

# JOHANNA RÖHRIG

If you can catch an emotion, nothing else matters

*Photos by Raimar von Wienskowski*



**Hello Johanna, thank you for being with us. Please, tell us something about you.**

Thank you so much for having me! I'm a German violinist, and currently I'm based in London, where I'll finish my Master of Arts next year, at the Royal Academy of Music. I engage in a wide variety of musical projects; playing concerts as a soloist, chamber musician or in leading orchestras, playing some gigs, teaching kids and adults, and all my instagram stuff on the side. I really enjoy the mix!!

**You are very young and still you have achieved so much, what's your secret?**

Oh, thank you! Well when it comes to music I would say it is true that you have to start at an early age, which I was lucky to be able to do, thanks to my parents, who introduced music to me in a playful way when I was just over 3 years old. For most of the time I had amazing teachers – another important factor – and ever since I started my professional life, with the beginning of my Bachelors, I'd say I was what people call 'being proactive'; to openly and fearlessly approach other musicians, promoters and orchestras, to create opportunities rather than to wait for them, and to always put myself out there, to push myself out of my comfort zone. Of course, I failed in so many things I don't even want to start listing them, but at the end of the day

some things (concerts/invitations/ competitions) do work, and these are what take you forward and shape your career.

**When did you realise the violin was your future?**

When I was 6, already back then, when people would ask me what I wanted to be when I was grown up, I'd always tell them that I wanted to be either a teacher or an 'orchestra player'. I don't think I knew what I was talking about, as I wasn't even playing in any kind of orchestra at that age, but it seems like I was pretty sure about it! I wasn't one of those kids, though, who spent their childhood practicing, thank God. The violin throughout my childhood was something I did for fun and pleasure purely. Maybe around age 13, when I auditioned for the Hamburg Youth Orchestra, I got more serious about music; that's when I decided I wanted to study music at a University, when I changed to a better teacher and put a practice schedule on my door to monitor the hours I spent practicing each day.

**Tell me something about your debut at the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Are you ready for it? How are you preparing for it?**

I am definitely really excited for it! It's in about two weeks, and I can't wait to meet the orchestra, the conductor, and to play in the amazing setting that

the Henley Festival will be (I think there's a floating stage?). I like the pieces I'm going to play a lot, and I feel confident with them as I've played them in some smaller concerts over the last few weeks already. That's an important part of preparing for a performance; to get to know your repertoire under pressure. That really tells you whether your work on the piece so far has been good, whether your fingerings and bowing can stand some pressure. My dress is in place; an amazing designer (Katya Katya London) will support me with the most beautiful dress, and I'm getting to play on an incredible instrument for this concert, which will be lent to me by J&A Beare. All these things just make me look forward to the day a lot, so that they outweigh any nervousness!

**You are currently studying at the Royal Academy Music in London, how would you describe this experience?**

To study at the Royal Academy of Music was one of those unrealistic dreams I had growing up, stored somewhere in the back of my head. It never seemed achievable for me, as under no circumstances would I have been able to afford tuition, so for years I didn't give it any further thought.

When I moved to Freiburg to continue my Bachelors, a friend of mine all of a sudden moved to London to do an Erasmus exchange for half a year. Don't ask me why, but I hadn't even considered this possibility before. After her doing this, though, I applied as well, and although everyone told me how unlikely my application was to go through, as no one from Freiburg had ever been accepted to go to the RAM before, I found myself being a student at this incredible institution just half a year later. One thing led to the other, and now I'll be finishing my Masters next year. The school is beyond amazing, and every time I set foot into this building, I feel a wave of happiness rushing through my body; just the mere wondering of how on earth I've been so lucky to be able to learn from some of the greatest teachers and lecturers worldwide, and to make music with an incredible pool of ambitious international students.

**Are you performing at the moment?**

I am a musician, so I tend to get really unsatisfied if I don't get to be on stage frequently. The performances I play are of a various nature; there bigger ones (like solo performances with orchestras at various places or recitals with the piano) which happen less often as they need so much more preparation on my side, and smaller gigs that don't even require rehearsing before; these are just really fun to play, to make some spontaneous music and to practice my sight reading, haha.

**Do you prefer live performances or performing in the studio?**

I am most definitely the musician that wants to be on stage rather than in a studio. I love to have the audience's attention, to create magic with the energy

that arises when a hall full of people is waiting for the next note you play. These moments are the moments I practice so hard for, after all, as they give me so much energy (as much as they may take from me at the same time) and make me feel so grateful for the life I get to live.

**How are they different?**

Well, all of these things you simply don't come close to in a studio. In a studio it's all about reproducing something in the most perfect way possible, and with today's editing techniques so much of it isn't real anymore anyway. Especially the incredible sound that a great concert hall rewards you with is often added onto the track after recording it, so that the end result seems the same. But what do you have in the moment? I'm very much someone who looks for the magic in every moment, I love my instrument's sound, love to be able to create emotions and transport feelings, all of which you need an audience for, so studio work just... isn't my thing.

**Please tell us about your experience in Padova when you won the 2nd prize at the international competition Città di Padova, do you still come to Italy to perform sometimes?**

This competition was really, really exciting for me. I remember receiving the schedule for the first round weeks ahead, and upon learning that my time to play was going to be at 8 o'clock in the morning, I started getting up at 5am to adjust to these early times. The first round went well, the second was good too, so I reached the finals, which took place with a gap of a few months in between. For the finals my parents flew to Padova with me, and I remember my mother trying to calm me down when I was completely stressed out before the concert due to the organisation of the competition, to cut it very short. The concert itself (I like to always think of competitions as 'concerts', it takes some of the pressure away) was wonderful, it was my first time playing the Beethoven Concerto in an orchestra, one of my favourite concertos, and after winning the 2nd prize I had a lovely dinner with my parents and spent the next day in Venice with an Italian friend. Part of the prize was a recital tour that happened a few months later, so I played some recitals in Venice, Padova and Abano and spent some beautiful days in Italy! Looking back I should have stayed for some more days after the concerts were finished, as it's hard for me to really enjoy a city when I have a concert to play, but, oh well, you live and learn.

**Do you travel a lot for your concerts?**

I do get around quite a lot for my concerts, yes. So far I have been to most European countries, with concerts in Mexico and Russia planned for the next season. Last year I had the pleasure to play in Greece, and I visited Athens afterwards for a few days, which I found to be my absolute 'city of my heart'. I really like Spain/Italy as



well though, so I'm looking forward to going back there this summer!

#### **And your favourite stage?**

My home city, Hamburg, got a brand-new concert hall just a few years ago, the famous Elbphilharmonie. They opened with SUCH a big delay, that everyone was waiting for it for years, me included. I had the honour of playing there once, leading the Junge Norddeutsche Philharmonie, and now I'm hooked, full on, and would love to have the chance to perform there again! The hall itself is huge, and from all of the backstage area you have the most beautiful views over the water. AND the staff welcomes you with handmade chocolate and a bathtub in the soloist's rooms, so what more could you possibly want?

#### **How long do you study to prepare a performance?**

It really depends. Different performances require different preparation. As mentioned earlier, for some concerts it's enough to have the music scores on my iPad, others require some practice and rehearsals for example with a pianist, and for the big solo performances naturally I have to practice a lot. But then again, if I know the repertoire because I've played it before, less time will be necessary than if the piece is completely new to me, in which case I don't only try and get as much 'physical

practice' in as possible, but to mentally prepare the piece as well and learn about its background and the composer, to be able to give a performance as informed as possible.

#### **Do you have a 'routine' when you start a new piece?**

Not a set routine, I would say, but I do have my tools that I like to utilise when learning a new piece. I want and need to know what it sounds like before, obviously, as that helps the process so much. That only goes for the rough idea of it, though; I am not looking to copy someone else's interpretation of it. It's absolutely necessary in my opinion to be able to find suitable fingerings and bowings as well, which for me is the next step. I sit down and go through the piece in my head, trying out different options and trying to find what 'feels' best (in my head). Only when I have gone through all these steps I start the 'actual practice' with my violin. Of course some of the things I have decided on beforehand will not feel or work as expected, but that's not a problem; if something shows to be a bad idea I simply change it.

#### **Do you also write your own music?**

No, that's not something that I do. Apart from cadenzas (the part where the soloist is supposed to 'improvise' in a concerto) I haven't ever composed anything. I assume

I could write something in somebody else's 'musical language', something that may sound like a very bad Mozart or Bach, but that's just not my interest. No matter how hard I would try, I would still be so far from expressing things as beautifully and perfectly as all the great composers did. That's what I'm after in the end; I want to transport emotions. I'm searching for what's in the language, what's in between the lines of a piece. For that the language doesn't matter, which is why I'm gratefully working with what is out there in abundance!

#### **Where do you find inspiration for your music?**

Contrary to what many people imagine musicians work like, I don't go around actively looking for inspiration. What I try and express through my playing lies inside myself already. It's about emotions, wishes, desires, love and pain. When I'm in a good place, personally, I have access to these most inner feelings and desires, and then, when I'm in good shape physically, and part of that is being in a good shape technically, on the violin, then it's easy for me to communicate these inner emotions through my playing. So all I ever use as inspiration is inside of me already, my work is just to listen carefully, find access to it and then think about how to express it in the most understandable way.

#### **Why the violin?**

When I was 6 years old, I went to our local music school to do something that I'd freely translate as 'merry-go-round for instruments'. Every week I would get to take a different instrument home; from the cello and flute all the way to the double bass and the violin. The violin was the very first instrument I was allowed to take with me, and I loved it from the very first second. My mum always tells me how I came home that day, and, overly excited, couldn't wait to present my violin to her, so that I kneeled down outside in the garden, right next to where the trash is, and showed her everything that I had learned already!

#### **What is your advice to all the people around the world who would like to follow in your footsteps?**

20% is talent, the rest is hard work and hard work alone. If you want to be a musician, you need to be in love with what you do, you need to feel that burning desire to express yourself, so much that you practice and practice and practice until you have the technical ability to do so. If you think that's the case, then go for it. Don't listen to others around you doubting you, and make sure to get all the support you need. If you're loving it, if music is your life, you deserve all the support in the world! Make sure to always have that in your mind, and then go and practice!!

#### **What are your plans for the future?**

Next year I'll be finishing my Masters at the Royal Academy of Music in London, so I'll be here in the UK for at least another year. I'd love to do an Artist Diploma afterwards, but most likely I'll try and do that

in Hamburg, my hometown in Germany. I don't want to stay in the UK forever; with Brexit daunting and general work opportunities for me as a classical musician, it's just not nearly as attractive as Germany is. To make moving back and settling in Hamburg easier, I think it'd be great for me to have one more year at Uni there; to be in a pool of musicians and to hopefully bring my playing to the next level!

#### **Thanks again for this chat. Where can our readers follow your next steps?**

I have a website, Instagram and Youtube which I try to keep as updated as possible! Day to day stuff I upload to Instagram, but for a clear overview of my concerts my website [www.johannaroehrig.com](http://www.johannaroehrig.com) is definitely the best place to look at! Thanks so much for having me!!

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