

Valerie Solti tells **Christian Lloyd** of how her husband's legacy continues to help young artists find their feet in today's competitive world

'I'm not a seasoned musician,' Valerie Solti admits from the outset. 'I'm a seasoned listener. I always say my instruments are my ears!' Having been involved in the music business for over 40 years as the wife of Georg Solti and as a supporter of numerous cultural organisations, Lady Solti (*pictured*) has used her position – and her listening skills – to help dozens of young artists achieve their dreams. 'We always try to give the best objective, dispassionate advice we can.'

It's invaluable support for the 14 singers attending the Georg Solti Accademia di Bel Canto each year, of which Lady Solti is the honorary president. This month 10 Accademia alumni will be performing at London's Wigmore Hall, including Glyndebourne's Eliana Pretorian and Mexican tenor Jesús León, in a concert commemorating the 10th anniversary of Solti's death. Next July, the three-week course will include masterclasses by Kiri Te Kanawa and Frederica von Stade. 'It's a total immersion course,' adds Lady Solti, 'covering technique, interpretation, presentation and movement. All the time it's really tweak, tweak,' she goes on. 'My husband was never satisfied; he always said, "If I say that was a good performance, you'll know there's something really wrong!"'

The Accademia has its home in the Tuscan resort of Castiglione della Pescaia, where the maestro had his summer home. Its final concert takes place each year in the town's Piazza Solti, while classes take place in the first house Solti owned. 'He always dreamt of holding masterclasses there so I hope with the Accademia we are fulfilling that ambition.'

Solti's own life as a young conductor also provided the impetus for the Accademia. As Lady Solti explains, he well remembered his early experience conducting the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo for two weeks in London. 'He didn't like conducting ballet but it was a job! He was conducting with Antal Doráti, whose uncle had spotted him in Budapest and asked

Photo: courtesy of the Solti Foundation



his nephew to help out his new young colleague and support him. So it's this helping hand that's essential – someone who can give you an introduction or help out with auditions.'

The same principles also led, 11 years ago, to the founding of the Solti Foundation, which provides interim funding for young artists at the start of their professional careers. 'It's very, very competitive; 50 years ago for a young British singer, the chances are that their whole career would be in Britain. Now you're competing with people from all over the world for the same number of jobs.' Hence, the Foundation helps artists attend courses or masterclasses, as well as making introductions. 'It's important that they know they've got someone they can ask – and the Foundation has no affiliations or financial interest.'

Though there are usually over 100 applications for the 14 Accademia places each year, it is hoped that the course will expand in the future. 'We would like to introduce a separate course for répétiteurs – there's a concern that there aren't enough coming through the system, or coaches. So we'd like to establish the same sort of masterclasses, particularly from [the Accademia's artistic director] Jonathan Papp.'

Alumni from the Georg Solti Accademia di Bel Canto will be performing at Wigmore Hall in London on 20 January