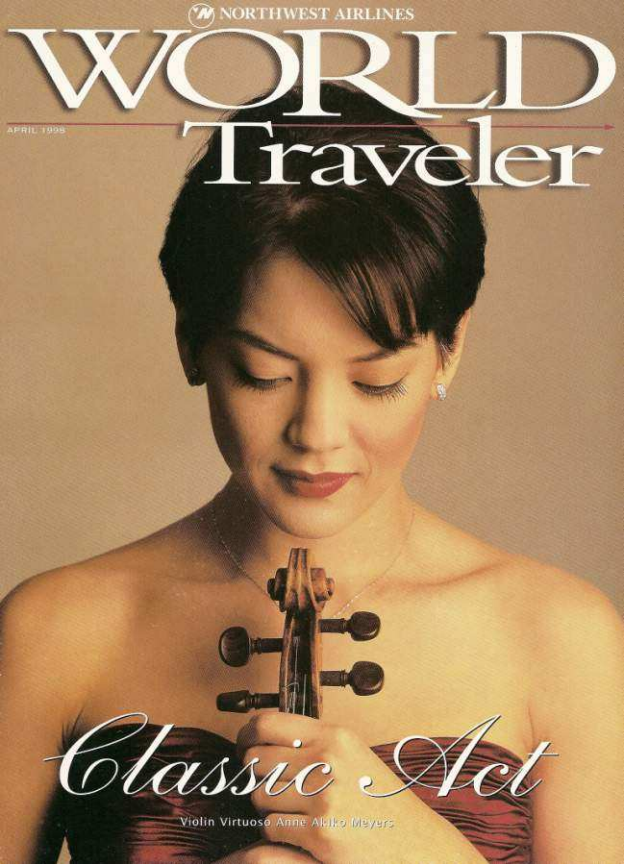


 NORTHWEST AIRLINES

WORLD Traveler

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Classic Act

Violin Virtuoso Anne Akiko Meyers

A woman with short dark hair, wearing a black strapless dress and a pearl necklace, is seated on a wooden floor. She is holding a violin with her left hand and resting her right arm on the floor. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The word "notes" is written in a purple, lowercase, sans-serif font in the upper right area of the image.

notes

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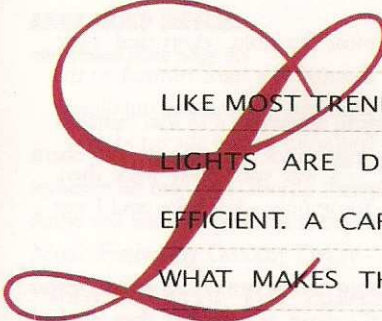
FROM VIVALDI TO SIBELIUS TO BEETHOVEN, VIOLIN VIRTUOSO

ANNE AKIKO MEYERS HAS BEEN CONQUERING THE CLASSICS

SINCE SHE WAS FOUR. NOW SHE'S READY TO SCALE NEW HEIGHTS.



by **PAT AKERS** *photographs by* **DANNY TURNER**



LIKE MOST TRENDY COFFEE SHOPS, THE PLACE IS PACKED; THE LIGHTS ARE DIM; AND THE SERVERS ARE BLUNT YET EFFICIENT. A CAFFEINE BUZZ PERMEATES THE THICK AIR. BUT WHAT MAKES THIS SHOP—ON THE CORNER OF 67TH AND

Columbus in Manhattan's Upper West Side—stand out on this blustery afternoon is a plush purple-velvet chair tucked away in the what-passes-for-quiet-section of the shop.

"See that chair over there? It's my favorite," says violin visionary Anne Akiko Meyers. Alas, that chair and nearly all the others are occupied, forcing Anne and her party to resign themselves to a wobbly four-top that lies about three steps from the entrance. As they get settled in, the already-forceful winter gales decide to pick it up a notch, causing patrons to talk louder to drown out both the breeze and escalating conversations from other tables.

Over the years, Anne, 27, has earned a reputation for being one of the most easygoing and engaging figures in classical music. Talk to anyone who knows her, and the words *she's so nice* are virtually guaranteed to come up within the first minute. That there is any table available, she seems genuinely thrilled—at first. After removing her dark coat and gloves, she tries to snuggle in with her still-steaming cappuccino, but someone in the constant parade of traffic working its way into the shop has managed to wedge the welcome mat under the door.

"Hang on a second. I'll take care of this," she says, bolting from her seat. She pushes the already-ajar door open farther, manages to wrestle the mat free and determinedly shuts the door. A few heads turn. She quietly retakes her seat. Having learned the error of its ways, the door does not repeat its mistake.

"I don't like this weather, and for as long as I live here, I don't think I'll ever get used to it," says Anne. Indeed, the concrete canyons the California native now calls home are about as far removed from that region's sun-baked streets and sidewalks as one can get.

A WORK OF ARTS

Throughout history, musical prodigies have fascinated and inspired us. Violinist Erich Korngold was labeled a genius while in his early teens. Felix Mendelssohn started composing so early that by the time he was 16 he was creatively spent. Anne had a head start on them both. In fact, her love for music stretches back about nine months before she was born.

"I was nervous about becoming a young mother," says Anne's mother, Yakko Meyers, "so while I was pregnant with Anne, I was reading everything I could get my

hands on about parenting and bringing a child into the world." But it wasn't her intent to create a prodigy. "More than anything, I just wanted to instill within my baby the pure joy of listening to music," she says.

"I've been told babies and young children equate happiness with food," says Anne. "When I was little, Yakko added classical music to the equation. Whenever she fed me, she would have Beethoven violin sonatas playing in the background. I don't know if that made me appreciate music more at an early age, but now whenever I hear the violin, I get hungry."

It's not so strange that Anne feels hungry when she hears the violin. That can be attributed to simple Pavlovian conditioning. What is slightly odd, however, is to hear her refer to her mother by her first name.

"Every since Anne has been able to speak, she has called me Yakko. Her sister, Toni, does it, too," says Yakko. "We used to joke in our house that there wasn't a mommy. There was a daddy and a Yakko."

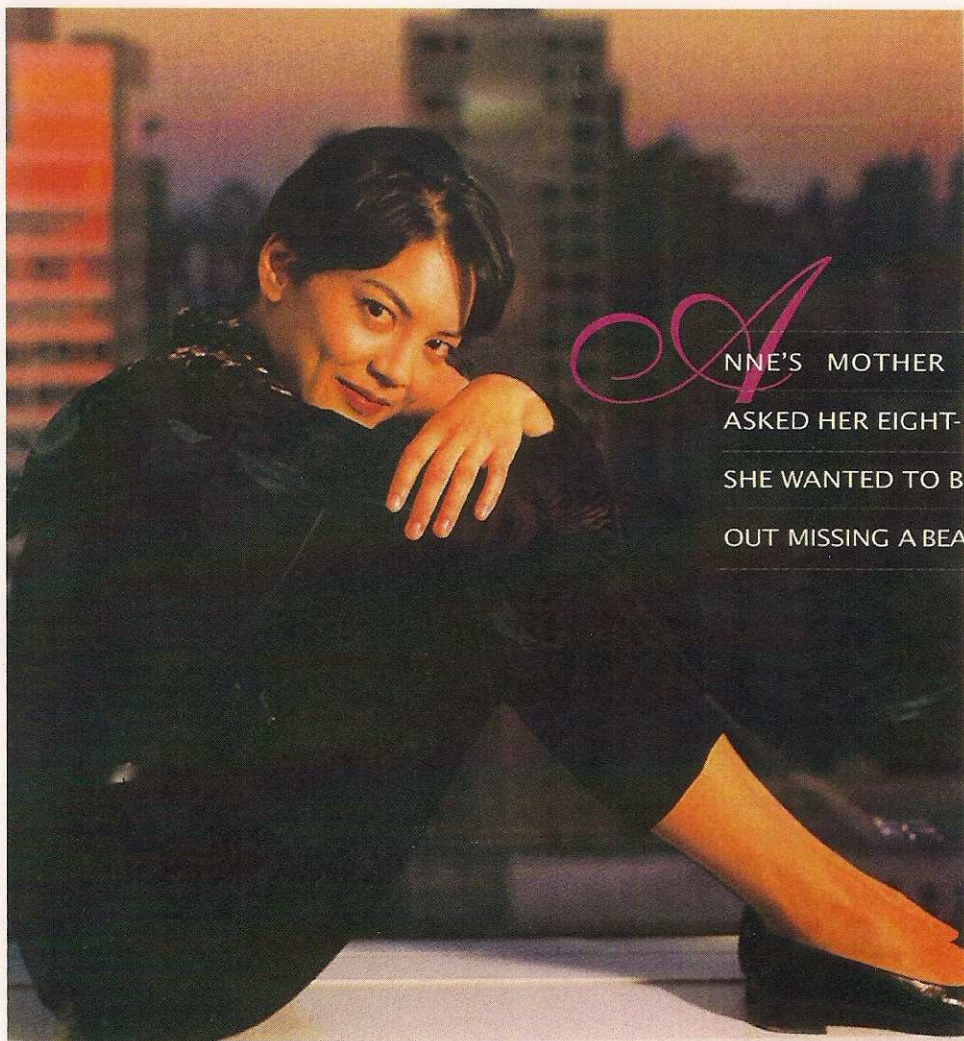
THE GOOD BOOKS

In addition to books on parenting, Anne's parents also were intrigued by *Nurtured by Love*, an influential book by Shinichi Suzuki. The book stresses that if children can master such complex arts as spoken language at an early age then they should be able to absorb the performing arts, as well. This theory is at the heart of the Suzuki method, a popular teaching technique that emphasizes group participation and repetition of sounds.

When Anne was four, her parents bought her a 1/16-size violin and enrolled her in lessons with her first instructor, Shirley Helmick. Though Anne would go on to study with Helmick for the next two and a half years, her potential made itself known almost immediately.

"At the end of the first lesson, the instructor gave the children a take-home assignment," says Richard Meyers, Anne's father and president of Webster University in St. Louis. "Anne came home that night, went to her room and memorized the piece. The next day, the teacher asked if any of the children could play it back. None of them could—except Anne. She played it back perfectly."

Despite the fact there was a virtuoso-in-the-making in the house—with all the special attention and burgeoning media recognition that soon entailed—Anne believes there was little jealousy between her and her sister, Toni. In fact, Anne says if anyone was jealous, it was she. "When I first started to learn, it was painful to get



ANNE AKIKO MEYERS

through those 15 minutes of practice a day. Toni used to go out and play in the sandbox while I practiced," she says.

"I've never been jealous of Anne," says Toni, now 25 and a first-year student at the St. Louis University School of Medicine. "I've always been so happy for her. Even when I was a little kid, I understood that there was something special going on in our house."

One of the things that jump-started Anne's career was her impatience with the Suzuki method. "It was a fine place to begin, but I knew from the start I didn't want to be the usual Suzuki robot. I wanted to learn how to read notes, and I did right away," she says.

By the time Anne was seven, she had made her debut with a local community orchestra and by eight had enrolled in Los Angeles' R.D. Colburn School of Performing Arts, studying with noted instructor Alice Schoenfeld. A couple of years later, she performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. It was around this time the national spotlight discovered Anne as the leader of the Angels Ensemble of California, a string quartet composed of child prodigies. They appeared on *The Tonight Show*, and despite their regional success, Anne wasn't entirely happy. She has described herself at the time as "the

most horrible, egotistical little dictator"—a stark contrast to the ebullient, gracious and unfailingly courteous person she is today.

"I was very bossy back then. You're only a kid once, and I was

ANNE'S MOTHER RECALLS AN INTERVIEWER ASKED HER EIGHT-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER WHAT SHE WANTED TO BE WHEN SHE GREW UP. WITHOUT MISSING A BEAT, ANNE REPLIED, "THE BEST."

taking everything so seriously. I didn't like a lot of things—school, in particular—because I guess I felt sort of left out," she says.

"She was so serious—a perfectionist. She was always so hard on herself. That's my side coming out of her," says Yakko, a Tokyo native. "I remember once during an interview she had around this time a reporter asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, and without missing a beat, she replied, 'The best.'"

In today's dual-income economy, it's common to find two successful careers in a household, but when there are three—Anne's father has spent 30 years in academia, and Yakko is an accomplished artist and inventor—something has to give.

"When Anne was about 14, she had the opportunity to study with Josef Gingold at Indiana University," says Richard. "At about the same time, I received a challenging opportunity from Western Oregon University. With both girls in music and Yakko's career, things were always busy around the house, but we'd never really been apart before."

"Things weren't easy for us then, especially for Yakko. She made incredible sacrifices. She put her own career on hold for five or six years to be Anne's guiding force. It was terribly difficult for us to split up the family, but we knew it was an incredible opportunity for Anne," he says.

"It was 1984, and I was itching to study with a different teacher," recalls Anne. "I thought the combination of Indiana and Josef Gingold would be great. And it was, but what I wasn't prepared for was the culture shock. In Indiana, there were cultural barriers and some racial problems, as well." When pressed for specifics, she pauses for a few seconds, takes a drink, smiles brightly and says, "It really doesn't matter now. That was a long time ago."

continued on page 64

Indiana's lack of a precollege program made her decision to leave after one semester an easy one. Shortly thereafter, Anne was asked to perform at the Aspen Music Festival by Dorothy DeLay—the noted violin instructor whose protégés include such virtuosos as Sarah Chang and Nigel Kennedy. DeLay offered Anne a full scholarship to the Juilliard School and took her on as a private pupil. Once again, the family packed its bags.

Mention the Midwest, and certain images come to mind—rolling prairies, farm fields stretching farther than the eye can see, small towns where everyone knows each other. Mention the Midwest to Anne, and one thing stands out: car trouble.

"Yakko, Toni and I were on our way to New York when the Audi broke down—twice. I thought we would never make it," Anne says. "Even when we first got to New York, we had no place to live or anywhere to go."

In the midst of adjusting both to New York and Juilliard, Anne was beset with management offers. She signed with Young Concert Artists when she was 16 and a year later was under contract to talent giant ICM. "I was getting paid to do what I love. It was exciting to be 16 and have professional management, but there were always conflicts with being on the road and taking classes. The glamour wore off pretty quickly," says Anne.

There also was little glamour in the classroom. During their demanding sessions, DeLay helped Anne shape her signature sound, which combines unerring proficiency, a velvety, creamy tone, and a deep helping of soul absent in many of today's players. "She was unlike any teacher I had before," Anne says. "I've had teachers who wanted to tell me everything. She told me nothing and helped me teach myself. My technique improved greatly because she made me realize where the music was coming from within me and how I could shape it."

Since graduating from Juilliard in 1990, Anne clearly has moved on but not very

far away. She maintains an apartment in a building adjacent to the Juilliard dorms—but a move may be in the works. "The other day I was practicing," she says, "and saw all of these students watching me through binoculars. I thought to myself, 'God, it's time to move!'"

It may provide her little consolation, but she's not around much, anyway. Though Anne's popularity is most firmly rooted in the United States, Europe and Asia, where she is one of the most sought-after soloists, the 60 or so dates she performs each year take her all around the globe. "I'm getting ready to take off for Europe. I'll be playing in Spain, and then I'm going to the Netherlands and play for the queen," says Anne.

"Amsterdam is one of my favorite places in the world to play," she says. "Whenever I'm there, I feel like such a free spirit. I'm so comfortable there. The people are so wonderful, and I feel encouraged to try new things."

Though playing for Dutch royalty in Amsterdam's Concertgebouw—one of Anne's favorite venues—certainly is an enticing prospect, her audiences generally consist of people eager to hear her play popular and much-loved pieces. Just as a Rolling Stones concert would feel incomplete without the inclusion of "Satisfaction" somewhere on the set list, audiences tend to feel a bit cheated if Anne doesn't play something from Brahms, Mendelssohn or Beethoven.

"Performing is a balancing act. I like to challenge both conductors and audiences, but I also know if I don't sell tickets, I'm not going to be asked back," she says. "One of the things I love most is when a conductor contacts me and says, 'Whatever you want to play, Anne.'"

If asked to perform something new, "it takes about a week to get the notes down but years to capture the essence. Pieces of music are like great bottles of wine; you've got to let them age to truly appreciate the subtleties," she says.

Anne has just reached the end of an

exclusive seven-year contract with RCA. Her final release, *Prokofiev: Violin Concertos; Five Melodies*, has been described by *American Record Guide* as "a record that causes the ears to perk up and the pulse to quicken... There seems to be no limit to the colors [Meyers] can draw from her instrument."

Although Anne prefers not to discuss her future recording plans—"There are only so many good ideas out there, and I don't want to be scooped"—she looks forward to performing a pair of concertos she has helped get commissioned. Joseph Schwantner is writing one, and Japanese composer Somei Satoh should be starting the other this spring.

Life on the road for Anne is devoid of many of the trappings people tend to associate with celebrity status. Mobs of adoring fans, limousines and paparazzi are conspicuously absent. "That's just the way it is with classical musicians. It's just me, my bags and my violin," she says. After several years of playing a 1718 Stradivarius and a 1736 Guarnerius Del Gesu, she is currently playing a 1708 Guarnerius.

"There is a lot of jet lag and disorientation, and we don't have entourages," she says. "It's pretty lonely. I spend a lot of time walking through downtowns, looking up at the beautiful deserted buildings. Eventually, I'll head over to the hall and practice the piece with the orchestra a couple of times."

"I have to practice for a couple of hours every day, or my fingers will get stiff. But I don't overdo it. It's like that in life, too," she says. "If you concentrate too hard on school, work or whatever, you run the risk of extinguishing what it is you love about it. But if you take a step back every now and then, it can grow beyond your dreams." ■

When Pat Akers was a child, his favorite piece of violin music was Charlie Daniels' version of "Orange Blossom Special."

