

CMA: a conversation with violinist Carolin Widmann

by Jarrett Hoffman



German violinist Carolin Widmann rarely performs in the U.S. — and we Americans might be feeling a tad neglected.

To smooth things over, the winner of the 2017 Bayerischer Staatspreis für Musik will bring a solo program of Medieval, Baroque, and contemporary music to Transformer Station on Friday, March 29 at 7:30 pm as part of the Cleveland Museum of Art's Performing Arts Series. Get tickets [here](#).

I caught her on the phone in Leipzig, where she was happy to be home for a day between performances in Italy and Frankfurt. I began by asking her if there's a reason she doesn't

perform in America more often?

Carolin Widmann: No, totally not! It's funny because I studied in the U.S. — I lived in Boston for four years — but there hasn't been much opportunity to come back. I've played only with the Seattle Symphony a few years ago. But I'm going to New York and Dallas in December, and then to the L.A. Phil in 2020. So things are really just starting for me in America, late in life!

Jarrett Hoffman: On either side of your visit to Cleveland, you'll give duo recitals with pianist Gloria Chien in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. But the Cleveland program is totally solo, which I think of as a different beast.

CW: I have to say that for me, my very favorite genre is to be all alone onstage because you don't have to tell anybody, "Let's do this faster or slower" — you just do what you want. And you don't have to communicate with anybody, only directly with the audience.

I feel something very special happens when I play all by myself because I can create a real aura.

And the program-building. When I have a violin concerto sandwiched between two pieces in a symphony orchestra concert, I have just those twenty minutes and one style, one piece to play. But here I can span hundreds of years of music history — in this case, going from Hildegard von Bingen until composers that live today and aren't even very old. It's real storytelling, more like a novel that I'm going to create on this one evening, and I absolutely adore it.

Also I love that I can do everything I want in terms of dynamics because it's so intimate. I don't have to play louder than anybody else or worry that I'll cover them up.

JH: I love that description of a solo program being like a novel. You've certainly put together an interesting large-scale structure here, with Hildegard von Bingen at the start, Bach's d-minor Partita at the end, and pieces by George Benjamin, Hans Abrahamsen, and your brother Jörg Widmann in the middle. Do you rely on instinct with programming, or do you spend a lot of time on it?

CW: Absolutely both. Even when I don't think about programming, I constantly think about it. I do music every day, and sometimes I play something and think, 'Oh! That would match with such and such!' and I end up creating programs for recitals I will never play. Other times it's very constructed.

In this case, I thought of Bach as sort of the base of violin literature. We have an instrument with four strings that we play with four fingers of our left hand, and we can play pieces that have four-voiced themes, like the "Chaconne" from the d-minor Partita — with independent melodies for each finger on each string. That's so incredibly ingenious.



I go even further back to Hildegard von Bingen. Of course, the piece isn't written for violin originally. It's just a single-voice melody, and it really gives a spiritual feeling to the whole evening when you start with something so ancient. In a way, I feel that it connects us as humans. That's where we are from, all of us.

Then it's interesting to see how young composers today deal with the violin, which hasn't changed since Bach's time. The contemporary pieces are all miniatures, like stones in a mosaic. And in the "Chaconne," there are all these little variations about

the theme. I think that's something very much in common — these little mosaic stones through the entire evening that form one big story.

JH: I want to come back to one thing you mentioned — these programs you create that you might never play. Do you write them all down somewhere, or just let them float around in your head?

CW: I do have a sort of inspiration sheet. I'll write down even a single word I like that I read in a book, or that just came up. Sometimes that word can create associations, and that could be the nucleus for a new program. I might also write down a color or material that I see — very much like a visual artist or a designer — or a quotation that I find fascinating, or a recording that I like. Out of that, sometimes other things come.

JH: Could you share an example from your inspiration sheet?

CW: I think in different languages — sometimes it's French, sometimes English, sometimes German — but an English word that I really love is *sublime*. I think if you don't already know the word, it transports what it means. *Sublime* sounds sublime.

So which period or style do I connect with that word? I think of some of the works just before the late period of Beethoven — that is the sublime period for me. Some Strauss, maybe, also some late Romanticism. Like that, the thoughts continue and create something.

For me, *sublime* says so much. And you as a native English speaker connect with this word in every field of your life — much more than you know, probably. Once you really state that, so many things come to you from different areas, I feel.

JH: I've had a similar feeling — noticing a particular word in a pop song that just sticks with you.

CW: Yes! It triggers so much. It might be different in you than in other people, but there's also a collective memory of certain words that all of us feel when we hear it. I think it's very interesting to think about these things.

JH: Jumping back to the Cleveland program, I know you've explored using gut strings for some Baroque and Romantic repertoire. Are you doing that for this recital?

CW: I'm just bringing one violin and one bow, partly due to logistical reasons. I have to fly, and Immigration is so tough now in America. Certain materials used in certain bows from certain periods are not allowed in the U.S. anymore.

But I also think it's good for the flow. I've done it where I've switched from Baroque violin to modern, but even changing the 'A' from 415 to 440 Hertz in one evening can be a bit much. There's already so much information that listeners have to take in, so with this particular program, I think one tuning is enough for their bodies and their minds.



JH: I also want to touch on your brother Jörg's 3 Etudes. I read that these were written for you — or perhaps with you?

CW: Yes, the third one is dedicated to me and was written with me, and the first two are dedicated to other violinists. But we were always close during that entire process. I'd practice the violin in the room next to him, so he always came to consult me or ask, "Is that possible?" Often my first answer was, "It's not possible." My second answer was, "OK, I'm going to *make* it possible."

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