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MUSIC

A Pianist Who Balances Acclaim and Assists

By JAMES R. OESTREICH

THE 59-year-old pianist Mitsuko Uchida — born near Tokyo, trained in Vienna and long resident in London — is, in more ways than one, a musician's musician. Her performances and Philips recordings of Classical and Romantic standards — especially works by Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert — have consistently fed a reputation for elegant and profound musicianship.

Those qualities have carried into later repertoires as well, in performances of Schoenberg, Debussy, Bartok, Messiaen and beyond. And they will undoubtedly shine through Ms. Uchida's Carnegie Hall recital on Friday night, a typically meaty serving of Bach, Schubert and Schumann generously laced with works by the contemporary Hungarian Gyorgy Kurtag.

But for this listener at least, the prime attraction comes right at the top: Schubert's C minor Sonata (D. 958), one of the three great "late" sonatas written in September 1828, some three months before his death at 31. For it is especially in the works of Schubert, even the more uneven early ones, that Ms. Uchida's musical depth comes through.

On May 17 she will return to Carnegie — this time in Zankel Hall, with "friends," in the trite formulation of the day — in a program of chamber music by Liszt, Bartok and Messiaen. And that event, like her summer job as co-artistic director of the venerable Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont (since 2000, with Richard Goode), presents her in a different light, as a musician in service to musicians, specifically younger ones.

Those friends are actually protégés of a sort, recipients of money from the Borletti-Buitoni Trust as part of a program largely shaped by Ms. Uchida. The concert ends her second tour with recipients of trust awards.

The Borletti-Buitoni awards and fellowships — the main thing Ms. Uchida wanted to discuss during a recent interview in New York, where she was otherwise engaged in meetings about Marlboro — germinated temporally, if not conceptually, from that festival, whose working method is to inject veteran musicians as mentoring colleagues into ensembles of younger musicians for intensive rehearsal periods and public performances. In the summer of 2001, as Ms. Uchida recalls it, she visited her friends Ilaria Borletti and Franco Buitoni in Perugia, Italy.

"I came right after Marlboro, so I was still full of it," she said. In Ms. Uchida's telling, Ms. Borletti, a founding director and major shareholder of the advertising journal *Loot Limited*, which was sold for almost \$300 million in 2000, questioned her about Marlboro, and said she was toying with the notion of helping young concert performers, perhaps prodigies. Ms. Uchida said she quickly squelched the notion of dealing with prodigies because "a musician's life is not about what you can do at the age of 16 or 18, but about what you as a full-grown adult can get out of the music and pass on to the public."

"The hardest time," she said she had told Ms. Borletti, "is when you are out of conservatories and places like that, and you have won a competition or two, and you are in the big world, and you're supposed to be making a lot of money, but you are not. There are moments in people's lives that it would be lovely to be helped."

So the two women hatched a flexible system of grants for young musicians — “not too young,” Ms. Uchida hastened to add, perhaps 22 to 35 — based on recommendations from established professionals. For the grants and administrative purposes, Ms. Borletti supplies some \$750,000 a year of her own funds, not those of her husband’s food empire, Ms. Uchida said. Awards range from \$40,000 for an individual to \$60,000 for a quartet, fellowships from \$20,000 to \$30,000.

The money, Ms. Uchida added, comes with strings attached: “They don’t get the money so that they can go out and frolic and buy a sports car. They have to use it for their musical development and toward their musical career, whatever that is. Some people use it for study money. Some have bought concert clothes or bows or support for instruments or commissioning a composer.”

Ms. Uchida’s own career seems in retrospect to have developed smoothly, and it continues to thrive despite the additional demands of the recent service ventures with Marlboro and the trust. Inadvertent, she calls them, and so they might have been at the start, but they require a serious commitment of time and energy. She limits herself to 50 or so concerts a year, perhaps half of what some of her colleagues might undertake.

Yet she has always worked in a selective and concentrated fashion. She made her name in the 1980s with cycles of the Mozart sonatas and concertos, performed in London and Tokyo and recorded.

Mozart remains a major preoccupation. As artist in residence at the Cleveland Orchestra from 2002 to 2007, Ms. Uchida worked her way through the Mozart concertos as pianist and conductor. The success was such that she will return next season to repeat some of the concertos, though without reclaiming the title. Instead, she will be artist in residence at the Berlin Philharmonic.

Despite this long experience with Mozart, she said, “I find it more and more fascinating to play his music.”

But the other topic Ms. Uchida was especially eager to discuss was Beethoven, whose sonatas she has been recording to high acclaim. Here, too, far from dulling her enthusiasm, long familiarity with the material has only enhanced it.

“I am getting to truly understand the strength and grandeur and humanity of Beethoven,” she said. “It’s as if he could understand the universe, not just the earth. And it is the explosive power combined with extraordinary humanity that I find unattainable.”

Not to mention unplayable, by any but the best. “I found Beethoven always horrendously difficult,” Ms. Uchida said.

Asked in another context about turning 60, as she will in December, Ms. Uchida said the milestone held no terrors for her. What she does worry about, she said, is 70, fearing that by then she may no longer be able to manage the intractable “Hammerklavier” Sonata. All the more reason to revel in Beethoven in the present.

But what Ms. Uchida’s interviewer most wanted to explore was Schubert, particularly the final sonata, in B flat (D. 960). There are works so much grander than any individual performances of them that you spend much of your life looking for an adequate one, and this seemed doomed to remain one of them. Even hopes stirred by a previously unreleased recording by Arthur Rubinstein in the end failed to do the trick.

It was Ms. Uchida’s recording of 1998 that finally proved worthy of the work, catching both its majesty and its mystery. It was at its most eloquent in the silences and in those odd, isolated soft grumbings in the bass.

“Actually, I prefer silence to noise,” Ms. Uchida said. “And also I was born to play quietly rather than noisily.”

People complained about my playing when I was young, and now they complain less.”

But complain they do. “There are few who are capable of such sustained intensity and eloquence while playing so quietly and contemplatively, as revealed in her series of Schubert sonata recordings,” The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians reports in its entry on her, “although to some she has made the composer retreat to a world that is too ethereal and idealized.”

Rightfully, Ms. Uchida greeted a reading of that passage with a guffaw.

The last two movements of the B flat, which can often seem empty rattling after the profundities of the first two, took on stature and heft in her recording, perhaps in keeping with the subtext she finds in the work.

“In the first movement you are basically dying,” she said, “and in the slow movement you are already dead. In the scherzo, the daughters of the Erlkönig are dancing around, and in the last movement the gate closes in front of your nose: Bang! You want to go to the other side, and you are not let in. And it goes on and on until the end, this very strange major ending, and fast. He goes running through the gate, happily. So it is actually about whatever it means to come to terms with death. Schubert knew that death was near, and suddenly he was open. And that’s the beauty of that piece.”

Ms. Uchida finds a similar program in the C minor Sonata, to be heard on Friday.

“It has all the sufferings and fear and tragedy of life,” she said. “And in spite of the unbelievable consolation of the slow movement, the last movement is a death rite. It is actually a much more terrifying piece than the ‘Erlkönig.’ You’re riding the horse. It’s really the noise of the hooves, and behind you the hounds of hell are yapping. You’re riding and riding and riding, and you go straight into hell.”

Such tales may strike some as too literal-minded or fanciful, even a bit frightening. But if they are what it takes to fire Ms. Uchida’s musical imagination, the results speak brilliantly for themselves.

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