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▼ he soloist glides onto the stage like a queen. Her hair is perfect, her make-up is perfect and her figure is perfectly enclosed in a floor-length, strapless sheath dress of orange silk. She carries her priceless instrument with the casual familiarity of a regal orb and sceptre. All that is missing is the crown.

Anne-Sophie Mutter has been the reigning Queen of the Violin for 35 years. Ever since her international debut at the Lucerne Festival aged just 13, she has been a household name in Germany and a worldwide classical music phenomenon. She made her first recording for the prestigious Deutsche Grammophon with the Berlin Philharmonic at 15 and has been with the company ever since. They have just released a limited-edition, 40-CD based set of her recordings titled ASM35.

In spite of her lofty status, when she talks on the phone from her home in Berlin she is at pains to stress how ordinary she is: a single mum who juggles life and work just like the rest of us. Forget the image tormented artist spending hours a day devoted to her craft. She doesn't even practise every day. "I don't know if I

she says. "Maybe I should. But I don't. I can't. I am a single mother of two children although almost grown up but still my life is so diverse. I have a foundation in aid of musicians worldwide and my benefit work and so many other things, including what a family needs.

"Even if I would love to, it would be impossible to practise every day."

When I admit that my own violin has been crying in the corner for quite some time she gushes, "Awww ... I can play on it when I'm in Sydney! Maybe not for the concert but just to

make it happy..."

The idea of her playing Beethoven's Violin Concerto – "the most complex, the most philosophical piece of violin

Regazzi, to choose from, is quaint. repertoire ever written", as she describes it - on a dusty student But her cute and cosy answers, fiddle, when she has two Stradiwhich reveal next to nothing about varius violins and a custom-made her personal life, speak volumes about her extraordinary career: this contemporary violin by luthier-tois someone who has been in the spotlight since she was six.

> story starts back in Rheinfelden, at the south-west tip of Germany, where she was born in 1963. Her parents were journalists, musical but not musically educated. Nevertheless, by the age of five Mutter had already developed a "burning wish to play the fiddle". It was soon clear that hers was an extraordinary talent. She

The Anne-Sophie Mutter

won National

> "I just went on stage and played and was ready to go home. Then I bumped into [Karajan] leaving the hall and I remember him saying that he was very much looking forward to col-

nerves, nothing.

tion from school to concentrate on

music. By nine she was a full-time stu-

dent at the Winterthur Conserva-

torium under the tuition of Aida Stucki. It was Stucki who introduced

Mutter to the conductor of the Berlin

Philharmonic, maestro Herbert von

Was it terrifying to be standing on the stage of the Berlin Philharmonie

Concert Hall playing Bach for one of

the world's most famous - infamous,

when I was invited in 1976 I actually

didn't accept his invitation. I went on

"Absolutely! It was so terrifying that

vacation first. And I did hope that

his office would forget and not

They did not forget. In

December 1976, Mutter was

on her way to her Berlin audi-

tion with "absolutely no

hopes". She was so convinced

she would fail that she felt no

Karajan. Mutter was 13.

indeed - conductors?

laborating with me next year in Salzburg. 'The earth stood still."

Except that for Mutter, nothing stands still for long. Her first Berlin encounter was the start of an intense creative partnership with Karajan. With him she recorded most of the great violin concertos, starting with Mozart, and working through Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky.

'The period between being an instinctive musician and becoming an aware musician, a reasoning musician, is a very important one and has to happen early in your teens," Mutter says. "Karajan taught me to find the common thread that runs through a score, to think the music through to its logical conclusion and impose a sense of direction on it. Karajan taught me not simply to juxtapose notes in long, overarching paragraphs but to place them in the service of the musical idea.'

It is Mutter's unswerving quest for the "musical idea" that has put off some of her critics, who find her stage presence sullen, even arrogant. But, unlike some other best-selling violin soloists, Mutter

does not aim to win audiences through charm. "I'm not in the mood to smile while I'm playing; I'm there to transmit the music,'

Mutter also vehemently rejects what she sees as misguided attempts at popularising classical music through gimmicks, slick marketing and dumbing down.

'We don't have to downsize it, we don't have to make a comic strip out of Shakespeare, necessarily. Music is out there in all its beauty and all its complexity. There are pieces which are more fun to listen to and others that are more complex and there is a time for all of these pieces in our lives.

She stops and thinks, anxious to press home her point.

"My son is a passionate piano player. He will not become a musician but he loves it. He used to adore only Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov when he was a teenager and now he falls in love with Mozart. It seems to touch a string in his heart and his soul, and it is a period where he needs that.

Once you are in that language of music, you are totally immersed.'

"What I am saying is that music is so complex that as you are growing up as a teenager, you will find a language which you can connect to, a language which is so irresistibly fascinating and touching that you can't escape.

"Once you are in that language of music, you are totally immersed. And that's what makes music such an eternally and universally precious language.'

This fiercely held belief has informed her entire life. The photos from her early years, playing her first public concert, with the Swiss Winterthur Stadtorchester, at nine, show a moon-faced child with golden curls and solemn eyes.

Pictures from her Karajan-Berlin Philharmonic days feature a plump teenager in sensible knits in deep conversation with a man 50 years her senior. Her swanlike transformation into the svelte, blonde bombshell who drives a Porsche, has cover-girl photos and wears Chanel has been coincidental rather than instrumental in her phenomenal success.

Nevertheless, the combination of talent, intellect and looks has proved irresistible to a string of older men who have shaped this exceptional artist.

First, there was Karajan. Then

there was conductor Paul Sacher, who threw her into the deep end of spiky, modern music by commissioning a concerto from iconic Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski, sparking her ongoing engagement with music of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Along the way, there was also her first marriage, to Karajan's lawyer, Detlef Wunderlich, 30 years her senior. (Wunderlich died of cancer in 1996, leaving her with two young children.) For a while, she was associated with Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, then in his 70s, with whom she recorded and performed much of her chamber music repertoire. In 2002, she married pianist and composer Andre Previn. He was 73, she was 39. They have since divorced but remain close. She will play two new works by Previn next year and calls him her "in-house composer".

Now, as she approaches 50, Mutter is very much her own woman. She is the executive figurehead of a small industry that, as she explains, encompasses performing and recording, regular benefit performances and a charitable foundation that mentors young string players, all of which she oversees herself.

She has also taken the initiative musically, commissioning some of classical music's most admired composers to write substantial, tough new works for her, which she tours widely. In the past three years, she has also stepped up to the podium, leading orchestras such as the London Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra "from the fiddle", as she puts it.

Small wonder she does not have time to practise every day. Luckily for her, the technical demands of playing her instrument seem to be the least of her worries.

"I have never been a musician who believed or needed hour-long drilling sessions. [You work out] fingerings and the logic of your hand movement more by thinking about it than stupid repeating mechanisms. I was taught at a very early stage that it is more about reasoning, more about looking at a piece of music and envisioning it in your inner ear.'

So whether you listen to her immaculate recordings of the great violin concertos or see her performing, svelte and spectacular, be assured she is not just turning on the charm and churning out the notes. Anne-Sophie Mutter is giving you a piece of her mind.

ASM35: The Complete Musician is out now. Mutter plays with the Sydney Symphony at the Opera House on March 30 and 31.

