

# REIKO

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And now this weekend, on Feb. 22 and 23, she'll perform the piece with the Southwest Florida Symphony at the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall, in a concert that celebrates her 25th year as concertmaster.

The concerts, which will feature her on Tchaikovsky's "Violin Concerto in D Major," are being held in her honor.

"I didn't expect anything like this," she says. "I'm absolutely honored and am very humbled by it."

Conductor Michael Hall had suggested a few pieces to her - a Samuel Barber, a Kongold.

"He said, 'How about this, or how about this?'" Niiya says. "I don't know." Then he said, 'How about Tchaikovsky?' I said, 'OK.' I have performed it with the International Orchestra of Maracaibo in Venezuela....The Tchaikovsky is definitely my favorite piece, and it's something special. So when Michael mentioned Tchaikovsky, I said, 'That's good.' It's extremely meaningful.

"The melody is nice. It's funny, because when Tchaikovsky first premiered the piece, everybody hated it. They said, 'It's too rough, and it almost sounds like destroying a violin.' There are a lot of sections that sound very vigorous and very strong, but there are sections that have such a nice melody, a calm melody.

"It's definitely one of the most difficult concertos in violin literature. So Tchaikovsky couldn't find anyone who would be willing to play it. A violinist he wanted turned him down, because it was too difficult. He said it was impossible to play. He had to give the piece to some young violinist who just came out of school, who didn't know any better that he couldn't play it.

"It is extremely difficult. It's very challenging. It sounds very flashy. If you can play it well, it just sounds marvelous."

Though Niiya's performed the piece before, she's practicing hard.

"It is challenging," she says. She keeps asking herself, "Can I play this better? This time, I'm finding this piece a lot more difficult than ever before," she confides.

It isn't that her talents have slipped, it's that her expectations and demands on herself have increased exponentially.

"Basically, the music world is full of that: there is no limit, no 100 percent," she says. "So far, there is not one concert that I was totally happy with. I've never been happy with my own playing. So it's sad; no matter how I play, I think, 'Oh, I could've done better there.' As long as I feel that way, there is still room to grow."

She admits that she thought she sounded better the day before than she did today.

"Today, somehow, I can't play well," she says. "Yesterday, I thought I sounded much better than the day before. Today I sounded terrible, and tomorrow, who knows? This is one of the things I always tell my students: 'You feel, why am I doing this? I have no talent. Why don't I just quit?' If I go through this phase, then the next stage is going to be looking really bright, looking really wide: 'Oh wow, I can do this! It's amazing.' It goes in cycles.

"I've lived long enough to know that. Now, I don't get upset too much. I have to be optimistic. I'll probably do it better tomorrow, or the day after. After struggles and suffering, there are always good results. Definitely I play this concerto much better than a month ago. I can play much better now than three weeks ago. That's something I always look forward to. I'm suffering right now, but a week from now I'll be achieving something."

After finishing school, Niiya had a two-year contract with the International Orchestra of Maracaibo in Venezuela. When it was over, she moved back to the States, jobless and newly married. Her former husband's father told them that the Southwest Florida Symphony was looking for a concertmaster, principle cello and general manager. They auditioned.

Her former husband was given the prin-



COURTESY PHOTO

Concertmaster Reiko Niiya will perform Tchaikovsky's "Violin Concerto in D Major" at this weekend's symphony. The concert honors Niiya's 25 years with the symphony.



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The concertmaster is the one who tunes the entire orchestra, she's the liaison between the conductor and the orchestra, in this case the Southwest Florida Symphony.

ciple cello and general manager's position, while Niiya was given the concertmaster position.

"The concertmaster is the liaison between the conductor and the orchestra, musically," she explains. "Whatever the conductor wants from the orchestra, I try to help him make it happen. The concertmaster is the leader of the string section, and definitely of the first violin section. The concertmaster is the one who tunes the entire orchestra. If the orchestra is not tuned properly, that's the concertmaster's fault. I have to demand them to tune properly."

She says that initially, she didn't know that the symphony was an amateur orchestra; there were only two professional musicians in the symphony then, both retired.

"I quickly fell in love with the orchestra," Niiya says. "A couple weeks ago, the symphony society threw me a big luncheon, a

big surprise party. It was really nice and sweet of them. One of their questions to me was, 'Did you know you were going to be in Fort Myers for 25 years?' They expected me to say no, but I knew, within a couple years, that I would stay here.

"I saw so much potential, once we started getting more professionals. I thought, 'I would like to be here until the orchestra becomes a full-time orchestra.' We're not there yet, but we're very close. I'm hoping that within the next five years, that it will be a full-time orchestra."

Niiya, a freelance musician, has been concertmaster of six different orchestras. At one time, she was concertmaster of three orchestras during the same season. Once a year she's concertmaster at the Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. for its annual benefit concert, and is also one of the concertmasters at Wolf Trap in Virginia.

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— Reiko Niiya

That's what freelance musicians do, she explains, even if they aren't concertmasters. She notes that a lot of the players in the Southwest Florida Symphony also play in Tampa, Orlando, or with the Palm Beach Opera.

"Every week, they play different concerts. That's freelance," she says.

From 1986 through 1999 Niiya lived in Washington, D.C., moving back to Fort Myers when she remarried. During that time she commuted to Southwest Florida for every single concert. She missed only one, due to pneumonia.

While in D.C. she played violin for popular musicians such as Natalie Cole, Patti LaBelle, Johnny Mathis, the Moody Blues, Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston and Barbra Streisand.

Streisand is a perfectionist, Niiya says. "We had to pre-record a couple things, and did take after take, so many takes. We thought, 'That one was good, what was wrong with that one?' She was very nice, but when it comes to her profession, she's really picky."

Niiya's treasured instrument is an old Italian violin made in 1793 by Vincenzo Panormo. It was her aunt's, and Niiya's had it since she was 16.

"This particular instrument has a nickname. A long time ago, they used to call it the Power Machine," she says. "It has a huge sound. The sound really carries over distance. It has a very, very bright sound."

She's seen a lot of changes over the past 25 years, both in town and in the orchestra.

"A couple other musicians and I started trying to get more professional musicians in the orchestra," she says. "Then, when conductor Paul Nadler came, the percentage of professional musicians increased, with more and more professional musicians than amateur. Paul was here for 16 years, and the quality got better and the standards got higher."

The most recent milestone is new conductor Michael Hall, Niiya says.

"We're just about half-way through his first season, and already there's a drastic change musically," she says. "When Paul was here, the quality was great, but now Michael brought in a different kind of quality. With different conductors, the tone of the orchestra changed. To me, the orchestra's tone is brighter. Paul liked a darker sound. I think Michael likes a brighter sound, which reflects on his personality. He's extremely positive, optimistic, upbeat, youthful. And that reflects on the music. He's extremely energetic, and the tone that he asks for is very, very bright. He puts the musicians at ease. We respect him enormously, but we're not afraid of him."

Asked to compare the two conductors' styles, Niiya says, "one commands and one demands. Michael commands. We want to give him everything we have."

"With new executive director Ernie Toplis, the orchestra is just going to go somewhere. They're a great duo. Ernie is just absolutely the best executive director we've ever had. I think the orchestra has grown along with Fort Myers. Fort Myers has gotten bigger, bigger, with more restaurants, more stores, more cars, more people. I'm optimistic and hopeful that more community people will be involved and grow more interested in our orchestra and we'll just keep growing." ■