

In Memory of Olga Schweizer

Renowned Danish Musicians Honor Danish Concert Pianist, a Hero in Albania

by Feride Istogu Gillesberg, Director and initiator of Lola Aleksí Gjoka Society

Two classical music concerts in June honored the memory of the Danish concert pianist Olga Schweizer Libohova, whose courage made her an Albanian hero in World War II. The recently created Danish-Albanian cultural organization, the Lola Aleksí Gjoka Society, named after the famous Albanian pianist, Lola Aleksí Gjoka (1910–1985), organized the concerts in Albania, on June 3 in Libohova and June 7 in Tirana. World-famous Danish opera singers Stig Fogh Andersen, tenor, and Gitta-Maria Sjöberg, soprano, were joined by Danish pianist Knud Rasmussen and tenor John Olsen, and this author.

Olga Schweizer Libohova (1886–1958) is best known in the small town of Libohova as “Madame Olga,” or “Zonja Olga” in Albanian. After finishing her education in Paris in the early 1900s, she gave many concerts in European capitals, including Istanbul, where she met Albanian intellectual Mufid Bey Libohova, who was studying at the city’s Military Academy. The two fell in love at first sight, and soon became engaged. They married, and settled in Albania in 1909, where Bey Libohova played an important role in the creation of the nation. When Albania finally gained its independence in 1912, after 500 years of occupation by the Ottoman Empire, Libohova became the country’s first Minister of the Interior, later Minister of Finance, and founder of the National Bank and the nation’s currency. Later he served as Foreign Minister.

Schweizer’s descendants tell stories about how she loved Albania and its people. For this reason, she stayed in Albania even after her husband’s death in 1927. She cared for the people of Libohova with an open heart, and with devotion and care. Perhaps it was the character traits that she brought with her from her Danish upbringing, to help people in need. The people

of Libohova loved her for her kindness and devotion towards them, conferring on her the honorific name “Madame Olga.”

In 1944, the German army descended on Libohova to carry out an act of revenge against the partisans in the area. The Nazis lined up all the male inhabitants,



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World-famous Danish/Swedish opera singer Gitta-Maria Sjöberg, singing at the concert in honor of Olga Schweizer, the Danish concert pianist and heroine in Albania, in Libohova, Albania.

old and young, in order to liquidate them. But Madame Olga, who had seen what was happening, came out of her house and walked towards the German officer in command. She stopped him at the moment he was about to order the soldiers to fire. In fluent German, Olga asked the officer what they were doing. The officer was confused; he couldn’t believe what he was hearing—a woman in a far-away place, speaking fluent

German! He asked her who she was. She evaded him and said, “I am a citizen like the ones you have lined up. I am a citizen who lives with everyday worries, sorrows and joys, just like everyone here, neither better nor worse than them. I enjoy great respect from the citizens here, and I ask you to let them go.”

The German officer grew more confused; Olga kept saying that these men were innocent, and that the hundred men were part of a hundred families, all of whom she knew. There were no partisans among them.

prompted the officer to call the German command center in the capital, Tirana. When the commander-in-chief heard Libohova’s name, he gave the order to let them all go free.

Olga’s bravery has been retold by all the descendants of those who were rescued that day and survived the war, from generation to generation. Her heroic act has not been forgotten, and she lives on in the hearts of the people of Libohova to this day. But her heroism became known outside of the town only after the fall



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World-famous Danish opera singer Stig Fogh Andersen, who also travelled from Denmark to sing at the concert to honor Olga Schweizer in Libohova.



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Roland Çenko, a very well-known singer of Albanian folk songs.

But the officer replied that he had orders to shoot them. Madame Olga assured him again, that there were no partisans, and ended by saying, “I am like them, so you must treat me like them.” Then, she stood in the middle of the line, telling the officer, “If you think these people are guilty, which I guarantee you they are not, then shoot me first!”

There was silence for a moment.

“Who are you,” the officer wanted to know.

“That’s not important,” was her reply. The officer continued to ask, and finally, Madame Olga told him that she was the wife of Mufid Bey Libohova. This

of communism in 1991.

The knowledge of Olga Schweizer must also be brought beyond the borders of Albania. The Danish musicians, hearing the story from this author, who proposed a concert celebrating Schweizer, were moved and honoured to be part of a classical concert in her memory. Andersen and Sjöberg, together with Olsen, Rasmussen, and this author, traveled to Albania to hold the two concerts with a Danish-Albanian program.

A local politician from Helsingør, Denmark, and a larger delegation of Danish citizens, together with

Schweizer's grandson, Kemal Libohova, and members of the Danish Albanian Friendship organisation, also traveled from Denmark for the occasion. In Libohova, the city square was filled with the local residents, including the mayor, along with the Danes, the Danish consul in Albania, and representatives of the Albanian intelligentsia from Tirana. Even Albanian families living in Greece, who had heard about the celebration, traveled there to take part: Members of their families had been rescued by Olga's courage. Libohova was transformed into an historic theater.

The celebration began by unveiling a beautiful plaque with the portrait of Olga Schweizer, made by Albanian-Danish sculptor Bajramali Idrizi, which was attached at the entrance to the house of the Libohova family. The dedication ceremony was followed by speeches and a children's dancing group. The high point came with the classical concert. Joining the famous artists in the program were an Albanian soprano from Gjirokastrë;



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Gitte-Maria Sjöberg gives a master class at the Tefta Tashko music school.

Masterclass with Gitta-Maria Sjöberg in Korça, Albania

Well-known Danish opera singer Gitta-Maria Sjöberg held a two-day masterclass May 30-31, 2024 at the Tefta Tashko music school, named for an Albanian opera singer whose singing captured hearts throughout the new nation, which had gained its independence in 1912. The school, both elementary and high school, integrates playing musical instruments, singing, and painting in the curriculum. The school is in Korça, once called "little Paris," a beautiful old city in southeast Albania, close to the Ohrid Sea, with a long cultural tradition including music. Korça was home to Albanian bel canto singer Jergjia Filce Truja. When she returned to Korça after finishing studies in Rome, she was fortunate that Albanian pianist Lola Aleksis Gjoka had returned to Korça at the same time. Together, they began giving classical concerts in Korça and other cities. The previously unknown sounds of Schubert, Beethoven, Puccini, and Verdi songs and arias were so loved by the population that their beautiful music provided

the basis of a cultural renaissance beginning in the late 1920's and early '30s.

Five students took part in the masterclass. Sjöberg was astonished by these young talents due to the quality of their education and the developed voices of the singers. The students, in turn, were very excited to learn new aspects of singing and absorbed all they could during the two days.

A concert for the students and Sjöberg, dedicated to Lola Gjoka, was organized by the director of the school, in collaboration with the city, at the city's Gallery of Art. The news about her visit and masterclass had spread quickly, creating excitement around the city. Even the national TV made a documentary, broadcast on the news, about the masterclass and the concert. Sjöberg showed her respect for Albanian culture, by singing an Albanian song in the concert. Ilir Zguri, the director of the Tefta Tashko music school, was very happy with and honoured by Gitta-Maria Sjöberg's work, and expressed hope for further such collaboration in the future.



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Gitta-Maria Sjöberg in front of a mural of Tefta Tashko, an Albanian opera singer whose singing captured hearts throughout the new nation of Albania.

Libohova and Tirana, the popular Albanian national TV program “Ura” (Bridge), which reaches the Albanian diaspora around the world, broadcast two substantive interviews on her life. The first program interviewed Albanian-Danish freelance journalists Ibrahim Xhemajli and Ixhet Lutfiu, who had documented the story of Schweizer three years ago. The second interview was conducted with this author as the concerts’ organizer.

Olga Schweizer’s example can be an inspiration of courage for many, since we live in times that demand courage from more and more of us, to stand up for peace and justice, as in Southwest Asia, where genocide against the Palestinian people continues in Gaza, or in NATO’s war in Ukraine, which must be stopped before it becomes a nuclear tragedy for

a very well-known singer of Albanian folk songs, Roland Çenko; and this author. The program comprised not only beautiful Danish songs by Peter Heise, Carl Nielsen, and Matti Borg, but also Albanian songs by Lola Gjoka, sung by the Danish artists of honor.

The beauty of the concert, especially the singing of Andersen and Sjöberg, moved all the attendees. As Kemal Libohova, a very important driver behind this event, said, his grandmother had finally gotten the celebration she deserved.

A smaller memorial concert, organised by the Danish consul in Albania, was held for diplomats at the art gallery Kalo on June 5, Denmark’s Constitution Day. The [final concert](#) was held in the beautiful concert hall of the Cultural Center of the Orthodox Church in Tirana.

The celebration of Olga Schweizer created enormous interest about her. Between the concerts in

all mankind. May the memory of Olga Schweizer’s heroic action to save her fellow human beings, even risking her own life, inspire us to act for humanity,



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Concert organizer Feride Istogu Gillesberg is interviewed about Olga Schweizer and the memorial concerts in her honor, on the popular Albanian national TV program “Ura” (Bridge), which reaches the Albanian diaspora around the world.

and may a musical dialogue of cultures expand, and lay the basis for peace between nations and peoples.