

East Meets West: Historical Keyboardist Anastasia Chin

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(Article translated from Chinese by Anastasia Chin)

It was not “love at first sight”, but rather “familiarity breeds fondness” that led Singaporean Anastasia Chin to early keyboard instruments. Part “musical rhetorician” and part “musical archeologist”, she hopes to bring listeners closer to the sounds and philosophies of 17th to 19th century Western European classical music (“early music”) through historical keyboard instruments and historically-informed performance practices.

A graduate of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in Singapore, Chin is currently based in the United States. With the Baroque harpsichord (popular from about 1600–1750) and Classical fortepiano (popular from about 1750–1825) as her daily companions, it is as though she lives in a time capsule in Europe hundreds of years ago. She performs and researches the music and keyboard instruments of the 17th to 19th centuries, much like a “musical archeologist”.

Chin’s path to the harpsichord and fortepiano is unusual. While studying for a Bachelor’s degree in Piano Performance at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, Chin enrolled in the Conservatory’s choir and was introduced to Renaissance choral music (spanning the 15th and 16th centuries) and fell in love with it. At the same time, she was also introduced to the harpsichord, but the instrument did not attract her at first. After graduating, she traveled to the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music to audition for a Master’s degree in piano performance.

“I was considering taking early music voice as a second major or my minor, so I met with the Historical Performance Institute faculty, including renowned harpsichordist and fortepianist, Elisabeth Wright,” Chin said. “Professor Wright asked me if I would like to try out the harpsichord or fortepiano in her office. I had never seen, played, or heard a fortepiano before, but I was curious. I sat down at the fortepiano and started to play a set of Mozart variations that I had just performed at my piano audition. After the 14-minute piece during which I was figuring out the instrument as I went along, she took me to the admissions office and asked the clerk to register me as a fortepiano Master’s degree applicant. I was shocked; did I really just do an impromptu audition without realizing it?”

Chin was accepted to the Jacobs School of Music as a Master’s student in both piano and fortepiano, thus beginning her graduate studies as a double major.

From fortepiano to harpsichord: the allure of rhetoric

As one of only two fortepiano majors in Wright’s combined harpsichord and fortepiano studio, Chin attended classes with harpsichord majors. “Professor Wright’s harpsichord performances are characterized by an extraordinarily beautiful, singing, limpid, and pearly sound, as well as a natural elegance and poise that transports listeners back to the time periods in which this music was originally heard. She would also frequently reference and demonstrate French Baroque court dances when teaching us about French Baroque harpsichord music. I was immediately captivated by that musical style and began playing

harpsichord for chamber music.” Such was Chin’s newfound love for the harpsichord that she made the decision to pursue a Performer Diploma in harpsichord while writing her fortepiano doctoral dissertation.

“The concept of Ancient Greek rhetoric and oratory is crucial to understanding Baroque and Classical music,” Chin explained. “Composers and audiences of the 17th to 19th centuries were educated in the classical art of rhetoric or persuasion. As such, the relationship between text and music was very intertwined and formed the basis of musical phrases, accents, inflection, punctuation, articulation, and even the formal structure of a piece of music. This is a very different approach to understanding music than later eras, resembling a musical oration.” Chin explains that this concept of persuasion allows her to improvise musical ornaments and decorations while performing the music, granting a much higher degree of personalization than what performers are allowed to do in later classical music.

Exploring the mysteries of “musical archeology”

For Chin, studying early music is like studying “musical archeology”. In addition to studying the instruments used by and known to composers in the 17th to 19th centuries, she also researches contemporaneous sociocultural backgrounds and contexts in order to better understand the musical intentions of the composers. In performance, Chin strives to convey the musical language of the composers’ time, so as to create a listening experience that is closer to history for the audience.

“Composers of the time often did not specify harpsichord, clavichord, or fortepiano in the scores of their keyboard works. This was partly to make more sales, but also to allow for flexibility in performance and performer input. Performers of the time were often the composers themselves, or other highly educated musicians who were expected to make informed musical and stylistic decisions. In the present day, it becomes a responsibility for today’s performers to thoroughly understand the historical contexts and musical meaning of the compositions.”

Historically-informed performance has been gaining momentum in Europe and the United States over the past several decades. More and more people hope to hear “authentic” early music, so Chin often tours in Indiana, New York, California and Oregon among other places to perform. However, historical keyboard instruments are rare, so Chin sometimes needs to travel with her own instruments, loading them into large SUVs or cargo vans.

Interestingly, Chin’s fortepiano is the very instrument that she played at her impromptu audition at the Jacobs School of Music, and which used to belong to her mentor. A few years ago, Wright retired from teaching at the university and sold the instrument to her. The instrument carries special significance as the first fortepiano Chin ever played and has known since the beginning of her historical keyboard journey. This instrument is a modern replica made by Kenneth Bakeman of Mozart’s Anton Walter fortepiano, which he acquired in 1782 and played until his death in 1791. The original instrument is housed in the Mozarteum museum in Salzburg, Austria.