

## FEATURE ARTICLE by Robert Schulslaper

### Flutophilia: A Conversation with Samantha Chang

Samantha Chang loves to play and perform on the flute and she wants everyone to share her enthusiasm for her instrument. She's also an entrepreneurial spirit adept at initiating and running a plethora of music-related enterprises. She's energetic—she'd have to be—outgoing, and still only in her early 20s.

*Q: Although most professional musicians start playing at an early age, you didn't take up the flute until you were 13.*

A: I was focused on the visual arts before I began to study music seriously. I used to be obsessed with the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo and spent countless hours on anatomical studies. In my spare time I would draw cartoons on my walls, which my parents did not appreciate. I'm actually glad I spent so much time earlier on in visual arts as it really ties in with music and helps me paint a better picture for the mood I'm trying to create whenever I perform.

In addition to my interest in the visual arts, I wanted to be President someday, so when I was older I studied commerce at the University of Toronto, Trinity College; however after three years I realized I couldn't live without music, so I started to research where I could go for a degree. (Before that I'd only studied flute privately.) The moment I realized music was the most important thing for me was when I started to wake up every day at 5 a.m. to practice flute, but refused to even consider rolling out of bed to finish an essay.

*Q: What was it about the flute that appealed to you?*

A: I wanted to sit with my friends in school and they all played flute, so it seemed the most logical choice at the time!

*Q: Are your parents musical?*

A: No, my parents are unfortunately tone deaf. I still remember people snickering at my dad when he sang the national anthem during the Canadian citizenship ceremony. People thought he was making fun of the anthem but honestly, he just couldn't tell how low/high and loud/soft he was. My mom thinks she's better, but I give her points for effort.

*Q: With whom did you study?*

A: My first teacher was Mizi Tan. He was a brilliant teacher and encouraged me to listen and watch others, not just flutists but all instrumentalists. He was also instrumental in helping me realize that musicians need to be generous and open-hearted, and he allowed me to study with many other teachers with no hard feelings. He had a very original approach. For example, I couldn't double-tongue to save my life, nor thought it necessary. After a whole year of failed attempts at double-tonguing, he

said that he would switch me to another teacher. He realized that scolding and prodding didn't work with me, but I adored my teacher so much that within a week I mastered the art of double-tonguing.

It was the same thing when I first started to learn music. Because I couldn't read music, nor could I remember fingerings on the flute (tuba players were even making fun of me), my ingenious teacher decided to use reverse psychology on me. He said that since I started so late there was no way I could ever catch up to others in the class so there was no point in trying. I was furious and started to work harder than ever. As we speak, I'm in the process of organizing a concert featuring his major compositions. It's a large event with more than 120 performers—orchestra, choir, vocal soloists, Peking opera soloist, solo violinist, solo flutists, chamber ensembles, and Chinese dizi soloist. This has always been a dream of my teacher's and I wanted to help him achieve it. Coincidentally, Mizi Tan is the same age as my dad. This is the best present I could think of giving him after all his years of putting up with me.

*Q: Besides Mizi Tan, who were some of your principal teachers?*

A: I've had a lot of teachers, and they've all been so helpful that I'd like to say a few words about each of them.

Margot Rydall was my Grade 10 RCM [Royal Conservatory of Music] examiner. I loved her critique so much, and my teacher Mr. Tan agreed, so I found her phone number and began studying with her. She opened my eyes to even more flute teachers out there including William Bennett and Peter Lloyd, and it was because of her that these great teachers were willing to teach me. Peter Lloyd is one of the kindest souls and musicians I have ever met. William Bennett was so much fun in class, we spent more time talking about art and literature than actually playing. Plus his daughter is one of my favorite writers. The first time I went to his house, I laughed at him and asked why he would buy five copies of the same book; boy, was I embarrassed when he said it was written by his daughter, Vanora Bennett. We share a love for Quentin Blake and I remember spending countless hours sitting on the floor staring at the illustrations on his fridge and rummaging through his bookcases.

Susan Hoepfner was someone I played for in a master class back in high school, and later I realized that I had a few of her CDs and decided to approach her for lessons. She's a very open and friendly flutist who taught me even more about stage presence and being exact in my playing.

Clare Southworth and Kate Hill were teachers I had at the Royal Academy. They were tough! But they certainly whipped me into shape. Kate reminds me so much of Peter, which makes sense when you consider how long they've worked together; it's fascinating how teachers and colleagues rub off on one another. I like to think you leave the best of yourself on people you've touched.

*Q: Were you enrolled at the Royal Academy when you studied with Clare Southworth and Kate Hill, or did they take you on as a private student?*

A: I was an "official" student at the Royal Academy of Music from 2007 to 2008. I finished the postgraduate diploma and licentiate in one year's time as I was urgently trying to finish the degree because living costs were so high.

My audition took place in Toronto; Christopher Elton (piano) and the then-vice principal (now principal) Jonathan Freeman-Attwood auditioned me. They were warm and inviting, and thankfully I'm not one to get nervous. We chatted after the audition and walked with Chris to purchase coffee; all in all, a relaxing audition. I played a piece by my teacher, Mizi Tan (*A Caged Partridge's Longing*, featured on my first CD), and Karg-Elert's *Sonata Appassionata*. I was supposed to play something else but my pianist was away and I had to quickly change the program.

Being at the academy was an exciting experience for me since it was the first time I actually studied music full-time in school. I felt out of place at first because everyone was so amazing. The teachers at the academy taught us everything including how to walk on stage and bow properly. It made me realize that just practicing by yourself in a small room all day is not what music is all about. I met lots of talented and hard-working people who motivated me to work harder. It was a competitive setting and there was a constant search for practice rooms; it seemed that there were never enough rooms. We would get to school before 7 a.m. just to line up for the best rooms. Sometimes during exam periods things got desperate, so students began practicing everywhere, stairwells, washrooms ...

It's no surprise that the academy has produced some of the best musicians. I loved my time there even though I was stressed. This is a place where everyone truly understood the stress and anxiety of learning pieces quickly and accurately while retaining expressive qualities. When we got a bad mark, we tended to hide out in Regent's Park, right behind the school. I still remember the week of technical exams, the benches in Regent's Park were packed with us moping and wallowing in our own misery. Watching the swans and ducks chase one another eventually cheered us all up.

The library at the academy was small; it felt like a scavenger hunt every time you'd have to go down into the basement searching for a score. But the collection was tremendous; you build great leg muscles at the academy because the elevators were so bloody slow that there was no point in taking them.

Teachers at the academy were hard to please, but incredibly supportive of all of us. My time at the academy was perhaps one of the best experiences of my life.

What else? Our practice rooms were so small; I always hogged room B59 because no one would fight me for this tight, cramped space. It was packed with a grand piano set in storage, with an upright on the other side. That left only enough space for one person to walk through. Basically, once I'd lift my flute I couldn't move and twirl around as I pleased. The acoustic was dry but it really improved my sound because I had to work that much harder to attain a good sound. There was a large window that was stuck because too much paint had been put on so that you could no longer open it. Despite all of that, I loved this room and my classmates always knew to find me there.

*Q. You've told me that Mizi Tan encouraged you to observe and learn from other instrumentalists. Are there any whom you particularly admire?*

A: When I lack inspiration, I go to Cirque du Soleil; they seem to have an abundance of imagination, creativity, and energy, which I hope to reflect in my performances. Also, I am constantly in awe of how musicians like Yo-Yo Ma make everything seem effortless. My flute god, Jean-Pierre Rampal, embodied

that same marvelous fluency. And I've never seen anyone who seems to love music as much as Marcel Moyse. Among conductors, Gergiev is so powerful; he seems to be able to draw the soul out of any piece. I hope to be like that someday with my own conducting.

*Q: The program notes to one of your recent concerts refer to your Samantha Fantasy, inspired by James Galway. There's also a connection to the Guinness Book of Records, but the details aren't spelled out. What's the story behind your piece?*

A: Back in 2009, in celebration of Galway's 70th birthday, and during the National Flute Association's convention in New York, Galway and composer David Overton arranged a flute choir piece to be performed by all those attending the convention. One thousand, nine hundred and eighty-nine flutists participated and the music was a collection of Galway's favorite melodies. When I released my second CD this year, I wanted a piece to interact with audience members and to give my students an opportunity on stage, so I arranged *Samantha Fantasy* with melodies from my childhood: cartoon melodies; Taiwanese, Japanese, and Chinese folk tunes; and classical favorites.

*Q: Sounds like fun. You seem to have the knack, if I can call it that, for devising and following through with all sorts of projects.*

A: Well, I like to keep busy. I love learning new repertoire; my own library at home contains more than 1,000 pieces of sheet music, so it made sense to introduce these wonderful compositions to the general public.

On a side note, I'm a bookworm and neat freak. I love reading and have more than 1,000 books and DVDs/CDs that are organized by category, and alphabetically by author. My parents keep warning me that our house is going to collapse someday. The main floor of the house is filled with my sheet music collection and the second floor is filled with my other, non-music library. My friends joke that everything in my house is alphabetized and has a set order. I used to have students who would secretly move things around and check if I would notice when I walked into the room. I am proud to say that I noticed every time and always quickly fixed the order back to its original state. It's no surprise that I worked for the company Indigo Books & Music over a period of eight years, and many employees said they have never met anyone like me who can organize and memorize where everything is.

Among my strictly musical activities, I'm still continuing my duties as the executive director of the Canadian Flute Association and I am in the process of planning the first-ever Canadian Flute Convention, set to take place in 2013. I'm currently working on details of the new music series I started called Music Tutti, which showcases performers from Ontario while donating all proceeds to a charitable organization. I'm also the publisher for Yikewen International, a new company focusing on publishing rare works for flute at an affordable price (we all know how expensive sheet music can be). I'm planning to record a CD of Mizi Tan's compositions. And I own a teaching studio filled with some great students. And I also do volunteering at retirement homes playing light classics for them.

What else music-wise am I doing? Oh, I record a lot of YouTube videos for fun. It started because my students wanted to hear certain pieces, so I just got going with my little home video camera. I think I have around 315 videos now.

I'm the conductor for the Ontario Cross-Cultural Music Society Youth Symphony Orchestra. They're a great group of kids to work with. I also am the assistant conductor to the Chinese Artists Society of Toronto Chamber Orchestra and am orchestral manager of the Chinese Artists Society of Toronto Philomusica Orchestra.

In my free time (ha-ha-ha, there's really not much of this left!) I enjoy learning new instruments so that as a conductor I'll have a much better understanding of the instrumentalists. But all in all, many of these projects can be expensive and I work really hard to teach as much as I can and do my other business during the daytime so that I can earn money and continue to perform and play.

*Q: It seems as if 24 hours in a day aren't enough for you, but somehow you've found the time to record two CDs. They're an entertaining blend of familiar and somewhat esoteric items that even flutists may not be aware of; how did you select the repertoire?*

A: Both CDs were created with my mom in mind. She loves putting in a CD in the evening and pretending she's at a concert, so I wanted to put a little bit of variety in each album while showcasing music that has influenced or touched me. I couldn't fit all of my favorites on one disc, hence my two CDs: *Flute Sketches* and *Sentimentale*.

In the first CD, I wanted to start with Mizi Tan's *A Caged Partridge's Longing* since he was my first flute teacher (actually first *music* teacher; I didn't even learn piano before this, and he was the one who suggested I learn after two months of studying with him because I was struggling so much with reading music). *A Caged Partridge's Longing* was also my audition piece for the Royal Academy of Music, so it made sense to perform it again after studying in England. Next, the Woodall was a gorgeous little English piece that I found and loved its simplicity so much that I thought it would be nice to record. I am a huge fan of Taffanel's cheesy virtuosic music; who doesn't love cheese? I love opera, and many of Taffanel's fantasies take themes from famous operas and glorify them. This type of music make my toes wiggle with joy, and its sappiness is so much fun to portray. Schulhoff's sonata was one of the pieces I performed in my graduation recital. I still remember when I was playing the second movement, a little kid got up and started dancing with his umbrella! I first heard Piazzolla on Yo-Yo Ma's CD *Histoire du Tango* and fell in love with his music. This arrangement of *Oblivion* was originally for violin, cello and piano, but I thought it would be fun to borrow this piece.

My favorite flute concerto is by Carl Reinecke, but it was too long for this album, so I decided to perform his Ballade. The reason I love the concerto so much was because when I was first learning this piece, William Bennett felt I wasn't emoting very well so he suggested I create a story to help me emote. I then made up this whole story about a fat purple dragon with green spikes falling in love with a princess and kidnapping her. The prince didn't realize at first that she was missing because he was playing around, but then he tries to rescue the princess, fails, and is captured and begs the dragon to let them both go. Then in the second movement—the most gorgeous second movement ever; beautiful interplay between

flute and cello—the dragon is sad and cries about how no one loves him, blah blah blah. Third movement, a fat female dragon comes along and they hit it off, everything ends happily ever after, and so on. I think I even drew pictures of the fat dragon somewhere. Anyway, the Ballade is also very emotional and I love German-Romantic repertoire when it comes down to it.

The Exodus Partita by Tod Paul Dorozio was an interesting piece written by my friend who worked as a sales clerk at Remenyi's music store; I spent so much money there that he knew me on a first-name basis. Later on I found out he was a composer and volunteered to play his work. I like to create and share music and this is my way of doing so. Also, I wanted to support fellow Canadians and introduce new composers and repertoire. Lastly, the Goossens was one of my greatest finds. He's like the Monet of musicians. In other words, just as Monet was the master of Impressionism in painting, Goossens, despite being English, mastered musical Impressionism. He evokes the styles of Debussy and Ravel so beautifully. Each composition is a painting, an interpretation of light. I loved Goossens even more when I found out how he was forced to resign because of a scandal: an artist with character.

While I was working on the first album, I realized I could never fit all of my favorites into one disc, so that's when *Sentimentale* was created. I chose my favorite movements from Bolling's *Jazz Suite: Sentimentale*, *Irlandaise*, and *Fugace*, which were brilliantly performed by my flute god Jean-Pierre Rampal, but I wanted my version of them. If I had more time, I would have squeezed *Javanaise* onto this disc, but in the end, I just performed it at the CD release concert instead. That was back on April 16, 2011, at Koerner Hall, at the Royal Conservatory of Music. I'm proud to say that it was a full house and all the performers were ecstatic to perform for 1,000 people.

Doppler is another of those cheesy composers I adore. For the Andante and Rondo, I decided to ask the violin to play the second flute part so that the different lines and voices could shine through. Another small piece by Dorozio, then fellow flutist Christopher Lee and I made some changes to the Hugues fantasy, another operatic piece, based on Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*; loads of fun, and loads of notes. Next, a piece featuring my alto flute playing, *Two Lyrics of Yi People* by Mizi Tan, followed by more operatic inspirations—Bizet's intermezzo from *Carmen* and Borne's fantasy on themes from *Carmen*. And, lastly, Ibert's *Deux Interludes*, a beautiful French composition with a touch of Spanish flair.

As a bonus, besides performing so much of my favorite repertoire on *Sentimentale*, I had the thrill of working with such a great engineer, Mark Camilleri, who I also knew was an *amazing* pianist. Therefore I couldn't pass up the chance to get him and his boys to play on this disc.

*Q: On your website there's a little motto at the bottom of the home page, Music=Life. As mathematicians and physicists might say, that's an elegant equation.*

*A: I think everything in my daily life can be associated with music. Often when I'm playing, images of art or of books will loom into my head. Essentially, all of my experiences provide a source of enrichment and, I hope, add depth and maturity to my performances.*

**FLUTE SKETCHES** • Samantha Chang (fl); Khai Nguyen (vn); Amy Laing (vc); Ellen Meyer (pn) • SAMANTHA CHANG 326118 (62:29)

**TAN** *A Caged Partridge's Longing*. **WOODALL** Serenade. **TAFFANEL** *Fantasy on Mignon*. **SCHULHOFF** Sonata. **PIAZZOLLA** *Oblivi3n*. **REINECKE** Ballade. **DOROZIO** *Exodus Partita*. **GOOSSENS** *4 Sketches: Romance; Humoreske*

**SENTIMENTALE** • Samantha Chang (fl); <sup>1</sup>Mark Camilleri (pn); <sup>1</sup>John Maharaj (db); <sup>1</sup>Mark Inneo (drums); <sup>2,7</sup>Conrad Chow (vn); <sup>2,7</sup>Ellen Meyer (pn); <sup>3</sup>Christopher Lee (fl); <sup>3,4,6</sup>Dona Jean Clary (pn); <sup>5</sup>Chen Liu (pn) • SAMANTHA CHANG 270222 (67:08)

<sup>1</sup>**BOLLING** Suite for Flute and Jazz Piano Trio: *Sentimentale; Irlandaise; Fugace*. <sup>2</sup>**DOPPLER** Andante and Rondo. <sup>3</sup>**DOROZIO** *Pescara Pastorale*. <sup>3</sup>**HUGUES** *Grand Concerto Fantasy on Themes from Verdi's Un Ballo in Maschera*. <sup>4</sup>**TAN** *2 Lyrics of Yi People*. <sup>5</sup>**BIZET** Intermezzo from *Carmen*. <sup>6</sup>**BORNE** *Fantaisie Brilliante on Themes from Bizet's Carmen*. <sup>7</sup>**IBERT** *2 Interludes*

This article originally appeared in Issue 35:3 (Jan/Feb 2012) of *Fanfare Magazine*.