



In with the new

FLAUTIST SHARON BEZALY IS ON A ONE-WOMAN MISSION TO INCREASE THE FLUTE REPERTOIRE. SHE TALKS TO NINA LARGE

There is a very big hole in the flute repertoire. In some ways there just isn't enough *really* good music," insists 32-year-old Israeli flautist Sharon Bezaly. If it comes as a surprise to hear this, it is an even bigger one to hear that Bezaly has taken it upon herself to change things.

But how does a musician come to such a radical conclusion? There are many works in the core repertoire and Bezaly has been performing them since the start of her career, when she gave her debut with the Israel Philharmonic and Zubin Mehta aged 14. But five years ago she embarked on a series of recordings for Swedish label BIS, and suddenly the penny dropped.

The series was called A-Z; Bezaly intended to play one work from a different composer for each letter of the alphabet. Although she discovered some great rare works along the way, she found herself

stumbling at the first hurdle – the letter A. 'Robert von Bahr [founder of BIS] suggested a Finnish composer named Kalevi Aho,' she remembers. 'I started listening to his music and when I got the score I was amazed. It was difficult in a different and very technical way. Sometimes I have felt that composers don't write for the flute idiomatically enough, but Aho does. He extends the boundaries and makes you do impossible things, but it all makes sense because it is serving the music.'

The A-Z series has gone on to win numerous awards, and Bezaly herself was named Artist of the Year in 2002 by the Echo Awards and Young Artist of the Year the following year at the Cannes Classical Awards. This catalysed her unwavering ambition to commission more and more new work: 'I want to put the flute in the spotlight for a change! My aim is to give it the same

sort of prominence and exposure on the concert scene that the violin has.'

Three volumes of the A-Z series have been released so far, taking us up to the letter D. Each new release now has one new work specifically composed for it and BIS has received a huge number of emails from composers asking to take part.

On top of that Bezaly has had seven concertos dedicated to her from composers all around the world including Sofia Gubaidulina, Sally Beamish, Zhou Long and Brett Dean. This summer BIS released the world premiere recording of a concerto by Aho, written for Bezaly after he was so impressed by her interpretation of his earlier work, alongside two others by Haukur Tómasson and Christian Lindberg.

'I hope they will inspire other challenging composers to create new repertoire, and that these pieces will eventually become standard repertoire. That's the ultimate goal,' says Bezaly. And why shouldn't they? After all, when André Jolivet's concerto was premiered 50 odd years back it was criticised for being too difficult, and now it is a common choice for talented flautists.

'When you commission it is always a gamble but I have been lucky that all the pieces have been truly fantastic,' muses Bezaly. 'It is so exciting and gratifying to have a dialogue with the composer. What a privilege! Lindberg and I sat together and talked a lot. He changed many little things according to what I suggested.'

Many of the new works present fearsome challenges to the performer, but Bezaly has the edge on most flautists because she has mastered the rare art of circular breathing – as taught to her by esteemed French flautist Aurèle Nicolet. 'It has changed everything,' she admits. 'I feel liberated – I can breathe where the music needs it, not where I need air. It's incredible! It astonishes me how much more can be got out of the flute. I am discovering new things every day.'

As well as mastering super-human breath control, Bezaly has extended her talents to the full range of flute instruments: piccolo, flute, alto flute and bass flute. Sally Beamish has taken full advantage of this in her flute concerto, and Bezaly will be called upon to play on all four instruments when she premieres the work

in Glasgow in October with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

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She may feel that there is always room for more, but Bezaly also continues to perform the classic repertoire, as her new disc of Mozart flute concertos – out in October – proves. Even so, this rendition comes with something of a twist because none other than Kalevi Aho has composed the cadenzas. Bezaly is chuffed to bits: 'They are totally controversial, but they really work,' she says delightedly. 'Aho expands on Mozart's musical language so that the cadenzas seem to grow out of the concertos themselves, yet he goes one step further by using the whole spectrum of the modern flute and all the possibilities that the instrument offers today. Yes, they are provocative and maybe even slightly crazy – but they still fit to Mozart, who himself was provocative in his own time.'

Bezaly performs them all on her 24 carat gold flute, made especially for her. 'Gold is a very personal choice,' she says. 'I have a big sound but it allows me the freedom to have all the colours I want in the music. When I tried a platinum flute it sounded like a trumpet. And hey, if I ever stop playing music I can make a lot of gold rings from it!'

That looks near impossible at the moment. However, Bezaly is also unlikely to run herself into the ground. She takes care to balance her work and play, sometimes taking days off to get a sense of space with her music as well as relaxing and enjoying being a mum to her little toddler son. A strong sense of instinct guided her when she started and it will surely make for some exciting years ahead: 'You don't really ask yourself why and how – you just feel it and it comes. I am thrilled to be doing all this. And most of all I'm lucky, because it's all happening naturally.' ■

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