

Frederic Chiu

With a vibrant concert schedule, a legacy of 28 CDs, and a stream of superlatives from major critics around the globe, pianist Frederic Chiu occupies a special place in the world of classical music. In an eclectic career encompassing unusual collaborations and little-played repertoire, along with explorations into the psychology of performance, Mr. Chiu has demonstrated an ability to go beyond boundaries. Not coincidentally, this long-term Yamaha Artist also helped the instrument establish its brand as one of the world's great piano makers by providing important feedback to technicians as they developed the newest models, both acoustic, digital and hybrid.

The accolades tell part of the story. Reviewers have called his recorded performances “playing on an exalted level” (*Fanfare*), and “stunningly virtuosic... [with a] sense of spontaneity [that] is often incandescent” (*BBC Music Magazine*). *The New Yorker* included his version of Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage, Italie* among their “Best Classical Albums of 2001.” His Mendelssohn Sonatas—selected as “Record of the Year” by *Stereo Review*—became a best-seller in the classical piano category.

Live performances continue to play a major role in his life. Mr. Chiu has toured Europe and the U.S. with the Orchestre de Bretagne and Stefan Sanderling. He has played with the Hartford Symphony, Dayton Philharmonic, Kansas City Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony, BBC Scottish Symphony, BBC Concert Orchestra, Estonia National Symphony, China National Symphony, the FOSJE Orquesta in Ecuador, among others. In recital he performs in the world's most prestigious halls including the Berlin Philharmonic, Kioi and Suntory Halls in Tokyo, Lincoln Center in New York and Kennedy Center in Washington DC. Mr. Chiu's musical partners include Joshua Bell, Pierre Amoyal, Elmar Oliveira, Gary Hoffman, David Krakauer, Matt Haimovitz and the St. Lawrence, Shanghai and Daedalus string quartets. He has worked with many composers, including George Crumb, Frederick Rzewsky, Bright Sheng, Gao Ping and David Benoit.

But recordings have always represented a strikingly unique aspect of his life's work. His most recent discs include Liszt's arrangement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, Saint-Saën's *Carnival of the Animals* (with storyteller David Gonzalez), and *Hymns and Dervishes*—music by Gurdjieff and de Hartmann (out on Centaur in February 2016). The latter demonstrates the pianist's ongoing adventurousness.

Mr. Chiu's interest in the mystical Gurdjieff was sparked by philosophical pursuits, encourage by a book written by Gurdjieff student Thomas de Hartmann about his life with his teacher. “I read it,” he reports Mr. Chiu, “realized he was also a composer, and found a bunch of scores in the Library of Congress.” Gurdjieff's music had been notated and arranged by de Hartmann, a student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory when Prokofiev was also there. In an effort to do justice to the music,

Mr. Chiu began studying Middle Eastern scales. “I consulted Julien Weiss, who started a Middle Eastern musical ensemble called Al Kindi, and he gave me a lot of insights.” The result is a recording that uses both standard “equal temperament,” and alternate tunings, which give the music “a sense of inspiration and expiration. We had a tuner adjust the piano before each piece,” he explains.

That presented a new challenge: how to create that unusual musical context in live performance. “I was able to accomplish the right effect using a Yamaha keyboard that allowed changes of intonation on individual pitches,” he reports. “Through the help of Yamaha’s technicians, I found that I could go back and forth between the sound of an acoustic instrument in equal temperament and a midi instrument with delicately shaded tunings. The changed scales have specific references to particular Middle Eastern traditions, and the sound really gets to your gut somehow. It’s subtle. Listeners don’t think, ‘That’s a nice intonation.’ Yet they know something different is going on. It’s a great effect.”

Frederic Chiu’s early career followed traditional avenues. His awards and competition wins included the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant, Juilliard’s Petschek Award, and wins at contests run by the Music Teachers National Association and the Beethoven Foundation (now the American Pianists Association). He was a “non-winner” of the 1993 Van Cliburn Competition, where his elimination from the finals caused an uproar in the press.

“They were very supportive afterward,” recalls Mr. Chiu. “They had me back in Ft. Worth every year for eight or ten years, playing, going to schools, doing outreach. I was very happy doing that.”

Yet, being out of the competition circuit gave him the freedom to explore music that was not “the core repertoire” for those contests. That included transcriptions—his first foray into recording—and the music of Prokofiev, for which he has been acclaimed.

Another area of interest involves the intricacies of the performing experience. “In my workshops,” he says, “I deal with the balance between body, mind and heart. I’ve done a lot of thinking and analysis from a pianist’s perspective, especially using ‘affect theory,’ as developed by Dr. Silvan Tomkins.

Frederic Chiu has been a Yamaha Artist since 1988, when he began practicing on pianos in the company’s Paris studios during his years living in France. “I was one of the first people to buy a *GranTouch*,” he reveals. “I saw a prototype made for Sviatoslav Richter, who needed a practice piano for traveling. I practiced exclusively on one for years, using it as a silent keyboard, for low-volume practicing—which pushes your muscles—and employing earphones to develop right brain/left brain coordination. Over the years, I also witnessed the development of the CFX, an amazing instrument.”

One of the fruits of that association is the forthcoming Yamaha recording, *Frederic Chiu: Distant Voices*, which includes piano music of Claude Debussy and Gao Ping. Technological advances have been stunning, he says. "In just three days we were able to produce an audio product, a video shoot, and a Disklavier program," he says with amazement.

What is next on the horizon? No doubt there will be ongoing collaborations, such as his work with Shakespearean actor Brian Bedford, hip-hop artist Socalled, and psychologist/writer/clown Howard Buten. And provocative audience-participation projects, like his ongoing series, *Classical Smackdown* (ClassicalSmackdown.com). As always, Mr. Chiu will also find time for writing, painting and cooking, and leading activities at Beechwood Arts, an arts immersion non-profit he co-founded with his wife, Jeanine Esposito, in Connecticut, his current home. A major addition to his activities is his teaching – he is on the faculty at both Carnegie Mellon University, as well as The Hartt School. He accepts a limited number of undergraduate and graduate students, who learn the lesson that Chiu himself has learned: Music is not an escape from life; it is a doorway into life.