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THE STAR AMERICAN
VIOLINIST ON
HER ENDURING
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FUTURE OF NEW MUSIC

ANNE AKIKO
MEYERS

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ANNE AKIKO MEYERS

WHAT'S NEXT?

US violinist Anne Akiko Meyers speaks to **Rita Fernandes** about her Californian roots, lifelong hunger for commissioning new works, and determination to make a lasting impact on the future of new music

The stars were aligned – quite literally – on the evening of 12 September 2023 at the Hollywood Bowl. They cloaked the clear Los Angeles night sky, a violet backdrop against the two crossed Hollywood searchlights beaming above the iconic 17,500-seat outdoor venue nestled in the Hollywood Hills. But they were aligned in other ways, too. Alongside the Los Angeles Philharmonic, US violinist Anne Akiko Meyers was performing, with the composer present, Philip Glass's Violin Concerto no.1, which she will be recording next year alongside his *New Chaconne* for violin and bass-line, written for her. She is herself from California and grew up attending the Hollywood Bowl. Her interpretation of the concerto was seamlessly in tune with the soul of the piece. And the orchestra ended the concert with Holst's suitably galactic *The Planets*.

Sentimentality aside, in our interview at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown LA the next morning, Meyers tells me that she was secretly wishing Jim Carrey would be there (Glass scored *The Truman Show*).

If you ever get the chance to meet Meyers, the first thing you'll notice – and hear – is her infectious laugh. With a witticism here and a deadpan joke there, she finds a humorous twist in almost everything. But don't be fooled by the light-

heartedness, as she is also a uniquely focused artist: focused on her musical mission and focused on the here and now, especially when it comes to commissioning new works. There is an urgency, a sense of childlike wonderment and a humanistic approach when she talks about commissioning. And though she may be too humble to admit it, her profile makes her one of the best-placed artists today to make a real and lasting impact on the future of new music. Commissioning has marked many of her major career achievements and it has come to define her approach to music itself.

Glass is her latest catch in a nearly 25-year-run of commissioning. (I can't think of any other artist on her level who has a tab on their website dedicated to composer collaborations.) With so many commissions now behind her, it is amusing to hear the genuine surprise in her voice every time she reveals that another composer has agreed to collaborate with her – as if her track record weren't enough, she is also simply a delight to be around. And her playing – so focused yet flexible – lends itself uniquely well to bringing new pieces into the world.

Since her early commissioning days, Meyers has collaborated with the likes of Einojuhani Rautavaara, Arvo Pärt, John Corigliano, Wynton Marsalis, Morten Lauridsen, Mason Bates, >

ANNE AKIKO MEYERS

*'I get so overexcited and
become obsessed with tracking
these composers down!'*

DAVID ZENTZ

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ANNE AKIKO MEYERS



Meyers performing Glass's Violin Concerto no.1 at the Hollywood Bowl in September 2023

Arturo Márquez, and now Glass (*below*), among many others. 'I have an insatiable hunger for these composers,' she tells me. The total number is around 40 now – but who's counting? 'I try to find a different position in the composer's arc,' she says. 'How would their language sound on the violin? I have so many ideas percolating through my brain.'

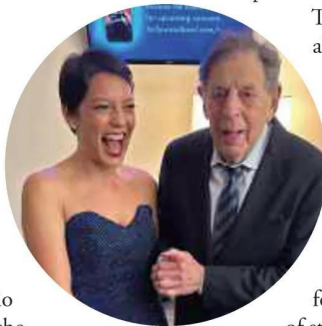
Meyers's interest in new music began early. 'It came from a very organic place, my fascination and deep appreciation of living composers. My teacher Alice Schoenfeld exposed me to lots of different music. I heard one of her students perform the Barber Concerto, which no one else was performing in the early 80s.' The Barber was included on Meyers's first studio album, recorded at Abbey Road Studios when she was 18. 'Playing that kind of music lit something in me.'

She continues, 'When I was in New York, I would visit record and sheet music stores: Tower Records, Frank Music Company – all these places that no longer exist.' Meyers moved to New York to study with Dorothy DeLay at the Juilliard School at the age of 14. 'I would flip through music, and even discovered a piece by Messiaen that had never been performed. I would buy hundreds of dollars' worth of CDs, stack them in my apartment and listen to everything on repeat. I remember

listening to *Cantus arcticus* by Rautavaara in the early 90s. I couldn't stop. The world he exposed me to was so monumental. To even think about going into a bird reserve, recording birdsong and incorporating that into a piece – I was just flabbergasted.'

There is a genuine curiosity on Meyers's part about the compositional process. The first violin concerto she commissioned, *Angelfire*, was written by Joseph Schwantner in 2002. 'He thought I was part angel, part demonic fire angel!' she says, bursting into laughter. 'Brilliant title! I remember going to his studio and playing the piece, and him excitedly telling me about his writing process.' Regarding Eric Whitacre's new work *Murmur* for Meyers, which is inspired by a murmuration of starlings, she expresses her excitement at learning the term: 'I had to look that up... and wow! How inspiring! I would've never thought of that in my life if I hadn't met him. How amazing is that!'

She is also reminded of her trip to Finland to meet Rautavaara and observing his 'big drafting table' on which he was still working. 'I remember flying to Helsinki, getting to his flat and seeing "E. Rautavaara" on the front door. I had chills. I felt like I was meeting my maker.' The piece he wrote for her, *Fantasia*, was the composer's last full work before his death in 2016. ►



Meyers with her teacher Alice Schoenfeld in 1984



Meyers with Dorothy DeLay at Abbey Road Studios while recording her first album at 18 years old

HOLLYWOOD BOWL: PHOTO FARAH SOSA. ALL OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANNE AKIKO MEYERS.

ANNE AKIKO MEYERS

The world premiere of *Fandango* at the Hollywood Bowl in August 2021

'THE NUMBER OF CONCERTS THE LA PHIL PLAYS AT THE HOLLYWOOD BOWL, EXPOSING AUDIENCES TO A DIVERSE RANGE OF MUSIC – THERE'S NOTHING ELSE LIKE IT IN THE WORLD'

But in my opinion, what has allowed Meyers to become the Wonder Woman of commissioning she is today is not so much her die-hard interest in new music, nor her prodigious talent, as her no-holds-barred can-do attitude. And it is only intensifying. I'm reminded of something she told me a year earlier: 'It takes grit to believe in your dreams.' And oh, does she show it.

'I get so overexcited and become semi – or fully – obsessed with tracking these composers down! Some I already have relationships with; others I reach out to through their publishers, or sometimes I send an email to the composer directly. They can always say no, but it's about putting an idea into their head by asking, "Would you consider writing something for violin?" And the answer is usually yes. There's nothing to lose, but there's everything to gain. After I met Arturo Márquez he said, "Thank you so much for asking me to write this mariachi-inspired violin concerto [referring to the 2021 violin concerto *Fandango*, written for her] – I have been

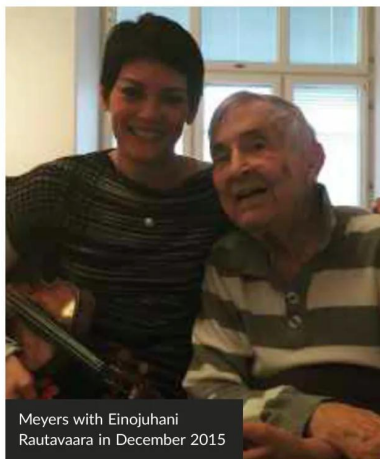
waiting decades to write it." I turned into a puddle hearing this.' On how she went about clinching her latest Glass commission, Meyers says, cheekily: 'A magician doesn't reveal her secrets...'

She may move quickly, but Meyers doesn't undertake these endeavours frivolously. 'There's such a commitment I feel towards the composers. I also feel very fortunate and grateful to them as I deeply love the works that have been written for me. What I've learnt from working with many of them is to be as free as possible and find the space and story within the notes. A lot of composers yearn to hear how artists bring their own unique perspective to their writing to create a whole new dimension and soundscape world. It's up to the artist to make it come alive. That's the beauty of new music – it grows into a life of its own.'

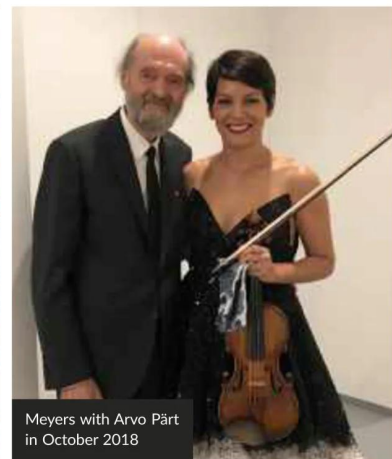
This is especially true for Márquez's *Fandango*, which Meyers premiered with the LA Phil and Gustavo Dudamel at the Hollywood Bowl in 2021; her recording of it was released ▶



(l-r) Marin Alsop, Joseph Schwantner and Meyers at the 2002 *Angelfire* premiere at Washington DC's Kennedy Center



Meyers with Einojuhani Rautavaara in December 2015



Meyers with Arvo Pärt in October 2018

ANNE AKIKO MEYERS



Performance of *Fandango* at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in October 2022

this autumn. Meyers has now performed the concerto nearly 20 times – more often than any of her previous commissions. ‘It’s grown so much since the premiere. It’s freer, so joyful and soulful. And performing it with Gustavo who feels the rhythms so innately, we’re just dancing and having a great time.’

To Meyers’s delight, the *Fandango* recording was made using four live performances at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. It is in stark contrast to her 2015 DVD recording of the premiere of Samuel Jones’s Violin Concerto, which she prepared in only six weeks and recorded with no prior performance or rehearsal. ‘For the *Fandango* CD we didn’t even have a patch session. There’s an energy and a fire that comes across when it’s live. Such electricity! And somehow, they were able to bleach out all the coughs and applause, and I thought, couldn’t you at least keep the cheers? I worked so hard for that!’ When I suggest that they could have added a whole separate track just for the applause, she replies, ‘Yes! An endless loop of clapping!’

Meyers has a long history with the LA Phil. She made her debut performance with the orchestra at the age of only eleven, in 1981. And their most recent adventure together has been touring *Fandango* since its premiere, from Carnegie Hall in New York City to the Auditorio Nacional in Mexico City. Upcoming premieres by Whitacre and Billy Childs will also see her perform with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and Los Angeles Master Chorale. She recently worked with the latter in her 2022 album *Mysterium*. Her connection to Los Angeles and California runs deep. ‘Yeah, I’m a California girl,’ she says.

‘PLAYING THE TCHAIKOVSKY CONCERTO FOR THE TWENTY-MILLIONTH TIME SADLY LOST ITS APPEAL FOR ME A WHILE AGO. I WANT TO HEAR THE MUSIC OF TODAY’

Born in San Diego, she grew up in the Mojave Desert in Southern California before moving to Los Angeles to study with Alice Schoenfeld at the age of seven. Before that, she had been doing eight-hour round trips to what would become the Colburn School of Performing Arts. ‘We were driving through the California desert, with occasional snowstorms and cow crossings, all while I was practising in the front seat of this little Volkswagen Beetle we had.’

Then came New York when she was 14, after a six-month stint in Indiana to study with Josef Gingold. ‘I lived in New York for almost 25 years, and I love the three airports there – they helped me so tremendously. But LAX and Burbank are really my quality places!’ she jokes. ‘Then I was in Austin, Texas, for seven years, but I was begging to come back to my roots. I love the sunshine, the high taxes,’ – this time, completely deadpan – ‘and the driving is really therapeutic because you can listen to loads of music. I’m like the crazy lady in the fast lane. I was listening to 80s music on the way here.’ I ask her what, specifically: ‘Oh, everything from U2 to Prince.’ Seeing my chance, I begin: ‘Well, if Prince were alive today, would you commission...?’ She anticipates the question and, in between laughs, says, ‘I’d definitely think about it!’

She focuses back on the topic: ‘The standard of the music scene here in LA is so high. It’s like a beam of light that’s shining out to the whole world, with Dudamel and the extraordinary LA Phil, Grant Gershon and the LA Master Chorale, the Colburn School, on and on. The number of concerts the orchestra plays at the Bowl, exposing audiences to a diverse range of music – there’s nothing else like it in the world.’

(l-r) Alice Schoenfeld, Meyers and Eleonore Schoenfeld backstage at Meyers’s 1995 Hollywood Bowl performance



WALT DISNEY CONCERT HALL PHOTO DUSTIN DOWNING, HOLLYWOOD BOWL PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNE AKIKO MEYERS

A four-year-old Meyers playing next to her mother in the garden of their Ridgcrest, California, home



Meyers's debut performance with the LA Phil at the age of eleven



About her first experience at the Hollywood Bowl, she says: 'When I was seven, my mum took my sister and me there. We packed a bento and went high up into the bleachers. I remember seeing Perlman play the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto. That's when I decided to be a professional violinist. Even though I've played there a couple of times now, it still gets my heart thumping when I see that sign, "Highland Avenue, Hollywood Bowl".' Recalling my own experience there the night before, I say, 'It's huge! There are twenty thousand people watching you!' 'No, no, Rita,' she replies, a glint in her eye, 'it's only seventeen thousand.'

Meyers also helps to provide Hollywood Bowl tickets to young musicians. 'Going there was life-changing for me, and to have all the students there from the Youth Orchestra Los Angeles last night was amazing,' she says, referring to a Q&A session she did backstage only minutes after leaving the stage. 'It's so awesome to see them eating popcorn and listening to music!'

It's 30 years since Meyers first graced the cover of *The Strad* (below), in May 1993 (she subsequently appeared again, in June 2018, via the cover story on her rock-star 1741 'Vieuxtemps' Guarneri 'del Gesù' violin), and even though she was only just 23 at the time, her professional career was already in full swing. At the age of eleven, she'd performed on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. She'd signed her first record deal at 16 and began her career as a touring soloist soon after. She soon became recognised outside music, featuring in Annie Leibovitz-shot commercials, Northwest Airlines advertisements and *Harper's Bazaar*. But as I dip into her tantalisingly Hollywoodesque past, she is humble – even disinterested. For her, it is the present and future that matter, and commissioning largely defines both.

It has been a conscious decision on Meyers's part to have a higher ratio of new music to standard repertoire in her concert seasons. 'Playing the Tchaikovsky Concerto for the twenty-millionth time sadly lost its appeal for me a while ago. I want to hear the music of today and how it can translate to the young musical minds of today.' Even her beloved Barber Concerto isn't safe: 'I call myself the

Queen of the Barber Violin Concerto! I'd have to say I've played it a hundred times and still find some amazing things in it. But possibly ten years down the line, will I still be playing it? We'll have to wait and see...'

I again broach the topic of sustaining such an impressive, almost four-decade-long career. She chuckles, but eventually says: 'I just find so much inspiration from commissioning. I draw from this insatiable hunger and am curious about so many things. We're on this earth for such a short time and I want to live it to the max. I always think, if I could go back in history, I would harass the heck out of some composers to write violin pieces. Chopin got off without writing any violin pieces? No thank you! And so, these composers of today – Márquez, Rautavaara, Glass, Pärt – are writing a legacy. What we are performing are the Beethoven Fifties or *Four Seasons* of our time. Just knowing that there's a concerto by Márquez out in the world now is amazing. That's a giant treasure for future generations of musicians, music lovers and audiences around the world, forever.' A word of advice for these future generations: 'I think it's absolutely essential to listen as much as possible and see what speaks to you. It can give you a new perspective without even realising you needed it before.'

Proof of this is how commissioning has affected Meyers's approach to standard repertoire. 'It has enriched it so deeply; I can't even explain. To go back to Vivaldi is the most beautiful thing. When playing new works, I'm always hunting for the story in the note, in the phrase, in the music. And that

translates to any kind of music. There's always a story, embedded in the notes. These musical storytellers are my lifeblood.'

Reminiscing about her previous night's performance of Glass's concerto, a work dedicated to his father, she tells me: 'Glass is 86 years old, and my own father, who was also there, is 85. It really makes you think about the arc of life. For Glass to be sitting there and thinking of his father is profoundly moving. Here is this musical genius who did everything to get into Juilliard. He drove cabs, was a house removals guy, and a plumber. So many amazing people pass away suddenly in life, so if you don't ask now, you might miss that opportunity. So get on with it!' ●

