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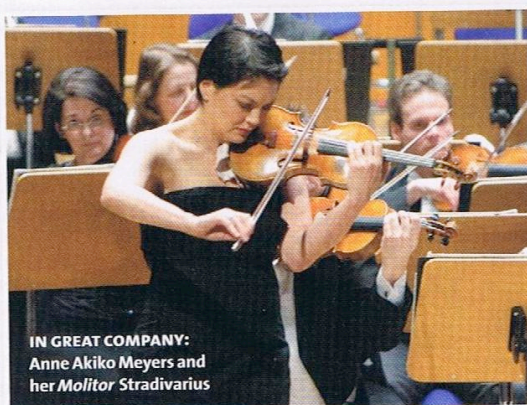
Strings of success

With her latest disc topping the US classical charts and her two Stradivarius violins in tow, Anne Akiko Meyers is on a roll, as *Rebecca Franks* discovers

Stubborn, impatient and passionate,' are the first three words that spring to Anne Akiko Meyers's mind when I ask the US violinist to describe herself. 'And my mom,' she adds, 'would totally agree.' When we speak, Meyers has just spent two days struggling to get from Atlanta to Düsseldorf in the face of airport closures, journeying via Minnesota and Paris with luggage, her mother, a six-month-old baby and a \$3.6m violin in tow. She arrived in her hotel 30 minutes before the interview and in a few hours she'll be playing the Barber Concerto. But despite being exhausted and 'dreaming of a hot shower', Meyers is happy to talk – bubbling with tales of her latest projects, why 2010 was a 'stellar year' and why 2011 is going to be even better. I'd like to add 'upbeat' to the list.

Last year was something of a landmark for Meyers who, at 40, has more than 20 acclaimed recordings behind her. It began with the birth of her first child, Natalie; saw her latest album *Seasons... dreams* reach Number One in the US Billboard classical chart; and ended with a world record. In October, Meyers made the news when her winning \$3.6m bid for a Stradivarius topped any previous auction price paid for a violin. She's been playing it ever since, and this year she'll be making her first recording on the instrument.

Expensive violins, by her own admission, are one of Meyers's weaknesses. Just five years ago, she became the owner of a Stradivarius once owned by the King of Spain, buying the instrument in partnership with members of her family. Like many artists, Meyers had previously played violins loaned to her by sponsors, all of whom eventually wanted their instruments back. 'It's like having your arm chopped off – it's the worst feeling in the universe,' she says. Finally a violin owner, Meyers looked set for the rest of her career. And if she



IN GREAT COMPANY:
Anne Akiko Meyers and
her Molitor Stradivarius

Meyers made news when her \$3.6m bid for a Strad topped any previous auction price

felt like a change of sound, she could always pick up the modern violin modelled on the renowned *Vieuxtemps del Gesù* that she'd bought from Dutch luthier Duncan Emck. But then Meyers met Molly.

'Molly' is, in more formal terms, the 1697 *Molitor* Stradivarius violin. Like the *Royal Spanish* it has an illustrious pedigree. US violinist Elmar Oliveira spent several happy years as its owner, coming up with its current nickname, while its namesake was Count Gabriel-Jean-Joseph Molitor, a general in Napoleon's army. It's thought that Napoleon was its first owner. Last year, Molly was put up for auction. Not that Meyers was on the lookout for another Stradivarius. 'I was getting my violin adjusted by the fabulous René Morel and he told me there was a Strad in the shop. I was very hesitant to try it, but I

did,' she says. 'I was pretty much blown away with the sound – it's so pure. There's really no other word to describe it. The *Royal Spanish* has a much darker, gutsier, Guarneri del Gesù quality to it. This is a very highly refined soprano of the purest vintage. It gives you goosebumps. And then to hear its provenance just reeled me in so deep, so fast.'

Meyers had around an hour to try out the instrument before deciding to take a risk and perform on it in Chicago that evening. Days later, she hit the record books. 'It's like finding your marriage partner,' says Meyers. 'It's so intimate, and the violin travels with you all over the place. On stage, in a tight spot, you pray that the violin will get you out of it, and hopefully it just glides you through.'

Of course, the expensive business of playing the violin doesn't end there. As important as the instrument is the bow. 'The Ferrari and the Ducati are sitting in the case,' laughs Meyers. 'Right now I'm playing on two Tourte bows. I love the mellow, supple feeling in the hand with these bows. I used to think I'd need weight, so I played on a lot of ▶



MY OTHER STRAD:
Meyers sports her
Royal Spanish Stradivarius



EUROPEAN SPECTACLE:
Anne Akiko Meyers and the
Düsseldorf Symphony Orchestra

Tubbs bows – but I discovered you don't need weight to create a big sound, you actually need to know how to control a lighter stick. That creates a much broader range of colour.'

With her last two discs – *Smile* and *Seasons... dreams* – huge popular successes, Meyers is turning next to Bach. She'll be recording this June following a preliminary session in February, and although details are still under wraps, she does let slip that it will feature both Molly and the *Royal Spanish*. Given Meyers's penchant for mixing up old and new, you can expect something of a twist as well. Her past two discs have taken traditional fare – Schubert's Fantasy in C and Beethoven's *Spring Sonata* – and combined them with a diverse array of music, including a Gene Pritsker commission, the US premiere of Messiaen's *Fantaisie* and world premieres of arrangements including Makoto Ozone's take on Harold Arlen's 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow'.

MADE IN JAPAN

The focus of the Bach disc will be his Violin Concertos, but will also include something new: 'John Corigliano has written a beautiful lullaby for my daughter that I'm going to be recording. It's difficult to think of a full piece that captures your imagination in three minutes or less – today's pop songs are so repetitive. This lullaby is a hushing song that's so beautiful. And I'm also going to be recording another lullaby by Jakob Ciupinski for electronics that's based on a Japanese traditional song. I'm crazy for a Japanese traditional song – I've got to get my fix!

SUSANNE DIENNER, GETTY

My mother's Japanese, and she used to sing this song to me as a baby.'

Working with contemporary composers has long been a passion for Meyers. In 2011, among other commissions, she'll be premiering a work by Mason Bates that she's dubbed the 'Laptop Concerto', on account of Bates's dual career as a classical composer and DJ. 'A lot of times I just happen to hear someone on a CD or on the radio, and I track them down. I just get so excited. I did that to Somei Satoh [who wrote a Violin Concerto for Meyers] – I stalked him. After a while, when they've looked me up and seen that I do play the violin, they think, "OK, I'll give her a shot!" This year there are a lot of projects that are incubating. It's so exciting when they release themselves – it's sort of like a birth, whether that be music or a child.'

'Energetic' might be another word that I'd use to describe Meyers, not least because her daughter Natalie tours everywhere with her. But having a baby must have made life as an international soloist harder work? 'As a mother you realise what your priorities become instantaneously. Even getting 30 minutes to practise becomes such a reflective time,' she explains. 'It's extraordinarily challenging travelling – I can see why there are very few violin soloists with children. Natalie's already been all over the US, and coming here to Düsseldorf involved her first transatlantic flight – she's a trooper.' As we end our conversation, I can't help thinking, 'like mother, like daughter'. ■

Million dollar violins

What are the world's most expensive violins?

GOING FOR A SONG:
Henri Vieuxtemps and
his 'Mona Lisa' of violins



THERE ARE AROUND 650 Stradivarius instruments surviving today. So what makes the *Molitor* violin so valuable? The answer lies in a winning combination of condition, provenance and sound. The 1697 *Molitor* has survived the centuries unscathed, while its 'biography' as described above, is distinguished. But, for Anne Akiko Meyers at least, the most important consideration was the sound. 'Its power, feel, and range of colour are extraordinary,' she says. The *Molitor* took the record from the *Hammer* Stradivarius, a 1707 violin, which in 2006 sold for \$3.5m at Christie's in New York. Also in impeccable condition, the violin was sold to an unnamed buyer described as an international benefactor and patron of the arts. But these auction price-tags are dwarfed by the money involved in private sales. In October 2009, a Guarneri violin sold for \$11.2m, while the Guarneri del Gesù owned by French composer Henri Vieuxtemps, described as the 'Mona Lisa' of violins, is expected to sell for \$18m.