

Violinist Sayaka Shoji to make her Cleveland Orchestra debut

by Mike Telin



Having performed on three occasions with CityMusic Cleveland, Japanese violinist Sayaka Shoji is no stranger to Northeast Ohio audiences. But when she returns to Cleveland this Sunday, August 22, it will be to make her debut with The Cleveland Orchestra, performing Brahms' sublime Violin Concerto.

"I'm excited and very happy that this is happening," Sayaka Shoji said by telephone from her home in Paris. "It was programmed last year, and of course we all had a difficult period, but they re-programmed it and I am very grateful."

Under the direction of Jahja Ling, the 7:00 pm all-Brahms program also includes *Symphony No. 3*. Tickets are available [online](#).

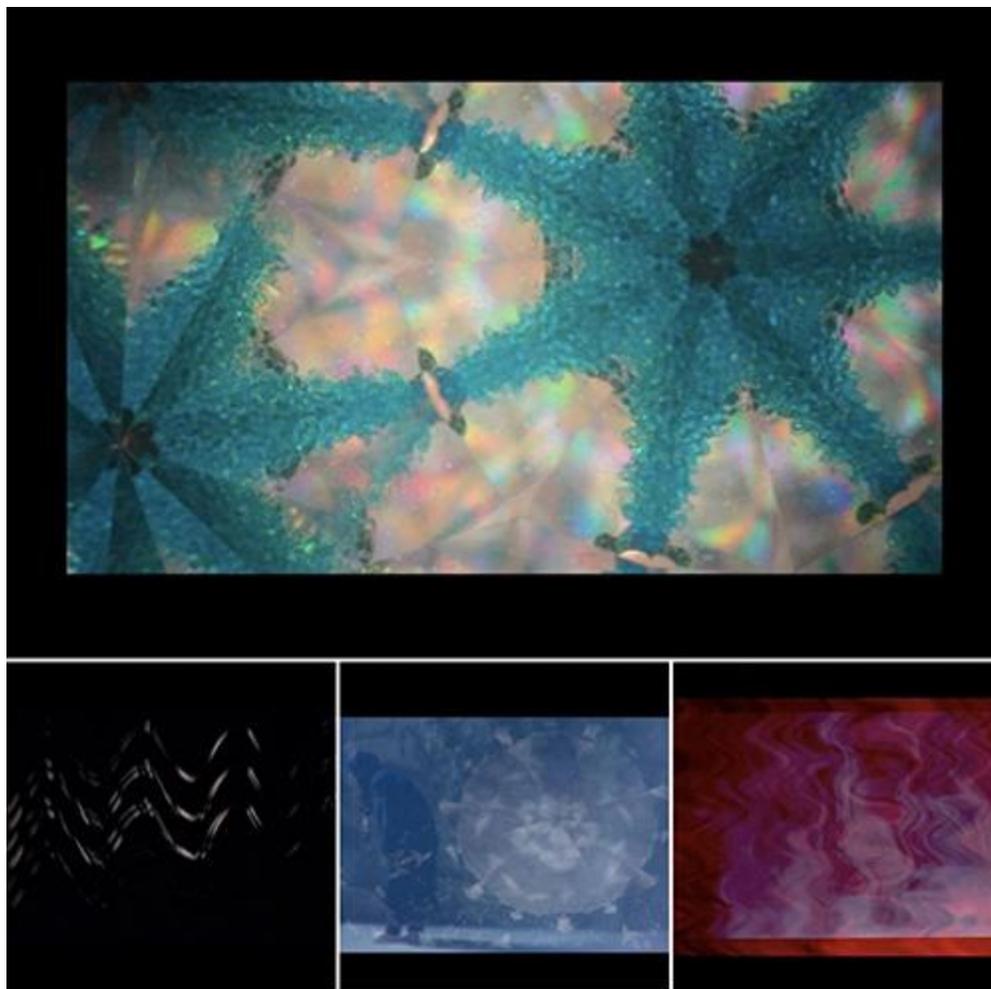
When asked why she thinks the concerto is one of the greatest in the repertoire, the violinist said it is partly because Brahms was a demanding, self-critical composer. "He also collaborated on the piece with his friend Joseph Joachim. And the result of that intensive collaboration is what makes it a jewel."

Although she has been performing the concerto for some time, she's always finding something new in it. "I've been playing it in public since I was maybe 17 or 18, and more and more I appreciate the concerto's internal intimacy — the incredible depth of its internal world and the dialogue with the orchestra. And I see more of Brahms' inner character, whereas before I was much more focused on the demanding violin part."

Shoji has also taken the time to listen to historical recordings of the piece, especially those of Joachim. “At the time he played with a lot of *portamento* — the style of playing that was fashionable during that period. But each year I play it differently.”

In addition to music, Shoji has a keen interest in the visual arts. “My mom is a painter, and I grew up in a family where artists were always coming over and I visited a lot of museums. That was an important part of my life.”

It is her interest in the interconnection between music and visual art that led to the creation of her video project, *Synesthesia*. “I started it in 2007, so it’s been some time ago. But I had the idea when I was still a teenager. I thought, ‘Why are films made, and then the music is made for the film? Why not the other way around?’”



Shoji said that when she began thinking about the intersection of music and visual art, she was unaware of Disney’s *Fantasia*. “I discovered that afterwards. Disney was inspired by the great old music of Stokowski and Tchaikovsky to make great films, and that was also my idea.”

The violinist said that when she plays — especially post-romantic and contemporary music — images have always come to mind. “I thought, why not interpret them? But I am an interpreter, not a creator, so in the beginning I worked with a video artist. I really respect what a creator can do, like a composer who can create something out of nothing.”

Shoji said that she has presented concerts with live projections and if asked, would be happy to do it again.

Another beneficial aspect of *Synesthesia* is alleviating people’s fears of contemporary music. “People tend to say, ‘Oh, modern music is difficult to listen to,’ so I thought that if I also interpret it in a visual way, that could help people to understand it. I don’t try to explain the piece visually — it’s not educational in that way — but when I play Bartók, I do project some of the images I filmed in Hungary of folk dances and local religious ceremonies. I wanted to show that it’s not just extraterrestrial music, but it has historical meaning or background.”



When asked if we could anticipate the release of a video or DVD, she laughed. “I’m still thinking about what to do. I didn’t have a commercial purpose for the project, I just did what I wanted to do, and now I don’t know what to do with it. I’m not great with business, but if somebody has a good idea I’d like to get some advice.”

When I spoke to Sayaka Shoji back in 2015, we talked about her interest in jazz — which she was introduced to by her parents. I was curious to know what she was currently listening to. “I’ve been listening to a lot of the Bill Evans Trio and I recently discovered Isfar Sarabski, and of course Hiromi — she’s Japanese.”

After a long discussion about jazz, we returned to the topic of Sunday's concert. She pointed out that live concerts have only recently resumed in Paris. "I hear many people say, 'This is the first concert in over a year.' But in a way I appreciated the time off at home learning new pieces. I've been very disciplined — I've practiced like never before. But I think sharing experiences of live music is vital and I will really appreciate this moment to share music together, and with such a great orchestra. I'm very happy and lucky."

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