



'I'm always looking for something new' – Midori: In love with music

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It's four decades since she launched her professional career, and Midori's joy, positivity and creativity remain undimmed. Thomas May discovers how the violinist's remarkable range of commitments, both on and off stage, reflects her belief in art's power to transform



Photo: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

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For Midori, the wonderful thing about milestone anniversaries is that they justify spending even more time on projects she loves. What the music world celebrates as the 40th anniversary of a celebrity violinist's professional debut is for her a pretext to reaffirm priorities: fresh interpretations of classic repertoire, collaborations with favourite colleagues and giving a platform to contemporary composers.

An anniversary season gives you leeway to do these large projects,' says Midori during a Zoom conversation from her hotel room in Los Angeles, en route to a marathon Beethoven programme in Tokyo. In November she released (on Warner Classics) her accounts of all ten of Beethoven's violin sonatas with long-time friend and collaborator Jean-Yves Thibaudet – an undertaking that captures an understanding of this essential music by two artists in their prime. They also performed three complete live cycles in the autumn, the last of which took place at Suntory Hall in Tokyo. She has devoted the rest of her 40th-anniversary season to solo recitals of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas paired with music by living composers.

In the public mind, all the fanfare recalling the performance that launched Midori's professional career at the age of eleven revives images of the child prodigy: the fairytale-like scenario of an enormously gifted child invited by Zubin Mehta to appear as a surprise guest at the New York Philharmonic's New Year's Eve concert in 1982 (which, as it happens, took place on 30 December as well). That image was further cemented by the performance, under Leonard Bernstein, that immediately became an inescapable part of Midori lore, landing her on the front page of the *New York Times* in July 1986 with the headline 'Girl, 14, Conquers Tanglewood with 3 Violins'.

But Midori, now 51, takes the occasion of this anniversary to reaffirm her mature vision of pursuing values that have remained consistently paramount. When asked how priorities might have changed at this stage of her career, she responds with her credo of the musician's responsibility: 'We're always agents between the composer and the public. We have this drive to do the best we can to honour the composer and his or her works and everything that he or she wrote in the score, trying to make that come alive in a way that stays truthful and sincere to the music and how it is written, and to deliver that. That hasn't changed. And that's what I always strive for.'



Photo: Bert Bal, courtesy of the NY Phil Shelby White & Leon Digital Archives

Zubin Mehta with Midori in 1989

An intense collaboration

It's a never-ending quest of deep commitment – one that belies the clichés of 'effortless' virtuosity evoked by those early feats (playing the first movement of Paganini's Concerto no.1 with unflinching poise during her 1982 debut, or breaking the E string on two violins while proceeding unfazed in Bernstein's *Serenade* at the now legendary 1986 Tanglewood concert).

'Obviously, she is gifted and could do a lot of things without working so hard,' says Thibaudet, who likewise began his career as a child prodigy. 'But I think the term to use is devotion. Almost like a missionary, she is completely devoted to music. Her energy, her enthusiasm, her professionalism are unbelievable. I admire her so much for that, because she works so hard. With Midori nothing is ever done just to be brilliant, to be a virtuoso. It's always at the service of the music and of every single detail in the score.'

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Midori's approach to making music has in turn inspired Thibaudet to push himself to what he says are new extremes of engagement: 'You can put two musicians together, they can read the notes and that can be very fulfilling and great fun. But we had a real collaboration. I don't think I've ever rehearsed and prepared so beautifully and so intensely. We would just work non-stop at my home in Los Angeles, from 10am until the evening, analysing all the details in the score.'

When working on the Beethoven sonatas, along with commanding every facet of her part, Midori brought a detailed knowledge of the piano score. 'Beethoven called these works sonatas for piano and violin, and the piano part is gigantic – some of them are like little piano concertos,' says Thibaudet. 'Often the violin line is not the main line, and she paid close attention to my part and would try to blend and match my colour.' The result was that they seemed to 'become one person'. Thibaudet believes that this is the way it should be: 'That's what real chamber music is. If you can take the time to discover that, you can perform it at an incredible level. And it changes everything. For me it has been the most enriching experience.'



Photo courtesy of Midori

Midori with Isaac Stern at a reception in the late 1980s

Formative influences

When Midori returned to her native Japan in November for her first major appearances there since the pandemic, she made sure that her five-concert marathon with Thibaudet and other colleagues was billed not only as a celebration of the 40th anniversary of her debut but also as a delayed homage both to Beethoven and to Isaac Stern (in lieu of the performances that were originally to have taken place in 2020 to honour their 250th and 100th anniversaries, respectively).

Recalling how Stern affected her is a central topic whenever Midori is asked to look back at formative influences. 'I met Mr Stern when I first came to New York. He taught me to become responsible for myself – musically, artistically; and the whole concept of being a global citizen, along with the activism.' It wasn't so much specific words of wisdom or actions that left their mark as the example he set 'in an organic way' through his entire way of life. 'We think about him as the saviour of Carnegie Hall or as instrumental in bringing the NEA [America's National Endowment for the Arts] into existence. But those are the outside things.' What matters most, she says, is 'how he inspired many of my colleagues to become advocates and citizens, to participate for the betterment of the community'.

'I'm touched that Midori still has this airtight devotion to all of the teaching and the guidance that my father lavished on her,' says the conductor Michael Stern, son of Isaac. 'He was very good at finding people who were worthy of that attention, and he never found anybody who was more receptive than her nor anybody else who digested what he taught and then made it their own in the way that she did.'

'Isaac Stern inspired many of my colleagues to become advocates and citizens, to participate for the betterment of the community' - Midori

Michael Stern believes this relationship not only left its mark on Midori's 'no-nonsense' professionalism as an artist but also helps explain 'why she's such an effective and compelling teacher herself. The ultimate goal of a teacher – and this is something that my father used to say all the time – is that you don't want to tell somebody what to do: you want to enable that young person to teach themselves.'

It was from her mother, the violinist Setsu Gotō, that the three-year-old Midori received her first lessons on the instrument while growing up in Osaka. Apart from her family and Isaac Stern, she is reluctant to single out other individual mentors. 'Whether you officially call them mentors or not, there are many I got to work with as a young artist.' Looking back on her life as a prodigy, she offers a more general sense of gratitude for 'the opportunities and access' she had to

'fantastic artists as a young colleague'. She explains: 'I was very fortunate that these inspirations were always there. I feel that they didn't happen in specific, out-of-the-ordinary circumstances, but in my ordinary life.'

At the same time, the tremendous pressure that Midori endured as she came of age under so much public scrutiny – every decision about her developing career path subjected to unrelenting attention, even before the advent of social media – is apparent from her 2004 memoir in German, Einfach Midori ('Simply Midori'). Michael Stern remarks: 'Not everything about her early life was easy, with all the notoriety and the concerts with big orchestras and conductors. The responsibility she faced to maintain expectations was a lot for a young person. It can take its toll on people who are less intellectually and emotionally open.' Yet it was precisely that experience, he suggests, that fortified Midori to become such an extraordinary, empathetic teacher. 'She remembers figuring stuff out and then she can bring that back.'



Eleven-year-old Midori's first artist photo

Coming of age

Questions about highlights in her career so far prompt Midori to reflect on the many experiences 'that go undetected by journalists or managements, or maybe even by myself, that I sometimes realise only now'. Rather than rehearse a list of specific musical achievements or performances, she prefers to savour the memory of 'everyday things as well as the very public things. It could have been just sharing laughter with somebody like Mr Stern, or sitting down to eat pizza with my colleagues at a particular place, or even missing a train together.' Unlike breaking strings at a concert, such Proustian recollections 'aren't going to make it into a biography', she says. 'Sometimes you don't even know why you remember them or why they made such an impact. But at some point, you just remember and realise that this was a very important moment.'

In a similar vein, Midori shies away from enumerating specific ambitions about expanding her repertoire. 'I'm always looking for something new: it could be works by living composers or things that were written not so long ago but that are not in the repertoire yet.' As for what educational or outreach efforts she foresees on the horizon, Midori refers to the variety of projects in which her own non-profit-making organisations are involved, stressing the necessity of flexibility. 'It keeps changing, because the world keeps changing. Sometimes that's good. Sometimes that's not good. But the world is changing and is a very living thing. I don't want to have anything that gets stuck in time.'

'I'm always looking for something new: it could be works by living composers or things that were written not so long ago but are not in the repertoire yet' - Midori

It was this attitude that arguably helped Midori make such a self-possessed transition from her earliest years as a prodigy to a searching young artist. 'Unlike a lot of other people who were child prodigies, where the novelty of being so young is what carried the day, Midori is all substance,' says Michael Stern. 'The incredible thing about her is the way she has been able to grow, evolve and deepen her connection to music while maintaining this extraordinary level of technical brilliance. She's only gotten better and better.' Related to that ability to grow is an intense curiosity that has led her to cultivate a repertoire of, as Stern describes it, 'everything from Bach to pieces that were written for her last week. Her ability to synthesise and find connections is exceptional.'

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A good example of such synthesis can be found in the programming Midori has designed for the solo Bach project with which she tours over the next several months. Interlaced with the Sonatas and Partitas are pieces by a wide scope of contemporary composers: Jessie Montgomery, John Zorn, Thierry Escaich and Annie Gosfield. 'I like the combination of different ideas,' she says. Midori chose the Bach masterpieces as a focus during her 30th-anniversary season as well. What has changed as she returns to these works now? 'It's the way we hear things, the way we shape things. The music itself hasn't changed. But how we react to it is always changing.'



Photo: Jack Mitchell

A publicity photo from 1995



***'An instrument that isn't strong enough - that succumbs to your powers - is probably not as interesting' -
Midori***

Bermel had previously written a solo violin piece as a commission for Midori: his violin etude *Chôros* (one of a set from 2009–16). 'It gave me a chance to try different things and see how Midori reacted to them,' he says. The issue to be addressed in *Spring Cadenzas* was that of the audio lag – particularly in the early days of Zoom – in linking Midori from a remote source with the live, socially distanced orchestral performers. Bermel structured the concerto as a series of interlocking cadenzas that allowed for 'lack of clarity in the bar-lines' during 'the remote period' when Midori would be playing her solos.

To prepare the piece, he listened closely to Midori's interpretations of the cadenzas in several canonical concertos, making note of 'specific technical questions surrounding how a cadenza moves through time and space'. He then built the piece around cadenzas: 'So I called it *Spring Cadenzas*: we were all hoping for a kind of a spring coming out of this very dark period.' Bermel recalls meeting her to discuss specific bowing issues: 'Nothing went unnoticed with Midori because she's a perfectionist. She's driven toward excellence all the time – and that drives me to be at my best as well.'



Photo: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders



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