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Local violin virtuoso spreads joy of music

by Shant Shahrigian

If a famous music teacher offered to turn a young student into a multimillion-dollar-earning star, many parents would leap at the opportunity.

But when Riverdale violinist Sheila Reinhold was 7, her mother and father declined to let an eager and well-known instructor mold their daughter into a bow-bearing ATM.

Ms. Reinhold, 60, went on to a career that has put her in the top tier of performers nationwide. Still, she is grateful that her parents allowed her to have a normal childhood and decide to become a professional musician on her own.



Sheila Reinhold on Sept. 19.

Photo: Marisol Diaz/Riverdale Press

“They wanted to support the whole child and not just one talent. It’s very challenging,” she said in a recent interview at the Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale (CSAIR), where she will soon begin the sixth season of her successful quartet concert series, “Intimate Voices.”

Ms. Reinhold said while her parents were not musicians themselves, their wish for her to enjoy her freedom partly came from their own experiences of oppression. Both were Jewish Belgians who survived the Holocaust.

“My mother was in Auschwitz,” Ms. Reinhold said. “That’s a little bit connected to me and my parents’ wisdom of understanding things and not having me be adopted to become world-famous.”

Ms. Reinhold’s first teacher, Vladimir Graffman, was one of the most famous pianists of his own day. Although her parents declined his offer to turn her into a star by age 10, her casually cultivated gifts enabled her to make her debut as a soloist when she was just 9.

After playing in front of an orchestra at the 92nd Street Y at that tender age, she spent part of her teens studying with the world-famous violinist and conductor Jascha Heifetz. Ms. Reinhold said when she was in high school, she decided to devote herself to the violin. Since then, she has put on performances from challenging solos at the Lincoln Center to back-up melodies for Tony Bennett and other stars, all while remaining a dedicated teacher for students of her own.

The latest feather in her cap came from the Bronx Council on the Arts, which earlier this year gave her a Bronx Recognizes Its Own (or BRIO) award for her part in a rollicking Haydn quartet.

“I thought it was delightful,” Ms. Reinhold said of the award. “I didn’t necessarily expect that I would win, because there’s so many talented people.”

In her winning submission, she plays the fluttering first violin in Haydn’s Quartet No. 40. She made the recording at an annual chamber music conference in Bennington, Vermont that she religiously attends.

Inviting atmosphere

Back home, Ms. Reinhold has introduced hundreds of listeners to the subtle joys of the string quartet since 2009. She aims to make the somewhat forbidding art form as accessible as possible, starting with the accoutrements.

“A number of people were shocked when I said there was going to be beer,” she said. “It’s not staid; it’s not white-gloves. You just come and listen.”

Refreshments are not allowed inside the concerts themselves, since those take place in CSAIR’s sanctuary. But Ms. Reinhold said intermissions with food and drink — the Bronx Brewery is donating beverages to the Saturday, Nov. 1 performance — make the atmosphere relaxed.

However, the violinist emphasized that for her and the other world-class performers on stage, the experience is anything but.

“When you play for a small audience or a very involved audience — as in Bennington, as in here, as I’ve played at other concerts — the audience sees you sweat,” Ms. Reinhold said. “And that’s the most exciting thing.

Discussing her favorite genre kicked up the tempo of her usual joie de vivre.

“What draws me and my colleagues the most is that connection... completing that circle,” she said. “We play with each other — and it’s a wider circle of everyone listening to us. This is what people have done for centuries with chamber music. It was in a chamber; it was in a room; it was for people to play.”

A combination of top-notch performers and a carefully chosen repertoire make “Intimate Voices” a hidden gem of the city’s classical music scene. One highlight of their schedule this year is a somber composition by a Jewish Czech composer killed during the Holocaust. Ms. Reinhold explained that Hans Krasa wrote his Passacaglia and Fugue while interned at the Terezin, or Theresienstadt, concentration camp — conditions which made for an emotionally wrenching work.

In addition to their three concerts at CSAIR, Ms. Reinhold’s group will continue their tradition of performing at nursing homes and the James J. Peters VA Medical Center in Kingsbridge. The process has made them a fixture of the northwest Bronx.

“We feel that we’re becoming a kind of community,” Ms. Reinhold said.

For “Intimate Voices” schedule, ticket prices and other details, visit www.csair.org/chambermusic.