

Once upon a time, if a concert artist had turned round on the platform and started talking to the audience there would have been a run on smelling salts. Talking was for actors — musicians were just supposed to play. Graham Johnson booted that idea out of the door over ten years ago when he started drawing capacity audiences to hear the Songmakers' Almanac present ingenious programmes of music and spoken word. Suddenly, recitals with titles were flavour of the month.

Now pianist Israela Margalit is aiming to do the same thing for the piano and chamber music repertoire and has booked the Queen Elizabeth Hall for four evenings of what she calls her Music and More series. She has already presented programmes in Carnegie Hall, Munich and Frankfurt and kicks off her London season with a Liszt programme on October 24.

Margalit's first Music and More programme was not the result of long-term planning. After a six-year break in her career during which her daughter was born, Margalit returned to the concert platform with an American tour. On the evening of the first concert, still jet-lagged from her Euro-

PUTTING IN A GOOD WORD FOR MUSIC

**Why is pianist Israela Margalit talking to the audience?
 Keith Clarke finds out**

pean flight, she fell asleep backstage and dreamed of Alexis Weissenberg's celebrated experience when he went out to play Beethoven's First Piano Concerto and the orchestra struck up the Fifth.

Waking from her dream, the story goes, she checked her own concert programme and sure enough it was entirely wrong. 'The manager was pretty upset, so to save the situation I took the microphone and went out on stage and started to talk to them about the programme I was playing. I improvised, talking about the composers and their time, and the public loved it. Lots of people came backstage to thank me for the approach.'

The printed programmes were wrong for the whole tour so Margalit got plenty of opportunity to sharpen up her act and having sold out Carnegie Hall she headed for Germany.

Audiences there were more of a challenge: 'A woman from Israel with black hair, speaking about Schumann is pretty shocking! There are a lot of purists who say you should either talk or play; you shouldn't combine them. But on the whole the German public reacted extraordinarily well.'

And what of the British audiences — does Margalit anticipate stiff upper lips? 'I don't think this country will be any problem. English people are open to any new ideas.' She is keen that we should realise that Music and More is by no means a lecture with musical examples. 'It's a full concert programme, a cross-section of a composer's chamber music for different ensembles. The music has its own logic of presentation; in between I aim to illuminate and humanise the composers, taking them down from their pedestals.'

After Liszt on October 24, the three coming down from their pedestals in the current Music and More season are Tchaikovsky in December, Mozart in February and Schubert in April. For the Liszt concert the artists joining Israela Margalit are soprano Carole Farley and pianists Marguerite Wolff and Leslie Howard. Margalit has also recorded an all-Liszt programme as her first record for Chandos, due out in November (LP ABRD 1197; cassette ABTD 1197).

One thing that Margalit will be finding out as she brings Music and More to London is how the British audiences react to humour. 'When you travel round the world you find that people are very similar, but the humour is different.'

'The Americans will roar with laughter at something that leaves the Germans with no reaction. The Germans will tend to go home and laugh afterwards.'

Not that it's a funny show, says Margalit. 'I've no intention of making a classical music comedy of any sort. A little bit of laughter relaxes people and creates more intimacy with the performers, but this is not a Victor Borge show!' □