

The Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with cellist Alisa Weilerstein

by Mike Telin



“I’m so happy to be coming back to my hometown. I’m quite excited about it,” cellist Alisa Weilerstein said during a telephone call from Belfast, Northern Ireland. On Thursday, November 6 at 7:30 pm in Severance Hall, Weilerstein will join The Cleveland Orchestra and conductor Giancarlo Guerrero in a performance of Edward Elgar’s *Cello Concerto*.

The program, which also includes Arvo Pärt’s *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* and John Adams’s *Harmonielehre*, will be repeated on Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon. On Friday at 4:00 pm in

Reinberger Chamber Hall, Alisa Weilerstein will lead a special public masterclass with students from Northeast Ohio colleges. Admission is free but a ticket is required.

Since making her debut with The Cleveland Orchestra at age 13, Weilerstein has gone on to establish a career of international renown. She has received a number of honors, including an Avery Fisher Career Grant, and in 2011 was named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow. Her recording of the Elgar and Elliot Carter concertos with Daniel Barenboim and the Berlin Staatskapelle on the Decca label received *BBC Music* magazine’s “2013 Recording of the Year” award. “I made the recording two and a half years ago. It was released in October 2012, but not in Europe until January 2013,” Weilerstein explained. “It was an incredible experience — very intense, but I learned an incalculable amount from the experience.”

Given that she has performed Elgar’s concerto numerous times, Weilerstein still enjoys the work very much. “It’s really a complete masterpiece, and the thing all masterpieces

have in common is that there's always something new to discover every time you return to them. I've probably played it as much as I've played the Dvorak, which is another one of those warhorses. The material is so great and so rich that there's always something new to find. It always teaches you something."

On October 28 Weilerstein released her third CD, *Solo*, on the Decca label. Why did she decide to record an entire CD of works for solo cello? "There were several things. Having the lone voice of the cello, and yet having it be such a complex and multi-faceted voice has always fascinated me. I've recorded the Dvorák concerto and of course there's the Elgar and Carter disc, so I thought for the third disc it would be great just to be by myself and to be in this state of exposed solitude."

Although she eventually wants to record the six Bach Suites, Weilerstein said that she wants to live with them a little longer. But she points out that there is a vacuum between the Bach Suites and the 20th century in the solo cello repertoire. "I wanted to create a survey of 20th century works for solo cello, starting with Kodály's sonata. With respect to everything else that has been written, it is probably the most comprehensive and interesting piece written for solo cello other than the Bach Suites. So I thought that would be a really nice centerpiece."

Another idea that guided the selection of repertoire was to have a folk music thread throughout the entire recording. "Of course you have the Hungarian thread with the sonatas of Kodály and Ligeti, and there's the beautiful Suite by Spanish composer Gaspar Cassadó in which you can immediately hear the Spanish dances."

The CD also includes Bright Sheng's *Seven Tunes heard in China*, which Weilerstein said is "wonderful", and Osvaldo Golijov's *Omaramor* which she describes as "a long tango". Rounding out the recording are two contrasting works, Britten's 75-second *Tema Sacher* and Prokofiev's "March" from *Music for children*, arranged for solo cello by Gregor Piatigorsky. "So these are the things that were going through my mind. It's 89 minutes of music on the digital version and we fit as much as we could onto the physical version."

Diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes at the age of nine, Alisa Weilerstein was named a Celebrity Advocate for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation in 2008. While on tour she will often meet with members of the local chapters of JDRF. On November 14, World Diabetes Day, Weilerstein will raise awareness about the disease by posting on social media and by making an appearance on Dallas morning television, where she is performing with the Dallas Symphony that week.

"Perhaps what's more relevant to me personally is that November 1 was Type 1 Day. I've had Type 1, which is the Juvenile type, since a month before my 10th birthday — so for

over 22 years. Actually only 10% of cases are Type 1, which means you are insulin-dependent. It's caused by a kind of mistake in the brain's autoimmune response."

Weilerstein's advocacy is centered around young families who have newly-diagnosed children, or children who have been living with diabetes for a few years. "I tell them that there's nothing that you really can't do just because you have this condition. If you take care of yourself there's no reason why you can't be whomever or whatever you want to be.

"This past summer I was on tour of New Zealand with my husband and was speaking to the diabetic twelve-year-old daughter of one of the orchestra members. I told her something that my husband once said to me — he was making a joke, but I thought it was quite profound. He said, 'you're like a special car. Like a Maserati, you can't just have normal fuel, you have to have special fuel.' I had no idea that this little girl was crazy about cars when I told her what my husband had said, but she really loved that analogy. Later she wrote me a card that said, 'To my fellow Maserati: thank you for meeting me.' I found that to be very touching. So my message to the kids is that, OK, we have to do some special things, and of course it's not always easy, but it doesn't need to stop you from doing anything that you really want to do."

Although the exact cause of Type 1 is still unknown, many feel it is brought on by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. "I think it's like a recessive gene. 'Lucky us,' as I say, 'the randomly selected,'" she said with a laugh.

"The thing is — it's not preventable, which is something many people don't realize about Type 1." Weilerstein said. "Type 2, to varying degrees, is generally preventable and treatable through exercise and diet. Type 1 is not, which means that we are insulin dependent. Even if I ate nothing, I would still have to inject it because I do not make any insulin myself. That's the big difference between Type 1 and Type 2. The symptoms are the same but the disease is completely different. Many people don't know the distinction, but it's quite an important one. "

We concluded our conversation on a lighter note. After some joking about the term "genius grant" with regard to her MacArthur Fellowship, she pointed out that it was actually journalists who first referred to it that way. The Foundation avoids using the term. "Yes it's colloquially known as the "genius grant," but the Foundation told me they were awarding me for creativity and for what I would hopefully do with my life and work. So I don't think of it so much as a genius grant. The term is very flattering and very nice, but I don't really feel that it applies to me."

Alisa Weilerstein's wonderful sense of humor is evident during her appearance on the satirical interview show "[Conversations with Nick Canellakis](#)," where she discusses the MacArthur Fellowship Award.

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