

## *Esther Yoo: Discovering oneself requires freedom and vulnerability*

JUAN CARLOS TELLECHEA

The violinist Esther Yoo will be the soloist of the concert of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Vasily Petrenko, this Wednesday at the Auditorio Nacional de Música in Madrid.

The audience will surely be fascinated when she plays Max Bruch's *Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor* op 26, scheduled on the program.

She recorded it on her recent CD along with Samuel Barber's *Violin Concerto* op 14, among other works. Quite a revelation!



Esther Yoo  
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The promising violinist was the youngest winner of the International Sibelius Violin Competition when she was 16 in 2008 and in one of the youngest winners of the Queen Elisabeth Competition at 18. In 2014, she became a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist and in 2018 the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra chose Esther Yoo as its first artist-in-residence. Yoo has kindly granted an interview to **Mundoclasico.com** These are her exclusive statements.

**Juan Carlos Tellechea:** How and when did you come to the violin, what attracted you to that instrument to make it your own; are there musicians in your family?

**Esther Yoo:** I began playing the piano first at the age of four and then about half a year later started the violin. My family love music - we always had music playing in the house and my mother was an amateur flutist. My favorite thing to do as a kid was sit next to her while she would practice, and draw pictures that I felt related to the music.

At that time we were living in New Jersey, not too far from New York City. My parents would often take me to amazing concerts at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall in NYC. I

became mesmerized with the violin at those concerts, where I saw orchestras on stage or violinists in recital - and that's when I asked my parents if I could try the violin myself.

**Are you a romantic (why yes or why no)?**

Perhaps you can take a guess from my latest recording :))

**Are you a perfectionist (why yes or why no)?**

Yes, I think I am naturally a perfectionist but I have worked on myself to be less so. Although being a perfectionist can be very positive, I came to a point where I realized that being a musician and too much of a perfectionist became unproductive for me. I became aware that I was not giving myself enough space and trust for spontaneity and momentary inspiration. Over the past several years I have worked on finding more of a balance between these two aspects and now I feel happier and more fulfilled with this balance.

**How did you discover yourself and what importance do you attach to that experience?**

I think I am still discovering myself and as I evolve through different stages of my life, I hope the journey of self-reflection, awareness and discovery never ends. I could talk about this for a very long time, but the deeper I dive into finding myself, the more profoundly I feel connected to music and artistic expression. Discovering oneself requires freedom and vulnerability - both of which are essential to great art.

**Has it been an illusion of yours to offer this concert in Spain?**

I am always excited to return to Spain and perform for Spanish audiences. This concert in particular is very special as I will be reuniting with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Maestro Vasily Petrenko with whom I recorded my new Bruch/Barber album for Deutsche Grammophon. It will be the first time for us to perform Bruch's *1st Violin Concerto* since the recording and we are eager to share this music with the Spanish audiences.

**How did Bruch and Barber come into your musical life; what do you feel when you play them?**

Bruch is a composer I have felt deeply attracted and connected to since my childhood. His first violin concerto has long been one of my favorite pieces and it grew and evolved with me throughout my development. The nobility and depth of this concerto felt so beautiful to me and it is evident that the violin was Bruch's favorite instrument.

Barber's violin concerto came to me later in life but I felt a friendship with the piece



Esther Yoo. © 2023 by Je-Won Kim

immediately. This concerto reminds me a lot of film music and as I listen to, or play, this concerto it evokes all kinds of imagery and scenes.

Interestingly, both composers wrote these violin concertos in their twenties - Bruch was 28 and Barber was 29. They are very contrasting concertos of course, but they have a similar way of expression where both composers are writing with their hearts on their sleeves. The emotions are so vivid, so tender yet passionate, their messages are very direct. Perhaps because I am at a similar age as both these composers were when they wrote their concertos, I felt a particular relatability to these works at the current stage of my life and therefore wanted to record them for my new album.

**What does this new CD Bruch Barber mean to you?**

The above answer blends into this question as well. This new album feels incredibly special to me. Over the past few years I have been on a journey of self-discovery and authenticity, and personally I feel like this album embodies much of that experience - from the album cover, the repertoire choice, the approach to making the recording and the music itself. It was a privilege to record with the RPO, with whom I have a very close relationship since I was their first-ever Artist-in-Residence in 2018, and an honor and joy to work with Maestro Vasily Petrenko who is not only a phenomenal conductor but an incredibly kind-spirited and humorous person.

**What other unfulfilled dreams do you want to realize; what other plans do you want to promote?**



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Especially after the tough years of the pandemic, it feels incredibly refreshing to be travelling and performing regularly again. I'm very much looking forward to all the projects I have coming up, including premiering a new concerto next season that is being written for me by [Raymond Yiu](#), multiple chamber music projects including European and China tours with the [Z.E.N. Trio](#), returns to the Royal Festival Hall, Concertgebouw, Wigmore Hall and debuts with the Melbourne Symphony, Hamburg Symphoniker and São Paulo Symphony.

I also look forward to opening up more dialogues about psychology and mental health - how important this awareness is towards living and making music, and also how music plays a huge role in our well being.

**JCT:** Can you tell us an anecdote of yours, unknown to the public until now, that you found funny, strange, mysterious, joyful and that made you laugh a lot?

EY: Well, what comes to mind are the many interesting stories I have from touring with the Z.E.N. Trio - a piano trio formed with my dear friends, pianist Zhang Zuo and cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan. We have been playing together as a trio for eight years now which is hard for us to believe. We are great friends but we each have very different personalities, and we often go through a wide range of emotions and crazy experiences when we are on tour, but ultimately laughter always seems to be the winner.

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