

Some of my best friends are pianos

Mitsuko Uchida talks to Jessica Duchen

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Pianist Mitsuko Uchida has strong opinions about tea. "I drink only Darjeeling, and I am very particular about where it comes from," she says. This is no ordinary stuff: it is harvested from the first flush of tea leaves in a particular field in the Himalayas, you can only buy it in Paris and you have to drink it black. "And if you don't like it, you accept it anyway," she beams. As it is with tea, so it is with music: she has fantastically high standards.

Though born in Japan, 52-year-old Uchida grew up and trained in Vienna; and, after an initial reaction against the city's stuffiness and traditionalism, she has made its music, especially Mozart and Schubert, the core of her repertoire. But the Mozart concertos she will be performing next week on London's South Bank - K413, 414 and 415 - won't look, at first, like concertos. She is playing them not with an orchestra, but a string quartet.

The chamber version of the concertos is Mozart's own, and every bit as rewarding as the original scoring for small orchestra. But are they still concertos? "I was thinking the other day what the definition of a piano concerto is," says Uchida. "The difference between Mozart's piano sonatas and piano concertos is that the sonatas are personal pieces: even the biggest and strongest you can still play just for yourself. His piano concertos are, as a genre, the most special, beautiful and strongest of his works, just half a notch behind his operas. But it's also true that these pieces were written to show off what he could do. And that gives it an extra kick."

For some musicians, Mozart is the most difficult of all composers to perform successfully - the ultimate test of both technical and spiritual accomplishment. Uchida doesn't necessarily see it that way. "Of course, Mozart is very, very, very difficult. But for me, personally, Beethoven might be more difficult - his difficulties lie somewhere else. Mozart's difficulties arise possibly because it is the least overblown of music. That makes it more difficult to perform because everything is so transparent and visible. It is seemingly simple, but only seemingly. It is horrendously complicated; it is as complicated as human emotions are.

"Mozart knew and saw and could transform all the various combinations of colours of emotion into sound and make them beautiful. That was his strength. Shakespeare used certain very simple words that any idiot can use and suddenly they were transported. Mozart does the same."

Uchida talks the way she plays. Much of the time her voice is very quiet: you have to sit forward and concentrate hard. Then, suddenly, she will let forth a

sky-high flare of emphasis. In both conversation and performance the fierce, dynamic intelligence, lack of compromise, lucid argument and intimate, private yet entirely audible sensitivity to the inner life of music are the same. On the platform, she says, she does not think about projecting to the back row of the gallery. Instead, she wants to draw the audience down to her, to make the hall "shrink".

This is why she prefers to perform on one of her own concert pianos, housed (with several more) in a studio close to her home. "To be able to take your own piano to a concert hall is a luxury," she enthuses. "Because on my own pianos I can play so quietly that nobody thought it possible. The set-up is such that I can play quieter and quieter and it still has more to give. That never happens on any other instrument. The younger piano is 11 years old, the older one is a 1962 I have owned since 1982. They are friends of mine. I shall take one of them for the Mozart concertos."

The intimate atmosphere works. On the way to a concert, an audience member would normally say they're going to hear Kissin, or Pletnev, or whoever. But before an Uchida recital it's simply, "I'm going to hear Mitsuko." This is a pianist whose audience spontaneously calls her by her first name. Next week there's a chance to see why.

- Mitsuko Uchida and the Brentano String Quartet play Mozart at the Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 (020-7960 4242) on April 3.