

philharmonia orchestra

December 2008 – Podcast Transcription

Maya Iwabuchi – Leader, Philharmonia Orchestra

Welcome to the Philharmonia's Japan special podcast. I'm Maya Iwabuchi, the orchestra's co-leader. In December the Philharmonia will be travelling with conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy for a 6-concert tour of Japan. Taking in four major cities, and some of Tokyo's best concert halls, this tour is a highlight in all of the Philharmonia players' schedules.

Joining us throughout the tour will be violinist Akiko Suwanai in performances of the Mendelssohn and Sibelius violin concertos. We spoke to Akiko to find out what it'll be like performing back in her home country.

Akiko Suwanai - Violinist

'Welcome' in Japanese

I like to be individual rather than harmonising, because to play in an orchestra, to be a soloist is completely different.

Extract from Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in E minor – first movement

It's wonderful you know. The orchestra, the Philharmonia is such a traditional orchestra, it's wonderful. I have the recordings from the old times and especially the sound, I think still they carry this Philharmonia sound, that I remember from these big LPs.

For some reason we never had a chance to play together in Japan, although we've had several projects together beforehand, so I'm very much looking forward to playing in my home country.

Extract from Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in E minor – last movement

Maya Iwabuchi

Audio only (UK version)

Akiko Suwanai will be performing Mendelssohn's violin concerto with Maestro Ashkenazy in London on Sunday the 14th of December.

Audio only (Japan version)

Akiko Suwanai will be performing Mendelssohn's violin concerto with Maestro Ashkenazy in Nagoya on the 5th, Fukui on the 6th, Tokyo on the 7th and 9th and Osaka on the 10th of December. She will also be performing the Sibelius violin concerto in Tokyo on the 8th.

If you're new to Mendelssohn's violin concerto and you'd like to know more, here's a listening guide to this remarkable piece, with amateur Luke Crookes.

Luke Crookes – Education Animator

Today we are looking at the violin concerto by the German composer Felix Mendelssohn.

Concertos are often in three sections called movements and have a passage called a cadenza, where the soloist can make the part up and really show off. Romantic music was defined by the expression of feelings and emotion. The concerto soloist was seen as the star, a hero to be celebrated for his virtuosic skill and musicianship.

Mendelssohn's violin concerto does this beautifully and brilliantly making it one of the most performed violin works in the repertoire. There are many unusual structural elements to this concerto; Mendelssohn grabs the audience's attention by introducing the concerto soloist in the second bar. This is highly unusual; normally the orchestra will play a huge opening tutti section to introduce the soloist.

The first movement cadenza is also unusual, for three reasons. Firstly Mendelssohn places it much earlier in the movement; usually the cadenza is placed closer to the end. Secondly, Mendelssohn writes the cadenza himself, leaving the performer no leeway to improvise, and finally towards the end of the cadenza Mendelssohn develops the part into an accompaniment part and the soloist then goes on to accompany the orchestra. Our concerto soloist has now become an accompanist.

At the end of the first movement Mendelssohn breaks away from convention again and he uses the bassoon to do it. He links the first and second movements together with a solo bassoon passage. It almost sounds as if the bassoon has lost its place in the score.

Some people say this may have been to stop the audience clapping in between movements so the energy and the drama is not lost. The second movement is slower and full of beautiful, simple melodies, the solo violin sings a gentle lullaby and the string section cradles it with a gentle 6/8 accompaniment. To me, the beauty is in its exquisite simplicity.

At some points the violinist becomes soloist and accompanist at the same time. This can be done by double stopping, which means playing two strings at the same time. This means the melody can be played...

(audio excerpt)

...On the top string. And the accompanying part can be played...

(audio excerpt)

.... Here they are together.

(audio excerpt)

The third movement begins with a theme in the dark key of E minor, reminding us of the dark E minor opening of the first movement. But this only lasts for 14 bars and then Mendelssohn really starts the fun. The key changes to a bright E Major and is heralded by fanfare trumpets. Then the violin takes off in exuberant leaps and the soloist can begin to display their star quality.

To me, the care free, happy nature of this final movement is something Mendelssohn captures perfectly, not only in this piece, but in many of his other compositions too. The third movement offers some lovely examples of why concertos are so much fun with the soloist and the orchestra often playing different parts that work brilliantly together. Listen to the Orchestra playing a light and bouncy melody while the violin soloist plays a romantic counter-melody. Then hear how the soloist and accompanying parts swap over, only a few bars later.

This piece is a journey from dark to light, which becomes more beautiful each time you listen to it. These examples are just my choice, I'm sure on listening; you'll develop your own. But I hope you enjoy listening to Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto.

Audio only (Japan version)

Maya Iwabuchi

The schedule of a conductor can be incredibly busy. However, Philharmonia cellist David Cohen managed to catch up with Vladimir Ashkenazy in-between rehearsals to find out all about his remarkable career.

David Cohen – Joint Principal Cellist, Philharmonia Orchestra

Maestro Ashkenazy, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me between rehearsals.

Vladimir Ashkenazy – Conductor Laureate, Philharmonia Orchestra:

A pleasure.

David Cohen

I wanted to start off by asking you about the way you see your relationship with the Philharmonia Orchestra.

Vladimir Ashkenazy

Well it's one of the best orchestras in the world, so for me it is a great privilege to stand in front of such good players. It is a great pleasure to be here because I know at least we will have 'very good' performances, and sometimes if I do 'quite well', then even great performances!

My first believably strong love for music was connected to the symphony orchestra. The first time I heard a Symphony Orchestra, I was absolutely blown over! I thought it was the most incredible, most wonderful thing that

ever happened to me and ever will happen to me. I spent all of my pocket money on orchestral concerts in the Moscow Conservatory and learnt a lot of repertoire, but I never, ever dreamt of conducting.

My father-in-law (my wife's father) had an amateur orchestra in London, and he asked me if I would like to try conducting the *Corilian Overture*. I said I would love to, but how do you do the first C? He said it is very simple, you just do this (waves baton). He did something, but I couldn't imitate him. So I came and conducted the Overture (it was pretty awful from me) but some things I thought I did sort of musically well and I enjoyed some sounds. Then one day, my mother said "why don't you conduct in England?" So I conducted the Liverpool Orchestra once, and then the Philharmonia came up, and I said "well" (nervous laughter), "I'm too nervous". So I did it, and I did one for Tchaikovsky. A one-hour piece! The orchestra did everything they could to play well for me. They were so nice, just like now! I conducted the *Manfred Symphony* by Tchaikovsky in the Royal Festival Hall and we had good reviews, can you imagine!

After the second concert (which was a repeat) I invited the orchestra out, offered them a drink, and I will never forget that I took some players around and I said "Come! Come! Come here I want to ask you something!" And I said "be honest with me it is really difficult to play with him because I don't really know how to conduct" and he said "yes it was sort of difficult but we like what you are trying to do. We like your music making. Please come back, we would love to play with you again. You will learn this – we love the music you are making!" I nearly cried you know, it was so nice of him and they were absolutely honest and they encouraged me, so I always came back to the Philharmonia.

Maya Iwabuchi

The Philharmonia have made an online Christmas card that can be sent to anyone in the world.

Featuring the Philharmonia brass section playing Christmas carols on ice, they're the perfect way to fill people with Christmas cheer, wherever they are.

Simply go to www.philharmonia.co.uk/christmas, customise the card and away it goes.

Audio only (UK version)

And if you're in need of some Christmas gift ideas, the Philharmonia might be able to provide some inspiration!

Our fantastic season continues with some great concerts in January with world-class conductors, and tickets start from only £8.

We now have three releases on our very own CD label, and each CD comes in its very own presentation box.

Why not become a Philharmonia Friend. With membership at only £35 for the year and a whole host of Philharmonia perks.

Alternatively gift vouchers are now available for any amount, and can be redeemed against any of the above.

You can purchase any of these simply by calling the Philharmonia Orchestra Box Office on Freephone 0800 652 6717.

On Wednesday the 17th, we will be travelling to Bedford for the festive treat that is Handel's *Messiah*. Bedford Youth Camerata join the Philharmonia for the performance, under the baton of Adrian Partington.

We do hope you've enjoyed this Japan-special podcast and we hope to see you at one of our concerts in Japan this month. Merii Kurisumasu.