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Symphonic homecoming for famed cellist

Jane Lott
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Cellist Hai-Ye Ni has won many prestigious awards, has performed with some of the world's greatest orchestras and conductors and is the youngest principal cellist in a major symphony orchestra - the Philadelphia Orchestra. And yet she is thrilled to be coming to San Rafael to perform once again with the Marin Symphony with music director Alasdair Neale conducting.

"I always have a very special feeling for Marin because I went to San Domenico School," says Ni, who attended the San Anselmo school on a full scholarship. "I've always felt a lot of support from those years, so it's nice to come back."

Born in Shanghai, China, Ni came to Marin specifically to attend San Domenico, she says, noting that it has a wonderful music department. In addition to her high school studies there, she attended classes every Saturday at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music preparatory department.

Her parents were the initial decision makers about a possible career in music, sending her to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music when she was young, then to San Domenico when she was a teen. But near the time she graduated, Ni became aware that playing professionally was what she herself wanted. Then, at age 18, she won the Naumburg International Cello Competition, the youngest musician ever to do so, and made her debut at Alice Tully Hall in New York. She went on to win first prize in the International Paulo Cello Competition in Finland, and the Avery Fisher Career Grant. Her performing career

was launched.

But the life of a concert soloist is difficult, Ni says. "When I was

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Cellist Hai-Ye Ni, a graduate of San Domenico School, is the youngest principal cellist in a major symphony orchestra the Philadelphia Orchestra.

playing by myself, I was very lonely."

She decided that being a traveling solo artist was not the professional life she wanted to lead. Now she enjoys the best of all worlds - she teaches, plays chamber music, performs as guest artist on occasion and is part of one of the best orchestras in America.

"Variety is always good," she says, with the caveat that "it's hard to know which I'm going to choose ultimately."

Choosing to play with Neale, however, was not difficult. Ni has worked with him twice before - the first time when she was 20, when she performed with the San Francisco Symphony and he conducted. In fact, she played the same piece - Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 1 - she will play with the Marin Symphony in its March 30 and April 1 concerts.

The same piece, perhaps, but not the same performance, Ni says.

"It will be musically more mature É maybe my fingers won't go as fast as they did before. But it will probably be more interesting this time, and musically more complex because I have had much more experience."

Despite having performed for 21Ú2 decades, Ni says she still gets nervous and excited before a concert, although she remembers she wasn't very scared playing for the Marin Music Chest auditions 20 years ago. "They were all very, very nice people."

Marin Music Chest offers, among other things, scholarships to assist young musicians in continuing their studies. The organization was founded in 1933 by Maude Faye Symington, a highly acclaimed Wagnerian soprano in the early 20th century. Wishing to offer Marin County "the greatest music, to the most people, at the least cost," Symington started and supported the Marin Music Chest by selling affordable memberships. The organization soon became a flourishing producer of concerts at Forest Meadows on the Dominican University campus.

"Winning the (Marin Music Chest) prize gave me the encouragement that I was doing things right," Ni remembers.

"I'm really looking forward to coming back to Marin," she adds. "It feels like homecoming."

IF YOU GO

Who: Cellist Hai-Ye Ni with the Marin Symphony, conducted by Alasdair Neale

What: "The Mellifluous Cello," featuring Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 1, Dvorak's Symphony No. 7 and Jalbert's "Fire and Ice" - a specially commissioned work.

When: 7:30 p.m. March 30 and April 1; pre-concert conversations with Neale at 6:30 p.m.

Where: Marin Veterans Memorial Auditorium, 10 Avenue of the Flags, Civic Center, San Rafael

Tickets: \$27 to \$65

Information: 499-6800, 479-8100, www.marinsymphony.org www.ticketmaster.com

More: Hear a preview of Ni's playing at www.naxos.com/artistinfo/bio547.htm

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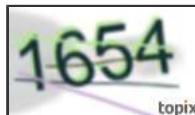
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