



DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

Anne-Sophie Mutter; and as a child with Herbert von Karajan, right

RAISING THE BOW

In the international spotlight since her early teens, violin virtuoso Anne-Sophie Mutter tells **Sharon Verghis** she's yet to master her instrument

AT nine, she played her first public concert. At 13, she made her international debut in Lucerne with Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic. At 15, she made her first recordings for the prestigious Deutsche Grammophon label.

By her late teens she was enjoying the fruits of international music stardom — a Stradivarius, a Porsche, critically praised recordings — after being hailed by the autocratic, silver-haired Karajan as “the greatest musical prodigy since the young Menuhin”.

Now 50, she's been in the international spotlight for more than three decades, known for her scholarship and virtuosity as well as her glamorous John Galliano gowns. She's sold upwards of 10 million albums, and critics worldwide salute everything from her lyricism and rich tone to her formidable control and the precision of her bowing arm.

“When she lets her turbo-charged sound roar fully out,” *The Washington Post* once said, “you feel it almost physically.”

The violin has been her first love since early childhood, but German superstar Anne-Sophie

Mutter is a woman of many passions outside music. Speaking to Review from Austria, it is tennis, not Mozart, that is absorbing her boundless energy this morning; within seconds of getting on the line, she confides gleefully that she's “absolutely” over the moon at the thought of finally seeing the men's singles final in Melbourne with her son when she returns to this country to perform with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra following her lauded Australian debut with Beethoven's Violin Concerto in 2012.

“I know I should speak only of Mozart but I now shall speak of Federer — I am a big Federer fan,” she announces cheerfully in precise English overlaid with a rollicking, singsong accent.

Engaging and candid, she waxes lyrical about the Swiss legend's almost musical

Federer crush and her vexed realisation she'll never truly master her instrument to why children are instinctively good at Mozart and her visceral dislike of listening to her old recordings (“I'll only do so if I'm in a moving car and can't jump out”).

Then it's on to the need for classical musicians to be more politically engaged (where are the benefit concerts for Syria, she asks), the frustrations of working with occasionally “uninspirable” orchestras, and her upcoming Carnegie Hall world premiere of an “insanely” difficult new work by octogenarian Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki. “I am so nervous,” she exclaims. “Oh my God, how many sleepless nights have I had!”

Art and literature, two passions, are regularly referenced. A keen collector, she has said Monet's desire to paint not the object but what

EVERY NOTE IS PRECIOUS IN MOZART, AS ARE THE SPACES BETWEEN THE NOTES

playing style, his graceful sense of rhythm, his temperament: like her, she explains earnestly, he appears coolly remote, even imperious, but “sometimes you see him give a funny little ‘c'mon!’ and you can glimpse this incredible inner fire which he shelves before playing. Without wanting to put myself anywhere near the mastery of Federer, I think we are the same type on stage.”

It is characteristic of Mutter, I find, to seek out parallels between her profession and her many interests. A self-described “insatiable caterpillar” of the violin repertoire, that curious, cerebral mind of hers soaks up books and art, jazz and magic tricks as quickly as it does scores, old and new. Refreshingly pragmatic about her life with “the fiddle” (“it's not life or death, let's be honest”), she makes quickfire conversational leaps from her

goes on between the object and the eye of the beholder is “very close to my understanding of music”; she compares Beethoven and Mozart to Miro and Klee, and has cited the epigraph from TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* (“We shall not cease from exploration”) to clarify her reasons for re-recording the Mozart concertos. At one point in our chat, she explains her theories on music in terms of the deceptively subtle work of Austrian sculptor Karl Prantl, and compares Mozart's compositions — lean and infinitely nuanced — first with a Japanese haiku, and then a masterpiece of microcarving she once saw in a Dresden art museum.

On the weekend after next, she will perform three of Mozart's five violin concertos with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The great composer is perhaps Mutter's favourite, “always waiting for me at every juncture of my career”.

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questions about socialism and the Castro government's now 55-year-rule.

“I can tell you that some Cubans hate Cuba and want the American dream, and that other Cubans are crazy about the place. For me it's about music and family.” Fonseca recently married his long-time girlfriend; both live with his mother, a singer and former dancer, in the modest three-bedroom home he grew up in.

“My mum always told me that music must be studied continuously, endlessly. It is like an eternal bride for a musician.” A smile. “My wife is very understanding.”

Fonseca's musical leanings were nurtured early; his father played the drums. His mother was previously married to Chucho Valdes — the great Cuban pianist, bandleader, founder of supergroup Irakere and, arguably, of the Latin jazz genre (“He's the guy that really put Cuba on the musical map”).

His two elder half-brothers are a drummer

and a pianist now based in the US and Mexico. “My brothers used to play a lot of funk and soul and my mother would be singing bolero and son (the precursor to salsa) all day long. I started off playing drums, and my first job was as a drummer in a Beatles cover band. But what I really loved was heavy rock.” He beatboxes a riff. “Iron Maiden. Quiet Riot. AC/DC. I loved the energy, the bass lines.”

So it was that the adolescent Fonseca got about after school in tassels, tight jeans, a studded Cuban army belt and, quite possibly, his mother's eyeliner.

“Then one weekend I was in the kitchen having lunch and listening to heavy metal, really loud,” he says, “when suddenly the cassette clicked off and I felt this peace. I was like, ‘Whoa, what was I just listening to?’ And then my tastes changed; I discovered the piano, and Keith Jarrett, and jazz.”

And while at present he's listening to a lot of electronica and dubstep (“I'm trying to compose some acoustic dubstep; it's a risk”),

he'd still like to make a big stompy rock album one day: “An Emerson, Lake & Palmer kind of thing, but don't tell anyone.” Just as he wouldn't mind getting into movie acting; there have been several offers, but he says he is biding his time.

“I want to be the guy who saves the world with a couple of words and a look,” he jokes, arching an eyebrow. “The quiet guy who resolves everything, and doesn't talk too much.”

I suggest he is more political than he'd have us think, what with tracks such as *7 Rayos* paying homage to the Palo Mayombe religion of the Yoruba people, who were taken from Africa to Cuba in the slave trade — and featuring some sonorous spoken words by the proudly Afro-Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen.

Fonseca nods, smiles. “I love the poetry of Guillen, but not only because it is political. I love it because it is rhythmic; it has a wonderful cadence.

“*7 Rayos* is the most important song I have

ever done in my life,” he says, “because it is the song where I change the way I compose.”

He fishes his smartphone from his jeans pocket, searches for the song and presses play. “I was feeling the melody and the impulse and the vibe and trying to create a bridge between African tradition and electronica,” he says as music — his own music — blares around him.

“So I added African instruments like the *ngoni* (lute) and *kora* (harp) alongside percussion from Cuba; I used some of the classical influences I have, and the voice of Guillen. I put all these things in one track. Now every time I hear the song, I think, ‘This is where I moved forward.’”

He pauses, smiles. “Do you like it?”

I love it, I say.

“Si,” he says with a grin. “So do I. I love what I do.”

Roberto Fonseca plays WOMADelaide March 7–9, Melbourne Recital Centre March 11, and The Basement, Sydney, March 12.