanted to play”.

The project has literally proved a life saver to Erez. “Before Musicians of Tomorrow I was a fat boy with no friends, staying home.” Thanks to the project he has had an operation to help him drastically reduce his weight. “Now I have a lot of friends – they are musicians”. He clearly loves lessons with Leat. “She’s young and inspiring. Lessons with Leat are fun and motivational they make me go for it to improve my skill.”

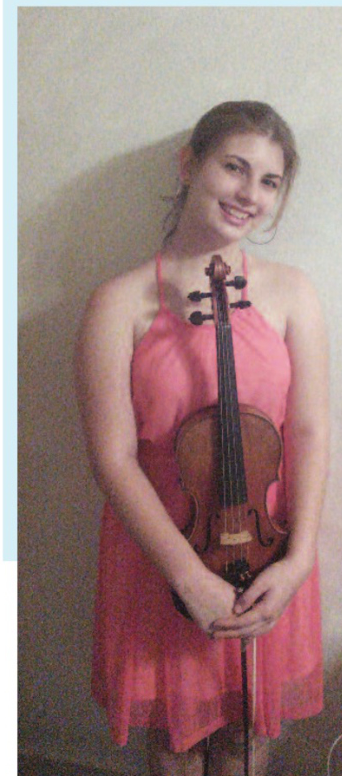
“Last year I came out of the closet. Music gave me a lot of confidence in myself so I trust in myself and I’m not ashamed [of being gay]. I don’t know where I would be without the music because now where I live half of the teenagers of my age are in trouble with the police. I have a lot of different friends now.”



Genia

15-year-old Genia (Jenny) Gerchikov’s first instrument is violin. She had just moved to a new school when she started at the age of seven. “Anna asked me what instrument I wanted to play, piano or violin. I chose violin because I didn’t know what it was. Obviously I made the right choice!” Genia also plays piano and viola.

“I like playing solos a lot. I like the process to go out on the stage and play. But I really like working with other musicians and other instruments. I have Imbar and Erez (co-students) – it’s a special relationship. Sometimes we play chamber



music and you have to count on them to play their part and to be together and to help you work on it.

Genia attends the Project twice a week after school. “My favourite thing about Musicians of Tomorrow is the way we do the work and eat and rest there. I think it’s quite unique. A group like ours and the work we do, the chamber music, it’s really special.”

So what is her ambition? “I see my future as a musician for sure. Whether solo or part of chamber or a group or an orchestra I haven’t decided yet. I love playing solos but I really love the experience that chamber music, playing with a quartet or trio, gives you. Chamber music is more unique because you can hear each of the musicians do their own part and you can hear how they work on it one by one and it really depends on each individual in the group

“I have travelled a lot but I think the most exciting concert for me was in Israel when I was about nine and I remember this concert like it was yesterday because it was really remarkable for me. I played with the Ra’anana Orchestra, Vivaldi’s Double Concerto in A Minor, and I remember clearly how I didn’t want to stop playing after the third part, it was such fun. After it ended there was a second of complete silence from the audience. I remember that one second when I felt that everything is rising, like the floor is coming down under me, it was really exciting and then all the audience applauded. But that one second of silence is something that I will remember forever. It was really remarkable.”

For details of Musicians of Tomorrow visit www.musiciansoftomorrow.com
To hear Genia speaking to Judi visit www.jewishrenaissance.org.uk/outloud, where you can also listen to Erez playing ‘Shalom Aleichem’ from the Friday Shabbat service from his hospital bed and an impromptu concert given to Judi.