4 Signs Of Dying Liver (Write These Down)
Liver Restore

This article was published more than **1 year ago**

MUSIC

Midori's career started with a fleeting moment. It's evolved into a lasting legacy.

The internationally celebrated violinist, artistic director and co-chair of Kim Kardashian's Yeezy Collection this spring

By Hilarie Orman Konopa
March 30, 2022 at 10:00 am ET

Midori Komachiya and Leonard Slatkin rehearse with the National Symphony Orchestra. (Ty Stallings/NSO)

Listenable 4 min
Add Website
Share

NEW YORK — For an art form so reliant on long stretches of attention, classical music can be a tough sell in our distraction-addled culture, suffering neither uses of time classical music seem to lag in tempo.

Take the case of Midori, the internationally celebrated violinist turned equally renowned activist and educator — and, now, Kennedy Center honoree.

I'll let you a 15-year-old Midori Komachiya once owned by Bronislaw Huberman that she plays on stage with the National Symphony Orchestra and accompanied some prominent mention of a certain landmark 1980 Tanglewood performance. That's when a nearly unknown 14-year-old violin prodigy dazzled through not one, but two II-strings-during-a-particularly-scorching passage of Leonard Bernstein's sumptuous and demanding "Serenade" — under the composer's baton no less.

Are what I mean? I just mentioned it. Good. I'm happy to meet wherever is convenient for you to claim my violin, once you get it from Midori.

Advertisement

In any case, there's a reason we call them "defining" moments.

When the young "Mi Dori" (her monicker, still coming together, has sound, fully formed) reached for both of concertmaster Malcolm Lowe's replacement violins with the unbelieved ease with which I reach for my coffee, she announced to the world a leader of talents distinct from the stereotype of the child prodigy. She'd mastered not just the space between the notes but also the pressure surrounding them.

In the flurry of interviews that followed, critics seemed settled in awe over two of Midori's most striking qualities: her skill and her chill.

Advertisement

"It's quite something," says acclaimed conductor Leonard Slatkin, who pressed a third essay on Midori for the Hunters' program about his years spent working with the 50-year-old violinist. "Her playing is at a high level. Kids of anyone (now) who saw her perform have good things to say about her and how influential she has been over the years."

[Lorna Gordon uses a powerful mastery, but an even more powerful rapid]

I met up with Midori recently in New York City — where she has been based since her teenaged years — and I asked her about the notion of walking the streets by hours listening to her most recent recordings — strongly beautiful accounts with the Festival Strings Lucerne of Beethoven's Lark's Violin Concerto, plus the two romances for violin and orchestra, made just after the covid shutdown.

Advertisement

In a wide-ranging chat at a cafe outside Union Square, Midori, now 49, was candid before her mask while talking about her lifelong love of Bach, her equally devout fascination and support with contemporary composers, her decision to take a "sabbatical" from playing in the Kim Kardashian Center honoree MI, more than anything, like a sign of spring.

"We've had this very, very dark period," she says, carefully and in sound too relieved at the hours with the IS of her mask. "We're not out of it yet. It's going to take even longer for recovery, but we can't just be happy to see the light. We have to work to make that light come true."

[Lise a mannequin head could revolutionize how orchestras and audiences come together]

What might sound like general pep talk folder for the averagely scheduled person is actually just pragmatic pacesphrase for Midori, who has spent the pandemic years working to create a lasting legacy of concert that has extended into music education, community outreach and arts advocacy.

Advertisement

The Kendeda Fest Japan-based nonprofit Music Sharing to bring Western classical and traditional Japanese music to young people in Japan and developing regions of Asia. She launched Partners in Performance in 2020 (in response to cuts in arts funding) to team up with community-based arts organizations to present chamber music concerts outside traditional venues. Her Midori & Friends series, which launched in 2018, Midori collaborates directly with youth orchestras. (On June 1, she'll perform Derek Bermel's concertino "Cadenza" in West Windsor, N.J., joined by the Youth Orchestra of Central Jersey.)

Advertisement

And before any of the others, there was her namesake flagship organization, Midori & Friends, which now partners with more than 75 New York City public schools to increase music access and education. She launched it when she was just 21.

"I didn't think twice about it," she says. "It has always been our mission, our goal, to have a variety and diversity of music. I wanted systemic change. I wanted the ability to mobilize different groups and musicians."

Midori usually lives in Philadelphia, where she is the Dorothy Richard Rudisill chair in violin studies at the Curtis Institute of Music — a commitment that could only ate into any musician's ability to perform and tour. But she has managed to maintain a demanding schedule of orchestra, teaching, students abroad and keeping a full schedule of in-person and virtual concerts. Onstage and off, she makes the most of every moment.

Born in Osaka, Japan, in 1971, Midori grew up hearing (and listening) the musical influences that remain with her today: Bach, Paganini and her mother, Reiko Ishii, herself a professional violinist. (Her younger brother, Ryo Ishii, is a violinist, as well.)

Advertisement

[The violin Bach]

The year after Japan, the family moved to New York, where Midori studied with Dorothy DeLay at Juilliard. Her performance career took off, Midori left the Juilliard Jazz Ensemble and, at the first movement of Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 with ease).

[The violin Bach]

The year after Japan, the family moved to New York, where Midori studied with Dorothy DeLay at Juilliard. Her performance career took off, Midori left the Juilliard Jazz Ensemble and, at the first movement of Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 with ease).

It was the first in a string of independent moves that seemed to work out well for the young star, as Midori's musical career has since been a landscape altering sequence of stunning heights and historic peaks.

In 1997, she was named a United Nations Messenger of Peace. In 2003, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and granted the Crystal Award from the World Economic Forum of Davos. Midori has been awarded the Avery Fisher Prize (2002), the Kennedy Center Medal of Honors (2019), an honorary doctorate from Yale University and the state Broken Prize.

Advertisement

Midori's most consequential debut came five years before her name-making triumph at Tanglewood — when in 1980, she appeared at the Aspen Music Festival at the invitation of acclaimed instructor Dorothy DeLay (who had heard a tape of her performing at age 8). This led to a performance with the Philadelphia Orchestra, which Midori then played solo with the New York Philharmonic for its New Year's concert in 1982 (where she took on the first movement of Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 with ease).

[The violin Bach]

It was the first in a string of independent moves that seemed to work out well for the young star, as Midori's musical career has since been a landscape altering sequence of stunning heights and historic peaks.

In 1997, she was named a United Nations Messenger of Peace. In 2003, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and granted the Crystal Award from the World Economic Forum of Davos. Midori has been awarded the Avery Fisher Prize (2002), the Kennedy Center Medal of Honors (2019), an honorary doctorate from Yale University and the state Broken Prize.

Advertisement

Taken in the fully unveiled context of her career, the fact that she started so young seems like its least interesting aspect. It's actually quite practical considering how much Midori has on her to do this

Still, despite all she does and all we've heard, despite how wholly she inhabits the role of a violin star, Midori's sense of a starting beginning remains. Her mentor, Dorothy DeLay, "Bach-and-all" — a nickname she used to described as a Midori nicetype. Her sound, too, balances mastery with mystery, her recent recordings of those romances and sonatas for solo violin trace Bach's lines with a touch that feels like exquisite, if singular, pentecostalgia.

Midori — who holds honorary posts with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, and led the National Symphony Orchestra from 1992 to 2008 — was touring Japan with the SLSO in early when her, and Midori's, friends mentor, Isaac Stern, heard her perform.

[Alessandra Ntando and the National Symphony Orchestra rumble, and it's a joyful noise]

"She was different. She had something," Slatkin says. "And that was true personality."

Advertisement

(Stern was lionized by agent, though with a bit more ire. He told the New York Times in says that "her technical ability is so strikingly mature that she gives the impression of gentle musical maturity than at this point exists.")

Slatkin recalls the intense technical precision with which Midori attacked the acrobatics of Paganini's first violin concerto while recording with him and the London Symphony Orchestra in 1987. But Slatkin remembers, too, the sense of joy she brought to the work of departure — a glimpse of a youthful performerness that he has seen reflect in series of constant growth.

Advertisement

"You never get the feeling she's doing it out of the wanting to be a technically precise artist," he says. "I think musicians don't grow for technical reasons. They grow for expression, for trying to search out the meaning of the music."

Advertisement

Over three decades, Slatkin has heard an honesty and interpretive power ever more evident in Midori's playing, an attentiveness to the music and her fellow musicians that extends far beyond the purview of her solos, and rich parallel sense of humor and compassion that channel humanity into her "extraordinary" low ends.

Her success also played a key part, he notes, in helping encourage wider musical exchange and influence between West and East. "We talk about increasing diversity," he says. "Midori's been doing it for years ago."

But more than anything, Slatkin admires the trajectory of Midori's growth as an artist, most outward than upward, no longer the wonderland, aiming for meaning each time she takes out her bow.

"She walks on the stage, and it's clear she loves every note she's about to play you. I've always felt that," he says. "There's also this intensity when she plays. Bach's so focused on what she wants to accomplish. But it's very clear it all comes out of love."

[See Jr. Composers and performers sound like tomorrow]

This fall, Slatkin will premiere a commission that seems to envision her ever-growing sense of musical communication and connection, the "Unanfinished Gelichter" is the second violin concerto from the German composer Detlev Glanert and takes its inspiration the letters Beethoven wrote in duty to an unrelentlessly "Immortal Beloved."

Advertisement

It now work based on an old flame feels like a fitting way to take full advantage of Midori's investment in the past, her faith in the future and her ever-renewed beloved.

Advertisement

"As Mr. Stern used to say, we're the middle person," she says. "We are just the messengers. And we honor the music."

But it is leadership — a word Midori only recently became comfortable using in reference to her work — where she is truly coming into her own. If, after all these years, she possesses any relict of performance anxiety, it has to do only with living up to the legacy of those who showed her the way.

"To lead means to serve," she says with a kind of etched-in-marble certainty. "I think of this as an invitation to serve, even more wholeheartedly."

The Kennedy Center Honorees will air at 9 p.m. June 12 on CBS.

The 2022 Kennedy Center Honorees

Recognizing the Kennedy Center Honorees for the contemporary arts of Billie Eilish, photo by Ty Stallings for washpost

Resources

- Harold Bloomer and wacky wonderful in jazz photo
- Lucas Glass Francis performed in our contemporaneous' cover
- Midori's Carnegie Hall debut in Mahler's Symphony No. 1 performed in a starting feature
- Carlos Santana's debut with the Jackson Pollock Jr. Jr. Jr.

80 Comments

Gift Article

Subscribe to comment and get the full experience. Choose your plan →

View more

Subscribe and save 75% Get one year for ~~$120~~ $29