

Mitsuko Uchida - The reluctant dame and her cup of joy

Mitsuko Uchida doesn't use her title, but the pianist is a stickler for preparation – especially of her tea. Jessica Duchen meets her

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In a quiet enclave behind Portobello Road, one of the UK's most unusual Dames is practising the piano. Mitsuko Uchida was awarded a DBE last year, but she doesn't shout about it. Instead, she reacts with wry humour and genuine warmth when I point out that she's the first concert pianist to receive this honour since the much-loved Moura Lympny (1916-2005).

"It is wonderful to be acknowledged," she remarks. She doesn't use the title publicly, though: "It would look too funny. I played with the Berlin Philharmonic the other day; if the poster had said 'Berlin Philharmonic, conductor Sir Simon Rattle, soloist Dame Mitsuko Uchida' it would have seemed like a sort of English conspiracy! Before, I was quietly doing my job and I will continue to do that. As the conductor Kurt Sanderling, whom I admired greatly, would have said: 'It is my duty to the great masters to do my best.'"

Her "job" involves more than practising and performing: Uchida prepares the music she plays in minute detail, examining the composer's original manuscripts and early editions, considering the implications of every instruction. Similar thoroughness permeates her home life, notably the making of tea. This involves exactly the right measurement of Darjeeling leaves from the first spring picking of a particular field, the brewing perfectly timed, the delectable result sipped from china made in Mozart's

day. I'm very scared of dropping anything in Uchida's house. Still, she doesn't take herself too seriously: her ready humour suggests someone content with her choices, artistic, personal or culinary.

She's recently turned her musical microscope upon Schumann in honour of his bicentenary this year; his *Dauidsbundlertänze* features in her upcoming Royal Festival Hall recital as well as on her latest CD. She spent long hours in the archive of the Musikverein in Vienna, poring over its manuscript.

The trouble with Schumann, she says, is that he kept changing his mind; so the discrepancies between the autograph manuscript and early published editions could be his rethinks, an editor's choices or printing errors. "You must make your choices," she says. "Which version do you accept as Schumann's heart and soul?" Sometimes a discovery confirms a musical instinct: "One accent in the *Dauidsbundlertänze* I had always felt in the music, yet never seen printed. In the manuscript, there it was. I always knew that was what he meant."

But there's room for her own personality: "I can't help but be me," she declares. "When you perform you turn into a bit of an animal, and unless the animal is there, the performance is not interesting. Still, I don't want to play just whatever is 'me'; I want to hear what I found in the music. So when you are performing, at best you are a listener."

Uchida was born in 1948 in Atami, Japan: "At that time in Japan," she says, "I was lucky even to have a piano." When she was 12, her diplomat father was posted to Vienna, once home to Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert: it proved an ideal environment for a musical young girl. But while many pianists start out as 'prodigies' pushed by ambitious parents, her experience was the opposite.

"My father hoped I'd be good enough to play one recital a year in Tokyo so that he could show up and be proud," she says. "He wanted me to live there and teach kids. I disappointed him." Aged 14, she gave her first recital in Vienna. Concert invitations followed. "My father quietly killed them all. I never knew anything about it."

Instead, she progressed at first through prizes at the prestigious Leeds and Chopin Competitions, then rose steadily to prominence; now, at 61, she is at the top of her game. Her pianos are her musical partners: she has two Steinways, one made in 1962, the other from the mid 1990s; the former, beautifully mellow, features on her Schumann record, while the other, "big, brilliant and very strong," as she says, accompanies her to London recitals. The pianos live in a studio opposite her house -- she has long been a Londoner. Her human partner, Robert Cooper, director-general for external and politico-military affairs at the EU, lives next door when he's not in Brussels. "This plan suits us," she says. "We both have mighty little time."

Uchida seems all about finding creative solutions to problems that might defeat someone less positive. Stage fright, for instance, which she says she suffers constantly. "One thing helps: to breathe well. When you are frightened you stop breathing." Qigong exercises can help, she adds. "I used to feel light-headed during concerts from oxygen starvation. I still remind myself while I'm playing: breathe!"

She designs her own concert clothes -- besides looking fabulous, they are supremely practical. Long skirts trap feet, so she prefers trousers; and the light organza wrap she devised originally for directing concertos from the keyboard. "It provides cover, because I think women look terrible conducting in sleeveless clothes; it's something

about the armpit," she says. "And strapless dresses are impossible -- people just wait for your dress to fall off! I wear things that don't distract the audience from the music."

Aside from performing Uchida devotes much time to two vital efforts to help younger artists. She is co-founder with Ilaria Borletti Buitoni of the Borletti Buitoni Trust, which supports the career development of a select number of young musicians: "What I personally don't want is brash, vulgar, sales-oriented playing," Uchida says. "That's the only thing I stop." She's also co-director with the pianist Richard Goode of Marlboro Music, the summer school in Vermont founded by the great Rudolf Serkin. "It's still Serkin's musical world of the 1950s-60s," she says, "and it's thriving, maybe because Richard and I are both hugely old-fashioned people!" She laughs, but there's a hard-edged point: "Music-making is about music. If music colleges give 'career classes' telling youngsters that PR and saleability are the most important things, where the heck are we?"

It often seems that high-quality musicianship is being submerged under the industry's preference for youthful glamour and egotistical barnstorming. But Uchida has a huge following; and she is optimistic that her values are alive and kicking. "The young people at Marlboro are so balanced and such good musicians that that gives me hope," she says, sipping the last of the tea.

Mitsuko Uchida, Royal Festival Hall, 5 October. Box office: 0844 875 0073. Her Schumann CD is out now on Decca.