

Posted on Sat, Jun. 04, 2005

A COMPOSER TAKES FLIGHT

EASTERN INFLUENCES ELEVATE WESTERNER'S ART

By Richard Scheinin

San José Mercury News

When Vivian Fung was a little girl, her mother sang a special Chinese lullaby to her at bedtime. When she was 17, starting to become a composer, Fung pulled it out of her memory and spun the song into a suite for cello.

Last summer, while studying Indonesian music in Bali, Fung heard a Javanese lullaby, which so enthralled her that she spun *it* into her latest work, "Butterfly Variations." The piece, written for string orchestra, chases the song, elusive as a butterfly, through an 18-minute set of six variations, drawing on the scales and interlocking rhythms of an Indonesian gamelan, or percussion orchestra.

It's the sort of musical synthesis that fascinates Fung, and it will receive its world premiere Sunday from the San Jose Chamber Orchestra at Le Petit Trianon.

At 30, Fung, born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta, is a hardworking achiever with a growing string of commissions and a faculty position at New York's Juilliard School, where she teaches music theory. But more and more, she finds herself taking risks, spreading her wings, as it were, and pursuing something *quite* elusive -- her own voice as a composer. For Fung, it means applying her classical training to the composing process while tapping into -- or rediscovering -- cultural roots that are still a mystery to her.

"I have this Western training and this Western upbringing," says Fung, who has been in and out of San Jose this past year as the chamber orchestra's 2004-05 composer-in-residence. "But there is this Asian identity that I'm discovering more and more every day. That's who I am. This idea of Asia and identity is blossoming right now for me and probably will continue to blossom for the next 10 years until I become a mature composer."

In July, Fung will travel with her parents -- who grew up in Saigon, married in Hong Kong and later moved to Canada -- to Beijing, where her first string quartet will receive its Asian premiere at the Forbidden City Concert Hall. Later this year and early in 2006, Fung will oversee first performances of other new works: One is for traditional Chinese instruments, including the stringed pipa and erhu; one is for clarinet and string quartet; one is for gamelan and electronics.

Back in New York, Fung is studying pipa and erhu and learning to speak Mandarin. (She grew up speaking Cantonese and English with her mother and father, a caterer and engineer). Deep into her Asian immersion, she says, it would be possible to grow self-conscious about her new musical influences.

Her strategy, she says, is to ``learn about Asia and gamelan, but then put it aside. Because if you don't, it will end up sounding like you are *inserting* them into your music."

The idea is to filter the influences through the imagination, so they ``come out as something new. I want to trust the instinctual power of my composing," Fung says, acknowledging that there's always the risk a piece could fall on its face. But, she adds, ``if it fails, it fails, and you just go on to something else."

Crowded field

It's a brave act, becoming a composer. Contrary to public assumptions, the classical composer is not a fading breed; there are thousands of them around the world, conservatory-trained, fighting for grants, commissions and public recognition. Piecing together a career takes perseverance and bureaucratic know-how: Fung's San Jose residency, for instance, is underwritten by the American Symphony League and Meet the Composer, a pair of non-profits.

Composers face a predicament: Audiences, more than at any other time in classical music's long history, would rather hear music of the past than music of the present.

Also, today's young composers are weighed down by the vast amounts of music that they listen to and study. The young Chopin lived in a sort of isolation in Warsaw; many works by Mozart and Beethoven were unfamiliar to him, and, as a result, he didn't have to compete, could let his imagination wander. Today's composers constantly are trying to measure up to music of past and present -- almost all of it available on CD.

Despite these challenges, Fung is finding a voice. In the past few years, since beginning her Asian quest, her music has taken on new casts, playing with thick moving textures that open up into shadowy sound scapes, with soft buzzings, swooping melodic lines and lots of those interlocking gamelan rhythms.

Much of her music, at least to these ears, summons images of dusk and reaches for hidden places and states of mind. It doesn't always get there -- Fung is a composer in process -- but, when it does, the results are enchanting. Her ``Chanted Rituals" for trumpet/fluegelhorn and percussion, from 2002, is full of floating, wide-open night sounds that build to taiko-drum intensity. Her ``Concertino Notturmo" for flute, harpsichord and strings -- premiered by the San Jose Chamber Orchestra in 1999 -- is a pulsing, scurrying piece that opens into airy flurries of shakuhachi-like flute, turning the Baroque instrumental configuration on its head.

One wonders what Fung will do with her upcoming piece for gamelan and electronics. She has been listening to electronica -- her boyfriend, a patent litigation lawyer, keeps the busy music professor in the loop on pop music trends -- but she isn't yet certain what sort of electronics she will employ. After years of intensive study and career building, she seems ready to risk walking off the proverbial cliff.

Barbara Day Turner, the San Jose Chamber Orchestra's conductor and music director, first heard Fung's music in 1998, when the young composer's ``Blaze" was performed by the Seattle Symphony, conducted by George Cleve, long-time leader of the old San Jose Symphony. Cleve tipped off Day Turner, who says the music was ``big, ballsy, and very colorful. All of her music has a real energy to it, which doesn't mean

it's all fast, but there's this *energy*."

Impressed by Fung's self-exploration and "unforced" incorporation of Asian influences, Day Turner says the composer's work is growing "deeper" and she uses words like "fabulous" and "devilish" to describe "Butterfly Variations," which was commissioned by the chamber orchestra.

Fung, for her part, clearly is excited and also amused by her new interests and penchant for taking risks. She was always "a good girl," she says. Piano studies began at age 4 in 1979; private lessons at age 7. She took up the cello at 13 and was always a top student, as well as president of the public speaking club in high school: "My mum thought that since I was a very shy child, it would get me out of my shell."

Entered Juilliard at 17

An accomplished pianist, winner of various competitions, Fung entered Juilliard in 1992 when she was 17. She studied for six years with the esteemed composer David Diamond, graduated with a doctorate in 2002 and immediately was hired onto the faculty.

Her Western training gives her a solid foundation for composition, she says, as well as the tools to experiment with new influences. She likes to point out that famous Chinese-born composers, including Tan Dun and Bright Sheng, have spent their lives moving from East to West, while she is moving from West to East. "Maybe we'll all wind up in the same place," she says, but she senses that her music feels different than theirs.

Moving forward, and eastward, Fung must realize that her musical life has been full of connections: There is her lifelong love of lullabies; there is her way of hearing music in the buzzings and flutterings of insects. When she was 9, she wrote "Insectsongs," a solo piano suite in three parts, titled "Crickets," "Mosquito Dance" and "Butterflies." Last summer in Bali, she was entranced by the sounds and flights of giant bees, spiders and butterflies. And now, here she is, unveiling her "Butterfly Variations."

The lullaby that inspired it is about a child who chases after a butterfly that's "flittering to and fro, to and fro," she says. "The child is trying to catch it and, of course, never can. And the message is that the child has to learn patience."

A patient artist, Fung is making her move -- and still chasing that butterfly.

The San Jose Chamber Orchestra

What Barbara Day Turner conducting the world premiere of "Butterfly Variations" by Vivian Fung, on a program with Tchaikovsky's "Serenade for Strings" and Vivaldi's Piccolo Concerto in C, with soloist Mimi Carlson

Where Le Petit Trianon, 72 N. Fifth St., San Jose

When 7 p.m. Sunday

Tickets \$20-\$40, (408) 295-4416
