

CityMusic Cleveland: a conversation with violin soloist Sayaka Shoji

by Mike Telin



Without a doubt, Johannes Brahms's *Violin Concerto* is one of the greatest works in the instrument's concerto canon. Filled with lush melodies and Gypsy dances, the work is nonetheless formidable, placing many technical demands on the soloist. Lasting around forty minutes, it also tests the performer's stamina.

This week CityMusic Cleveland, under the direction of music director Avner Dorman, will present five performances of the concerto featuring violinist Sayaka Shoji. The all-German program will also include Robert Schumann's *Symphony No. 1* in B-flat, Op. 38 ("Spring").

Following a performance in Dublin, Ohio on Wednesday, the [CityMusic](#) musicians will return to Cleveland for four concerts, beginning on Thursday, October 15 at 7:30 pm with a performance in Lakewood Congregational Church. See our [Concert Listings](#) page for additional times and locations.

During a telephone conversation, I asked [Sayaka Shoji](#) about the daunting task of presenting five performances of the Brahms concerto in five days. "It's going to be a challenge," the soft-spoken violinist said with a hint of a laugh. "I think I've played it three times in three days, but never five in five." A challenge, yes, but one she looks forward to. The Brahms concerto is one of her favorites because much of it is based in dance music. "As a child I would often listen to recordings of Brahms's dance works for orchestra. I also think the middle movement is one of the most beautiful slow movements of any violin concerto." (Click [here](#) to listen to Sayaka Shoji perform the concerto with the NDR Sinfonieorchester Hamburg under the direction of Alan Gilbert.)

Born in Japan, Sayaka Shoji spent her early childhood in Siena, Italy. At age five she returned to Japan with her parents, and shortly thereafter began to study the violin, although her first dream was to become a singer. “I wanted to become an opera singer but I had a very low voice, so I said, forget it. In a way, learning the violin was an alternative to becoming a singer, although singing is a very important element in my playing.”

At age fifteen she returned to Europe, this time to Germany to attend the Hochschule für Musik Köln, where she studied everything from music theory to harmony and history in addition to the violin. “I also began to discover literature, which was interesting to me. German culture is very connected to music, and it was important for me to experience those connections.”

Today she makes her home in Paris, and is very happy to have had the experience of living in three European countries, each with its own distinct culture and mentality. “I’ve learned to appreciate each of them,” she said. “I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to spend my early years in Italy. It’s the place where I first heard and made a connection with music and decided I wanted to become a musician. I also think I have a certain Italian spirit in me, both in terms of music and food.”

Although Shoji loves classical music and makes her living in it, she’s also a big jazz fan, especially the music of pianist Bill Evans. “That’s because my parents like jazz very much. When I was a kid, 80% of our LPs were jazz, and 20% were classical. Every weekend they took me to hear jazz, so I spent my childhood in smoky jazz clubs with a lot of drinking going on.”

She said that those experiences have influenced her musically, even if she didn’t think about it until much later. “We don’t improvise the notes in classical music, but I think it’s very important to improvise the timing, which plays a big role in making each performance new — it should never sound like a machine. Improvisation is important, and I admire the people who are able to do it.”

After an enjoyable conversation about jazz, I mentioned that I had read about her fascination with all things connected to the 1970s, especially the music. “It’s odd, but I feel nostalgic for things I’ve had no direct experiences with — like disco music. I don’t really judge music. I think good music is good music no matter what the genre, so I’m open to it all.”

At the age of sixteen, Shoji won First Prize at the 1999 Paganini Competition — the first Japanese and youngest artist ever to do so. “That was in the last century,” she said,

laughing. “It certainly pushed me to start my career, which I was not expecting at that age. Of course when I entered I hoped to win, but I was not ready to play so many concerts. There were so many offers — fortunately my teacher chose which ones I should accept. Because of this, I had a balanced life of studying and giving concerts during those developmental years.”

Wrapping things up, she said that she looks forward to renewing her professional relationship with Avner Dorman, from whom she commissioned a piece. “He wrote a very beautiful violin sonata, which I’ve performed several times. We first met in Verbier, Switzerland when his percussion concerto was performed at the festival under Zubin Mehta. That was the first time I heard his music, but it’s why I asked him to write something for me.”

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