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STILL ON TOP –
PIERRE BOULEZ



BENDING THE RULES –
HIP HOP-EMBRACING
COMPOSER DANIEL
BERNARD ROUMAIN

NO ANGEL

ANNE AKIKO MEYERS

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GODDESS OF FIRE

Anne Akiko Meyers doesn't practice much. She puts in maybe an hour or two a day with her violin, she tells me, and now I want to hate her. But of course, I don't. For on top of the fact that she's shown up for our 11am meeting in a sleek, satiny full-length gown and heels, she's actually modest, down-to-earth and, well, very likeable.

'Practicing is about quality, not quantity,' she explains as we sit down together in a conference room in the midtown Manhattan skyscraper she calls home. 'When you're a kid I guess it's more about quantity, but that reverses itself over the years. I was complaining to a violinist friend the other day - I said to him, "God, I really need to practice," and he told me, "Sweetie, you don't need to practice; you've been practicing your whole life." I thought about that and realized that he's so right. I've been practicing my whole freakin' life.'

Born in San Diego in 1970 to a Japanese mother and an American father, Meyers started violin lessons at the age of four. She made rapid progress. At 11, she captured national attention with an appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, and that same year made her debut with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. From there she bounced back and forth between school and stage.

Meyers spent a year studying with Josef Gingold at Indiana University before going on to the Juilliard School in New York to work with Dorothy DeLay, Masao Kawasaki and Felix Galimir. Yet even before she had graduated from Juilliard in 1990, she made her first recording, with London's Royal Philharmonic. A multi-record contract with RCA Records followed soon thereafter.

Since then Meyers has kept herself on top in an increasingly competitive field, winning awards, touring and - her real passion - bringing new works to life. Two recent recordings are a testament to her commitment to today's composers: both Semei Satoh's *Violin Concerto* (on the Camerata label) and Joseph Schwantner's *Angelfire* for violin and orchestra (Hyperion) were commissioned by Meyers. It would be



ON STAGE SHE'S FIERY AND UNCONVENTIONAL – A SELF-CONFESSED BOND GIRL. BUT IS VIOLINIST ANNE AKIKO MEYERS AN ANGEL UNDERNEATH? ANDREW FARACH-COLTON FINDS OUT

difficult to think of two more dissimilar pieces: the Satoh is remarkably spare and meditative, while the Schwantner is dramatic and opulently scored – so much so that the violin requires amplification in performance.

Meyers says that she is drawn to a wide range of musical styles. 'I love composers that have something to say, composers that write in a direct, easily accessible language. I don't want to have to work out some kind of theory in order to understand a piece. But there's a whole spectrum of composers I'm into. I love Arvo Pärt's music, for example. Jennifer Higdon is great, too. I recently recorded a trio of hers – a wonderful piece. When we played it in concert, the audience just responded with so much enthusiasm. That's the kind of music I really adore.'

Bringing a new piece of music into the world is immensely satisfying, she says. 'It's added another dimension to my playing – but I have to tell you that it can be a long and involved process. It took me 10 years from the time I asked Schwantner to write something for me to the time the recording was finally released.' Still, this long and rocky road hardly deters Meyers, who speaks excitedly about her dream to have Arvo Pärt write something for her.

Rescuing works from the sidelines of the repertoire is another of Meyers' obsessions. Ever since she was little, she recalls, she's scoured the shelves of libraries and record stores in search of neglected gems. She points out that when she made her first recording back in 1988, Barber's Violin Concerto (coupled on the CD with Bruch's G minor Concerto) was undervalued. 'Now everyone plays it,' she grins. Nowadays she is trying to do the same for Bernstein's *Serenade*, which she plays as much as possible: 'It's one of the greatest of all violin masterpieces, and it doesn't get the recognition it deserves.' Karol Szymanowski and Einojuhani Rautavaara are other causes she's advocating.

Classical composers aren't Meyers' only interest, though. Her tastes are eclectic, and she relishes the idea of reaching into other genres. Björk is one name she

mentions; Brian Eno another. 'I'm fascinated with ambient music [what Eno did back in the 1970s]. I think the violin can be made to sound like another instrument; it doesn't have to sound like a classical violin, and could work in an ambient style.'

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Meyers considers herself fiercely 'anti-establishment': 'In this business you mostly play music by dead white men,' she laughs. 'Now don't get me wrong, it's wonderful to play Brahms. But there are a lot of people who feel that there's no way a new piece could even begin to compare with anything Brahms wrote. I firmly believe that you need the old to understand the new. They fuel and feed each other.'

It's not just the new and the old that fuel each other, she continues, but also different genres. Meyers recalls playing the Chausson *Poème* not long ago and drawing on her love of the blues. 'The music starts so sorrowfully, there's so much deep pain; I feel like a black woman wailing at the top of my lungs when I play the opening. That's really what comes to my mind – Nina Simone, Etta James – that's what I have to tap into to feel the Chausson. If I hadn't been exposed to the blues I think the Chausson might just be flat – a flat line.'

In some ways, it seems that reviving a work from the standard classical repertoire requires more work than a new piece. Meyers does not disagree: 'I'm going on tour next week with the Mendelssohn concerto, and even practicing it can be very difficult. I feel that if I'm not vigilant, things are going to go wrong in concert, no matter what – even though I've played it two trillion times. I need to find a way to play it that doesn't sound over-analyzed, that's spontaneous, free, and moving all at the same time. And I think quality of sound is extremely important. It's such a well-written piece – incredibly classical yet with these romantic gestures. It's very linear, like the Beethoven concerto.' I ask Meyers whether this means she plays it in a more restrained manner than usual. 'Oh, no! There has to be fire in it; I simply can't do it otherwise. But there have to be clear



lines – fire with clear lines,’ she smiles. ‘In a work like the Tchaikovsky concerto, you can light fire all over the place. You have free rein!’

In an ideal world, Meyers would be taking the Satoh or Schwantner works – her new ‘babies’ – on tour, especially since she has only performed the Schwantner in Washington DC (at the Kennedy Center) and Dallas (where the work was recorded). The Satoh she has only performed once, at a concert in Tokyo (the recording was made live at the premiere). ‘I have sent the score and recording of the Satoh to various conductors, hoping that some progressive maestro will want to programme it. But it always comes back to, “Can you do the Tchaikovsky?” Or it’s the Mendelssohn. Or Vivaldi *Four Seasons*.’ Meyers sighs deeply. ‘That’s what’s going to sell tickets. People always shy away from the new; they’re scared of Satoh or Schwantner or whatever they don’t know.’

I ask about the investment Meyers put into these pieces, considering the limited opportunities for presenting them. Learning the notes isn’t so hard, she maintains, although she admits that the Satoh is extremely difficult to pull off. ‘It’s all about bow control,’ she says. But what’s more difficult than getting the notes under her fingers is dealing with the composers’ last minute changes. ‘When they finally hear you playing with orchestra, they say, “Oh my god, I didn’t realize it would sound like this! Can you change this note or that note?” You have to be very flexible. But it’s understandable. Most composers today use Midi when they compose, and that doesn’t do their music justice. To hear it played by living, breathing musicians is a totally different experience.’

It turns out that the title for Schwantner’s piece, *Angelfire*, was inspired by Meyers herself. According to the composer, the violinist is fiery onstage and an angel offstage. Those who have seen her perform would likely agree with Schwantner on the first point.

But is she really so angelic? ‘That depends on who you ask!’ Meyers replies with a hearty laugh. The score certainly gives her a chance to be both incendiary and beatific, though I was curious how playing with amplification affected the mix. She says she actually enjoyed it. ‘I felt like a Bond girl with that thing strapped to my thigh. It was kind of hot!’

Speaking of Bond girls, this seemed an opportune moment to bring up a controversial issue: image-making and the marketing of classical music. Meyers, who is unusually photogenic (in 1998 she was photographed by Annie Leibowitz as part of an international fashion ad campaign entitled *Women of Substance*), says there is an obvious double standard in the way that men and women are ‘sold’ to audiences. You just have to look at CD covers, she says, to see how the sexes are treated differently. A photo of a man is a straightforward shot. With women, it’s a bigger deal.

‘Looking at a woman’s picture on a CD,’ Meyers says, ‘you ask: what’s her makeup like? Her hair? Is she showing cleavage? Does she have big boobs?’ Meyers suggests, however, that this double standard can be used to one’s advantage. ‘When you try to sell music you’re also selling your style, your sound, and that should be reflected in your photos. That’s why I like my own shots to be simple, clean and (hopefully) noble.’

She also radiates good health – and for good reason, as she’s known in the business for having a mania for physical fitness. ‘Mania?’ she asks with mock pique, then laughs. ‘I work out to help keep my mind fit, too.

Look, with the amount of traveling I do, and the jet lag – I fly to Tokyo and am rehearsing the next day, and that’s following a 14-hour flight, and doesn’t include the time getting to and from the airport and all the waiting around! The only normalcy I find is to work out for 45 minutes to an hour every day. It gives me extra energy, which I desperately need on days after a concert when I feel like crap because the night before I’ve stayed up late and not eaten dinner until midnight. It’s just really hard on your body.’

She also suggests that there’s a positive relationship between the discipline of regular exercise and of practicing an instrument. Or perhaps the mental clarity that comes from being fit allows one to focus one’s practicing. Is this one reason why she doesn’t need more than an hour or two a day? The answer is a shrug and a smile.

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Prodigies learn about discipline from an early age, of course – or at least the successful ones do. Meyers is one of those few who have been able to make the transition from wunderkind to mature artist without any apparent strain, and she’s built on the foundation of her youthful achievements. One might wonder, though, whether it’s easier or more difficult to make a career as an adult having experienced the adulation accorded to those with Meyers’ level of preciousness. Meyers says it’s just different. ‘As an adult you’re so many things, so many pieces of a puzzle. Those early experiences definitely formed who I am today, but that wasn’t the end-all; that’s who I was when I was four or seven or 10. Now I can’t even relate to the person I was then, or to that time. In other words, I’m a totally different person. Even artistically – it’s actually painful for me to listen to my early recordings because they sound so unformed.’

And so one might say that Meyers lives in the present and looks towards the future. ‘There are so many other things I would like to do. I want to teach more. I already conduct a lot of masterclasses; I make it a point to do a masterclass pretty much wherever I go. Here in New York I’ve played for children in inner-city schools. Most of these kids have never even been to a concert, much less heard a violin live. Just showing them what a violin sounds like is probably a more moving experience for me than it is for them!’

One upcoming project that gives a taste of the violinist’s desire to shake up the establishment is a recital program devised for an upcoming US tour. ‘I don’t know what I was thinking when I put this together! It starts with Alfred Schnittke’s *Suite in the Old Style*. Then there’s the Janáček Sonata, and then more Schnittke again – a really bad-ass piece called *Stille Nacht*. It’s based on *Silent Night*, it’s five minutes long, and you play’ – here she sings a few bars of the famous Christmas carol – ‘and then you loosen all the pegs and it just dies out. It’s so awesome and I’m going to be playing it in all these conservative towns. They’re going to think I’m out of my mind!’ She laughs gleefully before adding that the program will end with the Schubert *Fantasia*: ‘For contrast.’

But now, as she prepares the Mendelssohn concerto for a tour of Japan and Korea with the Hiroshima Symphony, Meyers must content herself to walking the well-worn path of the traveling virtuoso. It doesn’t seem to trouble her, though. ‘I’ve played in Seoul before but on this trip I’ll be playing in some other Korean cities I’ve never visited before. And I love playing in Asia. It’s kind of like going home.’

As we say our goodbyes, I still wonder if the real Anne Akiko Meyers is more of an angel or a firebrand. One thing’s for certain: she’s enjoying herself. ■