

# A Queen of Arts

Queen Elisabeth of Belgium is not only immortalised in the world of music by the Queen Elisabeth Competition held every year in Brussels, but also by the exceptional and unique Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel in Waterloo. By Jehangir Batiwala

Coincidences and circumstances play a role in shaping the future; and when the future becomes past, in shaping history. Elisabeth von Wittelsbach, a Bavarian duchess, met Prince Albert of Belgium at her aunt's funeral in Paris in 1897. They kept in touch, married in 1900, and settled down in Brussels to raise a family of three children. When Albert's uncle, King Leopold II, died in 1909, Albert and Elisabeth became king and queen of Belgium.

Belgium is a country with a great tradition of violin playing. Charles de Bériot and Henri Vieuxtemps were renowned violinists, composers and teachers from Belgium. Eugène Ysaÿe, a pupil of Vieuxtemps, was one of the world's leading violinists and taught at the Brussels Conservatory. Since Queen Elisabeth was herself a violinist and a true patron of the arts, she got to know Ysaÿe and appointed him Royal Music Director in 1912. During WWI, Ysaÿe moved to London and from 1918 to 1922, he lived in the US as director of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. On his return, Ysaÿe settled in Brussels and

discussed many ideas and advised Queen Elisabeth on music education through 'transmission', following which, The Queen Elisabeth Music Foundation was set up in 1931. However, Ysaÿe died the same year. Even then, Queen Elisabeth wanted to put the ideas they discussed into reality, but the following years were indeed difficult. Financial crisis engulfed Europe; in 1934 King Albert died in a mountaineering accident and her son Leopold became King Leopold III of Belgium. Not to hamper the new queen, her daughter-in-law Astrid, Queen Elisabeth in a way withdrew from public life. But the following year, Astrid died in a road accident, and Queen Elisabeth had to return to public life.

## TAKING MUSIC AHEAD

Music promotion took priority, and in 1937, the first Ysaÿe violin competition was held. David Oistrakh was the winner, and the Belgians, represented by Arthur Grumiaux and Carlo van Neste, stood nowhere. In the 1938 Piano Competition, Emil Gilels was the winner, confirming the Soviet domination once again, and

an air of superiority of the Soviet system. That was a bit too much for the Belgians. So in 1939, thanks to the support of an enlightened and generous patron, Baron Paul de Launoit, Queen Elisabeth inaugurated a boldly conceived musical institution, based on Ysaÿe's ideas and intended to make a noticeable improvement in the training conditions of young Belgian artistes.

The Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel, located in Waterloo, on land owned by the de Launoit family, was hailed as a "modern Villa Medici" by Emile Vuillermoz, a famous critic of the age, and today plays a great role in providing extremely talented musicians a unique music education. The historical building, designed by Yvan Renchon, housed 12 studios with living spaces, a concert studio and a dining room and kitchen. The monument acquired heritage status and soon a need was felt to expand the facilities. From 12 artistes-in-residence in 2004, the facility could cater to 60 artistes in 2014, due to the addition of the new de Launoit wing. Twenty new housing studios made it possible for the Music Chapel to welcome a greater number of artistes-in-residence. A large grand studio, offering not only a rehearsal and performance space, but also a recording studio, can seat 250 spectators who can look out through a large window onto the forest of Argenteuil, where it

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Heritage building of the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel



Grand salon of the de Launoit wing