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## Meyers brings new life to most famous violin

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BY STEVEN MARK

Violinist Anne Akiko Meyers returns to Honolulu this weekend to perform with the Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra, carrying arguably the most prized instrument in all of classical music: a violin known as the ex-Vieuxtemps Guarneri del Gesu.

The pedigree of the instrument, which has been dubbed the Mona Lisa of violins, is stratospheric. It dates to 1741 and was built by Bartolomeo Giuseppe Antonio Guarneri, who among violin cognoscenti is considered at least an equal to the more well-known Antonio Stradivari. Guarneri's instruments, known as del Gesu (of Jesus), are considerably more rare.



HAWAII SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA IN PROKOFIEV AND STRAUSS  
Featuring guest conductor Junichi Hirokami and violin soloist Anne Akiko Meyers  
Where: Blaisdell Concert Hall, 777 Ward Ave.  
When: 8 p.m. Saturday and 4 p.m. Sunday  
Cost: \$32 to \$90  
Info: (866) 448-7849, [ticketmaster.com](http://ticketmaster.com)

Only about 140 are known to exist, as opposed to approximately 650 Strads. Stradivari made violins, cellos and violas, whereas Guarneri, who died relatively young, made violins exclusively and was constantly tinkering and refining his instruments.

But the Vieuxtemps' quality of sound and pristine condition, despite 273 years of being exposed to the elements, set it apart.

"It was actually CAT-scanned, and there isn't one blemish in the entire belly of the violin," Meyers said. "It really looks as if Guarneri made it yesterday."

The instrument was named for a previous owner, the mid-19th century Belgian virtuoso Henri Vieuxtemps, who "was so in love with his violin he wanted to be buried with it," said Meyers. "His pupil, Eugene Ysaye, who was another incredible composer and violinist, carried it on a pillow behind his hearse."

Some of the most famous names in violin history, such as Yehudi Menuhin, Itzhak Perlman and Pinchas Zukerman, have played the ex-Vieuxtemps. After Joshua Bell gave a series of performances using it, he said he'd "fallen in love" with it, adding that it was no "shallow infatuation" that he'd experienced with other instruments.

Violins this old sometimes have eventful, even tragic histories. They've been lost on buses and taxis, left in dressing rooms or hotels, or stolen. Worse yet are the attempts to "improve" an old instrument. "It was in big fashion for violin makers to take the tops off of violins and actually scrape off the wood inside, hoping to create a bigger sound, a fuller sound in the hall," Meyers said. "These violins were never meant for a 3,000-seat hall. Thankfully, no one did that with this violin."

NO ONE can really know what makes an instrument special. Meyers said some experts, after looking at the CAT scans, surmised that its wood came from a tree that survived a cold snap, hardening the wood and condensing the grain.

For nearly 50 years the instrument was kept largely out of the public eye. Its previous owner, a London banker named Ian Stoutzker, kept it under his bed and played it first thing in the morning or on sleepless nights, according to an acquaintance. But it was already so famous that it created a firestorm of publicity when he put it up for auction.

The hype was so pervasive that Meyers, who has owned Strads and had performed on Guarneris previously, was hesitant to even try it out.

"Once I tried it, I was just blown away by the depth and range and the colors and the sound that it has," she said.

The violin was subsequently purchased for a reported \$16 million to \$18 million by an anonymous buyer, who, knowing Meyers' history for taking care of valuable instruments, made it available to her on a lifetime loan. That also is a rarity; precious violins usually are purchased by foundations or philanthropists who make them available for a few years to a performer, then sell them or lend them to another performer.

Meyers called it "a curse" to have to give up such an instrument, and feels blessed to have had the time "for us to get used to each other."

“It has such a colossal sound,” she said. “It’s just easy to burrow down into the string because you want to soak it all up. But counterintuitively (to that), you actually do less. To sculpt the sound, you do it in a really finessed way. You’re not beating down into the string, you’re just letting it breathe and letting it sing. ... It’s just such a deeply intimate instrument.”

FOR ALL its history and reputation, the ex-Vieuxtemps had never been recorded in a studio. Meyers, noting that composer Antonio Vivaldi died the same year the ex-Vieuxtemps was made, recently played the instrument on a recording of Vivaldi’s music. She plans to record the violin repertoire on it in addition to touring with it.

For her Honolulu performance she will play Prokofiev’s second violin concerto.

“It’s pretty fiendishly difficult,” she said. “Everything sounds kind of wrong, but that’s when it’s right. It’s incredibly rhythmic, and ... you’re changing the propulsion and the energy throughout the three movements.

“It’s amazing that he wrote it in 1935, because it’s so modern,” Meyers said. “It has incredibly beautiful, lyrical moments in the second movement, but there’s also a lot of Russian soul throughout, as well as Spanish influences. You even hear castanets in the last movement. It’s a very coloristic work.”

Returning to conduct the symphony is Junichi Hirokami of Japan, who fairly danced on the podium last season leading the orchestra in Rachmaninoff.

Hirokami has programmed two popular Strauss works that capture the storytelling aspect of music: “Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks,” a tone poem that refers to a German folk hero, and the “Rosenkavalier Suite,” a rich orchestral work derived from the romantic comic opera of the same name.