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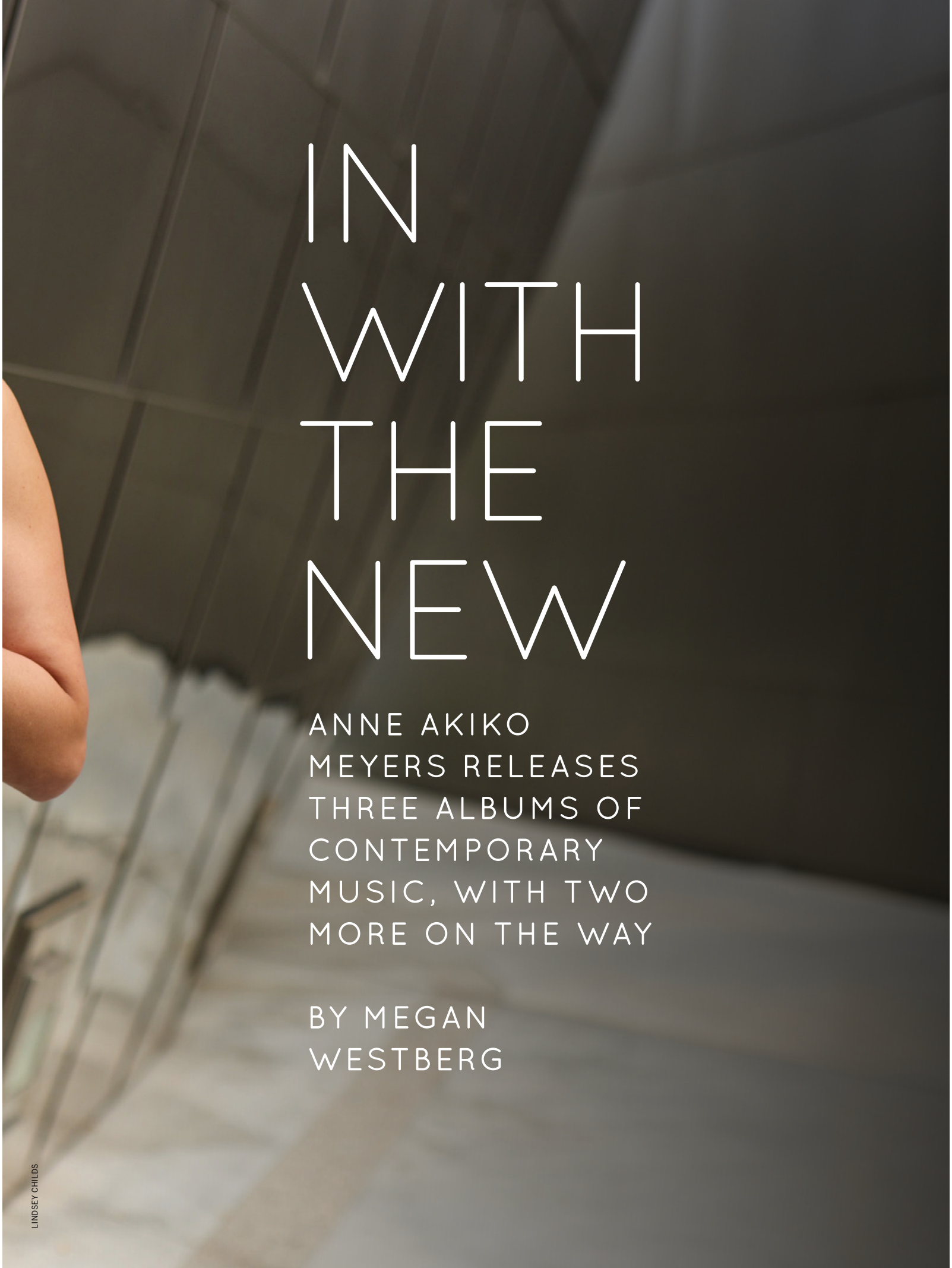
ANNE AKIKO MEYERS

ADVENTURES IN CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLING



IN WITH THE NEW

ANNE AKIKO MEYERS RELEASES THREE ALBUMS OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, WITH TWO MORE ON THE WAY

BY MEGAN WESTBERG

LINDSEY CHILDS

There is a sense of comfort in the familiar, in knowing that any musician's interpretation of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto will still manifest as indomitably Mendelssohnian. Thus, if one's tastes tend to run in the direction of past centuries, approaching contemporary music can seem a bit . . . fraught. Faced with an evening at least in part devoted to the ingestion of an unfamiliar work of recent origin, you may find that certain questions stand invariably in a cluster between your ears. Will you like it? How will it make you feel? Will it leave you confused (and a bit sheepish)?

Violinist Anne Akiko Meyers understands. She is a vocal, stalwart champion of contemporary composers and their works, and she's released three albums this year alone of this sort of music. But she's also not shy when you ask her why audiences haven't always taken an enthusiastic cannonball leap into the pool of new music. "Well," she begins, "I can say from my own experience that a lot of new music comes across as this scientific experiment that you are suddenly a part of, and you didn't expect to be. And it's really quite a painful situation." And she's not done. After noting that, of course, *all* music was at one time new, she adds of some modern musical fare, "It's almost like you're forced to try to like it. Like a big plate of kale. It's like, wow, I'm supposed to be liking this. It's supposed to be good for me. Even though it tastes horrible."

Meyers undoubtedly means no offense to kale devotees, but her point—that contemporary music has had, deservedly or not, a reputation for a certain prescribed virtue at times unmatched by the actual pleasure of its consumption—seems sound enough. And yet, even as she makes it, her career stands firmly in opposition to this notion, for Anne Akiko Meyers *loves* new music. She plays it *all the time*. She's just not into playing anything that makes a listener "feel like you need a doctorate to understand it."

"My terms for commissioning," she says, "is that I really am in love with the composer's music. I have to really be profoundly moved by their storytelling." One gets the impression she'd rather an audience come prepared to feel rather than analyze. That her vision of a concert hall presupposes trust rather than compulsory musical knowledge. And it would seem as though audiences, who tread in confident numbers to her premieres and subsequent performances of new works, have in fact acquired a certain faith in her musical palate.

FARAH SOSA

Meyers with conductor Karen Kamensek and Philip Glass

On paper, Meyers may appear an unlikely candidate to have become a commissioning evangelist. She started with a modified Suzuki Method, wherein—at her mother's request—the adolescent Meyers was taught to read music from the start. She went on to study with Alice and Eleanor Schoenfeld, then, at age 14, at Juilliard with Dorothy DeLay, Masao Kawasaki, and Felix Galimir. When she was 18, Meyers released her debut album after having been signed with management for a couple of years already. She was, in short, a highflier with the discipline, talent, and support to succeed, and her path was a relatively traditional one for a violin soloist with the chops to make standard repertoire sing (start early, practice much, learn from people who know what they're doing).

In terms of concertos, she played all the things you think she played ("Mozart Three, we worked on for *years*. I mean, to the point where it just, it drove me up a wall!"). But alongside the Mozart, the Mendelssohn, Lalo's *Symphony Espagnole*, and Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen*, Meyers had also been introduced to some less-standard fare, courtesy of Alice Schoenfeld. "I did not have any clue that Alice was really very interested in rare repertoire," says Meyers of her early days studying with her. "She had a student playing the Barber Violin Concerto. That's the first time I actually heard that piece. And I was so intrigued by that. And I was playing the Walter Piston Trio—no one plays music like that. Shostakovich trios."

"She just had so many xeroxed copies of rarely played music," Meyers adds. "And that definitely influenced me." It would still be a number of years before she made a nimble leap from the *rarely played* to the *never before played*, but it's clear her curiosity found validation and encouragement early on. Her first recording included the Barber Violin Concerto (paired with the Bruch) that had so impressed her in Schoenfeld's studio. Six years after its release, on her 1994 *Salut d'Amour* album, Meyers' first commissioning project, music by composer Shigeaki Saegusa, found its way to disc. The pieces were short and based on Japanese traditional folk music. "It included beautiful pieces like *Aka-Tonbo*, which means 'red dragonfly,' and *Kojyo No Tsuki* ('Moonlight Over the Ruined Castle'), which I play to this day," says Meyers.

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And then, she just never stopped commissioning new music. In addition to an extensive recording history (which, incidentally, also includes a great deal of standard repertoire), Meyers' website lists 38 composers whose work she has commissioned and/or premiered, and much of that body of work has made it into the discography as well. Having spent several decades devoted to the cause of new music, she's noticed, over the course of time, the classical music world's general attitude toward it shifting. Despite the barriers she mentioned, there seems to be an escalating degree of openness to the idea that adding new music into the mix is a good thing. Why?

"Because it's interesting," she says. "You know, you can't play the same music over and over and over again." She points to the success of Arturo Márquez's *Fandango*, a piece written for her. "The popularity of *Fandango* is just electrifying. To be a part of this historical legacy, where this music really just makes people cry and laugh and dance. And it's like, that's what you want to feel when you hear some music. All those emotions, you know? . . . You want music that *grows*. And we're all changing, and it's a reflection of our times, our culture, and it just resonates, I think, so deeply in our hearts when we listen to music that makes us feel."

The recording of *Fandango* was released in 2023, and Meyers is looking forward to its near-future release on vinyl. And because it won two Latin Grammy Awards, its name leaps to the tip of one's tongue when talking about Meyers' recording history, but 2025 has been pretty big for Meyers, too, in that regard. After all, she's managed to release three albums this year: *Michael Daugherty: Blue Electra* for violin and orchestra (written for Meyers and accompanied on the album by two of his pieces for orchestra); *Beloved* (*In the Arms of the Beloved* by Billy Childs, *The Seal Lullaby* by Eric Whitacre, and *Serenity* by Ola Gjeilo); *Philip Glass Violin Concerto No. 1* (with Glass' *Echorus* and *New Chaconne*).

So that's a lot. But Meyers is ever game to discuss what's on her music stand.

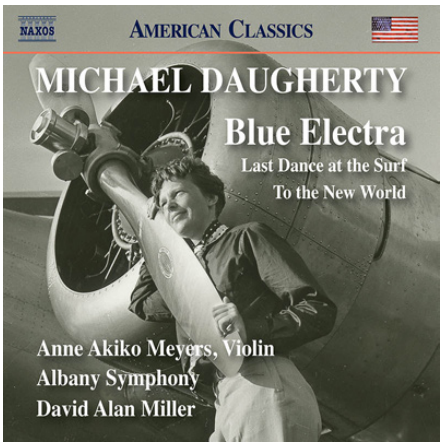
Daugherty's *Blue Electra* has appeared in the pages of *Strings* before, when the work, inspired by aviatrix Amelia Earhart, premiered in 2022. It is an unabashed celebration of melody that soars and swings, races and tiptoes and hustles, gazes philosophically from great heights, and, inevitably, unbearably falls. It is an especial musical treat for the historically inclined, as each movement seeks to capture some moment of Earhart's life—including its mysterious end—in evocative instrumental color. "It's amazing," says Meyers, her tone both emphatic and a touch deferential. "Michael's imagination is just incredible. It's just so fertile."

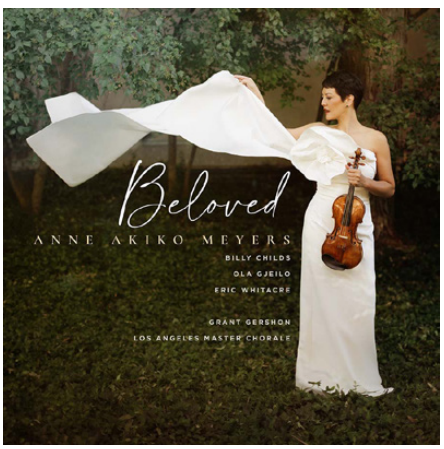
It was Daugherty who selected Earhart as the subject of this concerto, and one gets the feeling Meyers couldn't have been more pleased with his choice. "It's just such a tragic story, but she was such a celebrity, and there were so many dimensions to her: She wrote poetry, she was a feminist, she had short hair in a time when women just didn't. Her [eventual] husband begged to marry her, and she repeatedly said no. She was a woman of conviction, and I would've loved to have met her. She's just so fascinating. I was just really entranced by her. By her spirit."

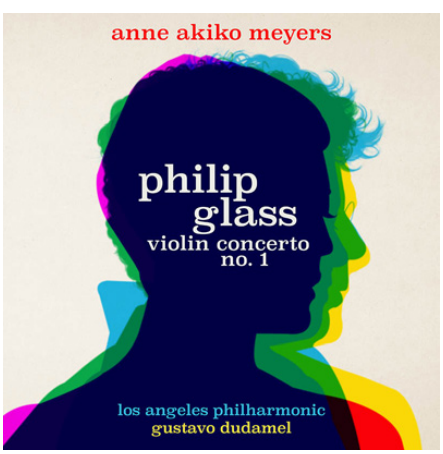
This roughly 27-minute odyssey demands a certain energy. (To watch Meyers dash through the second movement's hot-jazz cloudburst live is well worth the price of the ticket.) It makes grand and thorough use of the E string, especially in a particular moment in the final movement. And while it doesn't sound easy, Meyers mentions how well it fits her hand and that she imagines a lot of violinists will find that to be the case. It is, she says, so well written. But with Meyers, it always comes back to the story. When she plays, it's the stories that occupy her.

"I think about Amelia every time I play it," she says, "and am really pretty cut up at the ending—you know, when I'm playing that high, high note. And it's like you can just feel the anguish, that she's falling out of the sky, this dreamer. And that ending, with everybody sounding like an engine, is just one of the most unbelievable goose bump moments I've ever had."

In May, Meyers released her second album of the year, *Beloved*, anchored by *In the Arms of the Beloved* by composer and pianist Billy Childs. Magnetic, open hearted, and endlessly, enchantingly lyrical, this piece combines the virtuosity of Childs







Meyers' 2025 albums all include something written or arranged for her. *Blue Electra*, *In the Arms of the Beloved*, *The Seal Lullaby*, *Serenity*, and *New Chaconne* are world-premiere recordings.

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himself on piano with Meyers, several other soloists, Lyris Quartet, and the mighty, yet marvelously sensitive Los Angeles Chorale under the direction of Grant Gershon. When heard in rapid succession with *Blue Electra*, a subtle parallel may occasionally tug at your ear: a sense of soaring, of space, of flight. *In the Arms of the Beloved* is a tribute to Childs' late mother, Mable Brown Childs, and the text he uses to explore their relationship and process her loss is *Gone to the Unseen*, a poem by 13th-century Persian poet Rumi. The poem's imagery is decidedly avian, and Childs makes poignant use of Meyers' violin to capture it and, with it, a perception of boundless freedom.

Beating your wings and feathers, you broke free from this cage.
Rising up to the sky you attained the world of the soul.
You were a prized falcon trapped by an Old Woman.
Then you heard the drummer's call and flew beyond space and time.

As Childs describes his approach in the liner notes, "I look at the violin as the 'voice' of my mother, the piano as *my* voice, and the choir as a shapeshifting sonic environment which sets the mood and tells the main story of the timeless Rumi poem . . ." He writes that he remembers watching noir films with his mother, listening to the radio with her, laughing with her. The last thing she ever said was to tell him that she loved him too.

"Billy really, really was so moved and influenced by his mot her and misses her so much," Meyers says. "I can see and feel that. And the way he would talk about her was just so profoundly deep, and so I really tried to bring that gravitas and the haunting lyricism that's built into the piece." She, of course, also leaned into the music's soaring quality, as indicated by the text. Childs' mother faced health challenges at the end of her life, so emphasizing this idea of taking flight, of "how she could just soar through the sky and her spirit, still soaring, could leave this earth" even while remaining somehow present proved crucial to Meyers' approach to Childs' lustrous, jazz-influenced jewel. Released soon after the wildfires that devastated Southern California in January

***Beloved* performance with Grant Gershon and Billy Childs**

JAMIE PHAM

2025, Meyers also points to the piece's connection to Los Angeles, Childs' home as well as her own. "That this work is rooted in the very land—Southern California—that endured such hardship adds an extra layer of emotional depth, making it not just an incredible composition, but a collective expression of grief and renewal," she wrote in the liner notes.

Also included on *Beloved* are two pieces performed by Meyers and the Los Angeles Master Chorale. First, Eric Whitacre's sweet *The Seal Lullaby*, arranged for Meyers by Jonathan Newman, a piece of warmth and charm inspired by the Rudyard Kipling story of the same name. The album closes with Ola Gjeilo's arrangement of his own *Serenity*, set to the text of *O Magnum Mysterium*, aptly described in the liner notes by its composer as "a slow moving meditation." There is indeed peace in it, and majesty.

In June came Meyers' Philip Glass album, which includes his Violin Concerto No. 1 (with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel), *Echorus* (with violinist Aubree Oliverson and Academy Virtuosi), and *New Chaconne* (with harpist Emmanuel Ceysson), which Glass wrote for her. The concerto was Glass' first orchestral concert work, written in 1987, when the composer was 50. This is another work inspired by a family connection: Glass wrote Violin Concerto No. 1 in honor of his father, Ben Glass, who died in 1974 and was a connoisseur of classical music. "When the main theme comes in the first movement, [Glass] wrote D-A-D in it," says Meyers.

"His father really wanted something more mainstream," she says, referring to Glass' compositional output that preceded the concerto. "So this is what Philip wrote. To appease his father's spirit with a traditional violin concerto." The piece takes shape in three movements (fast, slow, fast) and represents a rich, propulsive example of Glass' signature style, which the composer himself describes as "music with repetitive structures."

"I think that Philip's music is really incredibly soulful," says Meyers. "And, you know, people just take it at face value, which is problematic because there's so much depth within each note. I'm just trying to find the space and the freedom within this repetition, so it can sing. And there's a lot of lyricism."

Glass wrote the gentle *Echorus* for Edna Mitchell and Yehudi Menuhin in the mid-'90s as a part of their Compassion Project, which invited leading composers to write music on the theme of universal compassion. Glass' notes on the piece confirm *Echorus* was "inspired by thoughts of compassion and is meant to evoke feelings of serenity and peace."

The final work on this album is *New Chaconne*, written for Meyers. Golden and

tranquil, and, according to the album's liner notes, inspired by "the idea of new friends and old forms," *New Chaconne* saunters along with an amiable energy in common time (rather idiosyncratically for a chaconne, which are usually of a slower and more melancholy disposition in triple meter). "I love that piece," says Meyers. "It's kind of like dropping the needle on vinyl. It's this very relaxed piece . . . where it's kind of a reflection of life itself in a genius five minutes because you're just playing relaxedly through and then it repeats, and then it can repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat, like vinyl."

Next year promises still more recordings of commissions from the intrepid Meyers, with two tentatively scheduled already. Adam Schoenberg's introspective violin concerto *Orchard in Fog*, premiered in 2019 with the San Diego Symphony under Sameer Patel, will be released sometime in the spring or summer, and makes adventurous use of scordatura, requiring Meyers to tune her G string down to an F. She acknowledges the challenges of resisting muscle memory forged over a lifetime, but does so with a laugh, making light of it. The scordatura serves the story, and that is what she cares about. "The violin ends up sounding like a viola," she says, "and the reason he did this is because the story is about a man thinking over his life and reflecting over his life. And in the last movement, he basically passes to the other world. And F is just a lower resonant quality, like you're in the ground. So it's coming from the earth."

She also hopes to release a recording with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra of a piece by Eric Whitacre, *The Pacific Has No Memory*, which premiered to a sold-out crowd at Carnegie Hall in May. Inspired by the Southern California wildfires, the recording, says Meyers, is meant "to honor all the fallen . . . our fallen heroes." In his notes, Whitacre (who lived for 25 years in Los Angeles before moving to Antwerp in 2024) describes how the piece got its name. "*The Pacific Has No Memory* takes its title from a line in one of my favorite films, *The Shawshank Redemption*. In it, Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) dreams of a life near the ocean where his past is a memory of a memory, distant and liquid—a place where the blue of the Pacific will give him a chance to start new, reborn. I hope the same for all who lost so much in those terrible fires."

These two albums are in addition to a rerelease of 2003's *East Meets West*, the premiere of a piece being written by Mason Bates for Meyers and frequent concert partner guitarist Jason Vieaux, and another premiere of an arrangement for Meyers and Vieaux of Arturo Márquez's Danzon No. 2 by Andy Poxon. Meyers has also commissioned José Luis Merlin for a new piece. Her guiding principle in all of these projects is simple, and she jokes that she isn't sure "if you could call it naïve." But perhaps its strength lies in its simplicity:

"I play what I want to hear." ■