

This is the best city in the world for musicians, says Mitsuko Uchida, fresh from last night's 25th birthday concert at the Barbican



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THE Queen was in the audience last night at the Barbican's 25th birthday celebration when Mitsuko Uchida played her fourth sell-out concert there in a fortnight. And that's only counting London. On her "days off" she played three more to rapturous receptions in Vienna and Budapest, handing out chocolates afterwards to the orchestra — the LSO with Sir Colin Davis — in thanks for their supportive playing.

World-class pianists may be more plentiful than top tenors but they remain a tiny elite. Uchida, 33, is unassailably among their number. True, Mozart will always attract audiences, but Uchida's appeal, a combination of seriousness, elegance and explosive vivacity, guarantees a different order of anticipation. Reviewers, struggling to say anything more coherent, describe her simply as "sublime" or "breathtaking".

It says much for London's exceptional musical life that this perennially glamorous figure has made the city her home for the past 30 years. Japanese by birth, Viennese by upbringing, with no children and little immediate family, she could live anywhere. Her 50 or so concerts a year are chiefly in America and Europe. Her partner, European diplomat Robert Cooper, is based in Brussels. "We have a rule never to speak about each other in public," she says. "But I will say that he is not a music lover. Certain noises I produce, say Bartók, or Schoenberg, he finds worse than a lorry rattling past." Yet she remains in the same compact mews house in Notting Hill she has long occupied.

"I chose London because it is musically neutral and culturally tolerant. I had been born in a completely intolerant place — Japan. And Vienna I found so oppressive, I had to get out. I didn't want to be in a place that tries to 'possess' its composers — Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, though strictly speaking only Schubert was Viennese."

Why not Paris? "I don't think the majority of the French like music. They do like intellectuals. And they do like looking as if they like music," she shakes with one of her explosive giggles as she says this. "In London I can be a nobody — except maybe in bookstores and museums. I am accepted as an individual, not a pack animal."

One of Uchida's traits has been to restrict her repertoire, with Schubert and Mozart her gods. A preoccupation is Beethoven's last sonatas. Between concerts in Chicago, New York and Athens, she will play Opus 101 and 106 in Reading next month. "It's what I call one of my hidden concerts, a way of trying things out away from the spotlight. I always do this with concertos, too, perhaps in some small town in Germany."

She chastises herself for being "slow and stupid" but the degree to which she inhabits the music gives her playing its intensity and integrity. "You come back to Mozart, and he's always different. He's slippery, seemingly simple and yet elusive. Beethoven is the opposite, all consuming, sublime, unchanging. But no one on earth is more talented than Schubert. No one has such soul. And then there's Bach. Perhaps I will play Bach in public when I am 70."

Her regime is stringent, with all extraneous activities excised. Her six pianos — four Steinways and two early keyboards — are an obsession. "The better the instrument, the freer you can play. I breathe down the neck of technicians before concerts, telling them which pin needs cleaning, the depth of the key pressure, the distance between the hammer and the strings. To have any of those wrong is like stumbling on a stair with an irregular tread."

The adjustments are a matter of millimetres. Alfred Brendel is another who shares Uchida's technical concern, but they are exceptions. Her chief joy is having time to practise. What does she do on her mini-sabbaticals? "Stay at home and shut the door!" She restricts



Magnetic appeal: Mitsuko Uchida's combination of seriousness, elegance and explosive vivacity often has reviewers struggling to find words more than "sublime" or "breathtaking"

London's piano queen

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is having time to practise. What does she do on her mini-sabbaticals? "Stay at home and shut the door!" She restricts her social life, eats well, doesn't go shopping, or drive a car, or use a computer and "hoards" her mobile phone number — "Yes, I'm a dinosaur."

ESPIRE her techno-indifference, she has no reservations about downloading, except for the consequent death of the CD shop. "It's such a shocker, especially for someone like me who does not shop online. One survivor is the amazing Harold Moores on Great Marlborough Street. Where can I browse? It's becoming impossible. Perhaps now the big monsters like Tower Records have gone, the small shops will start up again. Otherwise all that remains is concerts."

London's musical life is facing seismic

changes with new directors at the Barbican and the Proms, and the relaunch of the Festival Hall, where she will play in June. "We must pray that the new acoustic is good. Who can know? I do feel worried about the future of classical music, live or recorded. But I have no solutions. One thing I hope: that the revamped South Bank has a massive CD store, and if they want to have a fancy café and sell Kleenex with EINE Kleine Nachtmusik printed on it that's fine by me."

Uchida has refused all blandishments to turn herself into a marketing toy — "That's madness. Instant disaster." Even her noted devotion to fashion designer Issey Miyake is prompted by practicality. "My late brother was appalled by my wardrobe. He imported Issey's clothes to Germany. He knew I detested shopping so started buying up stuff for me. I can roll it up and shove it in a drawer. I always wear exactly the same for concerts, but in different colours. And if I pull out the same shade two concerts running, I say so what? I don't give a damn."

One misguided record executive once had the bright idea of suggesting she record some popular Chopin, "with a picture of my bare back on the cover!" But no one was brave enough to ask her: "I have certain rules: no slits, no sleeveless, no strapless. I know that at least half the audience will be men — I don't want them distracted by what might fall off. I am only interested in revealing myself through music."

© Mitsuko Uchida is Radio 3's Artist in Focus, at 10.30pm, tonight and tomorrow. She plays Mozart at the Festival Hall (0870 3800 400) on 24 June.

Norman Lebrecht is away

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