

The new Jacqueline du Pré? Barenboim might just agree

Alisa Weilerstein is the cellist trusted by Daniel Barenboim to play the music closely associated with his late wife

By Jessica Duchen, October 7, 2010



Alisa Weilerstein: played Elgar's Cello Concerto

Alisa Weilerstein, one of the cello's brightest rising stars, was accorded a huge honour earlier this year when she performed Elgar's Cello Concerto under the baton of Daniel Barenboim. Barenboim is said to have associated the work so deeply with his first wife, the cellist Jacqueline du Pré, that for many years after her death he preferred not to conduct it at all. Weilerstein was in effect stepping into du Pré shoes.

"For me it was very intense because Jacqueline du Pré was the cellist I worshipped," the 28-year-old musician confirms. "I saw all those Christopher Nupen films about her and I listened to most, if not everything, she ever recorded."

Weilerstein played the Concerto with the Berlin Philharmonica in Berlin, London and Oxford, where du Pré was born. "I learned so much from

Barenboim: he has a unique mind, real genius, and no one knows that piece the way he does. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life."

This ebullient and forthright young American isn't a new du Pré, however, but an entirely individual and thoroughly modern musician. She was born in Rochester, New York, to a pianist mother, Vivian Hornik Weilerstein, and violinist father, Donald Weilerstein, the former leader of the Cleveland Quartet. Donald was a second-generation American and Vivian's family had escaped from Vienna to the States at the time of the Anschluss in 1938. Today they often perform as a piano trio; and Alisa's younger brother, Joshua, has also entered the family profession as a violinist and conductor.

Her maternal grandmother accidentally instilled in her a passion for the cello. "I was two and a half and I was at home with chicken pox," Weilerstein relates, "so she felt sorry for me and came round with an entire model string quartet she had made herself out of cereal boxes. So my first cello was made out of a Rice Krispies packet with f-holes drawn on and an old green toothbrush as an endpin. I kept sawing away at it, trying to get a sound out, which of course I couldn't. But when I was about four I started begging my parents for a real cello."

Her career started early when she won a competition that offered the chance to play a concerto with the Cleveland Orchestra. She was only 13, but her performance of Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations drew such praise that she found herself signed up by ICM Artists and on a carefully managed path towards stardom. "It built gradually, with not too many concerts at first, so I could still go to high school and have a normal life," she explains. She went on to take a degree in Russian history at Columbia University.

Indeed, Weilerstein's inclinations often send her into areas beyond the immediate concerns of practising and concerts. She is passionate about music education and has visited Venezuela several times this year to work with the Simon Bolívar Youth Orchestra and El Sistema, the world-renowned music education system for disadvantaged children.

"Some 400,000 children are involved in El Sistema in a country where 60 per cent of the population is below the poverty line," Weilerstein says. "It was developed as a social programme to bring art to the masses, not as education for the elite. That's how it ought to be: people should be able to take it for granted that we have music in our homes and our schools. Its founder, José Antonio Abreu, has managed to secure government sponsorship for it since 1975 and it is entirely state funded. A lot of the kids would have faced a choice between a musical instrument and a gun."

Last November she performed at the White House, along with violinist Joshua Bell, guitarist Sharon Isbin and pianist Awadagin Pratt: "It was Michelle Obama's initiative, first to have music in the White House, but also to have some seminars," she says. "So in the afternoon I worked with 24 young cellists of different levels and I played a Boccherini cello duo with a wonderful little 8-year-old, Sujari Britt.

"We talked a lot about the state of music education in the US, where there's not much government support for the arts; the National Endowment for the Arts is minuscule. This was a great day for classical music - it attracted the most press attention I've ever seen for classical music in the US. And I got to meet the Obamas. I think Michelle Obama knows a lot more about classical music than her husband does; he said as much in his opening remarks. But the charisma you see in him on TV - try multiplying that by 2000. It just knocks you over!"

Weilerstein is also embracing a more personal cause - when she was nine years old she was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Now she has become a celebrity advocate for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation.

"I used to be quite private about the condition professionally," she says, "but now I really want to use the fact that I travel and am in public quite a lot to speak to families about it. Often newly diagnosed children are frightened, the families don't know what the future holds, and I want to put across that it's completely possible, with the treatments we have now, to live a perfectly normal life."

Weilerstein will be performing at the Wigmore Hall next week, with the Israeli pianist Inon Barnatan, with a programme including music by Beethoven, Britten, Stravinsky and Chopin. This admittedly eclectic line-up is nevertheless rather conservative compared to some of her other performances: she adores contemporary music and works with composers as contrasting as Osvaldo Golijov, Lera Auerbach and Matthias Pintscher. And she is also enjoying non-classical performances with an ensemble involving two Brazilian percussionists and a hyper-accordion, an instrument she describes as "an accordion on steroids" capable of a startling range of sounds. With them she plays everything from jazz to Jimi Hendrix numbers.

In short, she is one busy cellist. "This year I've had 130 concerts," she says. That would be a huge workload for any musician and Weilerstein is happy if she manages to spend as many as five continuous days at home in New York with her boyfriend. "But I'm enjoying it," she grins. "I won't keep up this pace forever. But I'm young and for now it's great."

Alisa Weilerstein, Wigmore Hall, October 15. Box office: 020 7935 2141