

discovery

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Trailblazing

Anne Akiko Meyers charts her own course.
By Bradley Bamberger

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BACK IN THE 20th century, virtuosos had their images honed by record companies; they may have had to toe a traditional line, but they could focus on music rather than marketing. Now, many top musicians are forced to take care of business on their own. That can be stressful, but it allows for freedom of movement that some artists might not want to give up, even if they could return to the good old days.

Anne Akiko Meyers knows what the cushy times were like, having had an exclusive RCA recording contract in the '90s. These days the violinist doesn't necessarily enjoy the minutiae of maintaining a website and coordinating her own publicity, travel and rehearsals, but she definitely relishes living outside the traditionalist box. She's able to curate more personal recordings, pursue a passion for fresh music and play venues once considered more apt for a chanteuse than Schubert.

"Forging your own path can be hard, but I've never seen myself as a safety-first, ivory-tower musician," Meyers says. "I'd get bored to death playing the same three concertos all season as some do. I always keep my ears open to music, whether it's in a concert hall or a bar, and I like to mix it up. I don't even mind making myself uncomfortable. It keeps you sharp."

In da club. Akira Eguchi and Anne Akiko Meyers performing at Le Poisson Rouge in New York

Born in 1970 to an American father and Japanese mother, Meyers is more beautiful in person than any publicity glamour shots make her out to be. The native Californian lives in the Carnegie Hall neighborhood now, and the tension of a New York lifestyle can obviously wind her up. Free afternoons are rare, but she eventually eases into giving up this one to a journalist. She has a disarming habit of using salty language or indulging in backstage gossip, then raising her eyes to see your reaction — and blithely lowering them, as if hardly caring what it is.

As we try to talk over a midtown hotel lobby's blaring Baroque soundtrack, Meyers bolts up, saying, "Incredible — that's the Vivaldi piece I played on the Johnny Carson show when I was eleven....I'm still mad at my mother for making me wear knee-highs on national television."

Although she hates the term, Meyers was a child prodigy, debuting with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the age of eleven and the New York Philharmonic at twelve. Her Juilliard peers included such fiddlers as Midori and Gil Shaham. Repaying the warm devotion

of her parents — "still my groupies" — she was recording the Barber concerto at London's Abbey Road Studios by eighteen. She signed her RCA deal a few years later, cutting a swath through concertos by composers from Mendelssohn to Prokofiev while the major-label heyday lasted. Re-stoking her career, Meyers produced a 2004 recital disc through the artist-led Avie imprint. The East-meets-West program was close to her heart — Japanese moderns Toru Takemitsu and Somei Satoh set alongside Debussy, Ravel and Messiaen.

This year, Meyers and pianist Akira Eguchi released *Smile* via the indie label Koch. The album features an early rarity by Messiaen (his *Fantasie*), along with Schubert's dramatic *Fantasy in C* and song-like pieces by composers from Arvo Pärt to Astor Piazzolla. *Smile* also includes a wistful interpretation of the title tune, written by Charlie Chaplin (in a Claus Ogerman transcription), along with another evergreen, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," in an arrangement Meyers commissioned from Japanese jazz pianist Makoto Ozone.

The disc's highlights, though, are the wonderfully lyrical arrangements of two Japanese folk songs. "Moonlight in the Castle," Meyers says, "is a song my Japanese grandmother used to sing to me. I arranged it to play solo, so it's just the one voice. It's about a once glorious castle, now faded into emptiness, where the only constant is the moonlight shining down — a nostalgic, very Japanese theme. The other song, 'Sea in Spring,' reminds me of being a kid visiting Japan, getting dressed up, eating watermelon, holding sparklers. We prepared the piano to sound like a koto zither, and I tried to make my violin whisper like a shakuhachi flute."

Some purists may consider *Smile* a something-for-everybody potpourri, but "every piece is there because I love the music, whether it's an intellectual challenge like the Schubert or something with a simple, breathing, emotional quality like 'Over the Rainbow,'" Meyers insists. "Who effin' cares where a piece comes from as long as it moves you? I really played these pieces from my

'Who effin' cares where a piece comes from as long as it moves you?'

heart and recorded almost everything in one take. We booked the hall for five days, but only needed two."

Meyers unveiled *Smile* in Manhattan not at a hallowed hall uptown but at a Greenwich Village club, Le Poisson Rouge. For a violinist bred to play bigger halls, it can be unsettling "to have people sitting right under your nose, but the energy I felt fed into my playing," she says. "It seemed less like a classical 'presentation,' more like the audience and I were really sharing something."

Not all classical musicians are suited to a downtown setting, but Meyers took to it, says Ronen Givony, a music director at Le Poisson Rouge. "Some performers would just do the usual, but she took advantage of the informality, talking to the audience, introducing each piece, saying how the night made her feel

more like a chanteuse. We forget sometimes that even high art like Schubert's was first played where people were drinking and socializing. Someone like Anne shows how the environment for this music is more elastic than people think."

Meyers has an elastic sensibility when it comes to the music itself, too. She commissioned Wynton Marsalis — famed jazz trumpeter, composer and "cutie," she jokes — to write cadenzas for Mozart's G Major Violin Concerto, scheduled to be unveiled this summer. Meyers marveled at the different ears of a jazzier while they were listening to a record of the Mozart at her apartment, scores in hand: "The way he

Hot spot. Le Poisson Rouge is currently the place to be.

heard the music was so different from me. He could really feel the polyrhythms, and he was singing things out so vividly."

One of Meyers' biggest fans is conductor Andrew Litton, a friend since they recorded Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending* together in her RCA days. In 2005, for Hyperion, they recorded Joseph Schwantner's *Angelfire*, a concerto for amplified violin written especially for Meyers. She played the piece "like she should have — like she owned it," Litton says. "There are a lot of violinists who play with a great sound, intonation, phrasing. But Anne has all that plus this special savvy, energy and curiosity. Many don't make the transition from prodigy to serious, mature artist, but she has in a way that I never cease to admire."

For Meyers, the emphasis should always be on music over fashion or formality. "Classical musicians are so concerned about how they present themselves, and the audience is so worried about doing the right thing — it creates this tension that's unnecessary and unmusical," she says. "Believe me, when I finish the twenty-minute first movement of the Tchaikovsky concerto, I love to hear applause. Really, who cares what the snobs think?" ■



Strange brew. Meyers' *Smile* pairs Messiaen, Schubert and Pärt with Piazzolla and Charlie Chaplin.