

Algonquin alumna achieves international acclaim, remembers local roots

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By Lori Berkey, Contributing Writer



Cynthia Lee Wong relaxes under the grand piano after a concert in New York in 2008. (Photo/George J. Kunze)

Northborough – Sitting on her father’s lap while he played the piano is a fond memory for Algonquin Regional High School alumna Cynthia Lee Wong. Although her dad wasn’t a professional pianist, his love of filling their home with his renditions of Chopin pieces made it natural for her to take to playing the instrument. She developed a lifelong passion for playing and composing music and has gained international acclaim for her works.

Having started to play the piano at age 6, Wong experienced early success. Her musical skills developed as she began taking piano, composition and violin lessons at the New England Conservatory (NEC) Preparatory School. By the time she was 8, she was thoroughly rapt by what her NEC composition instructor, Ginny Latts, was teaching her.

“She and I created stories together, usually based on animal characters, and improvised to various scenarios, such as a cat chasing a mouse,” Wong said. “That’s a familiar image which you find in “Tom and Jerry” cartoons. It’s instantly understandable to a child.”

Sticking with music, Wong played in her middle school jazz band in Northborough and went on to sing in the Camerata Choir at Algonquin Regional High School.

Throughout middle and high school, she continued at NEC, where her piano teacher



Wong on the streets of San Francisco in 2015. (Photo/Betty Lee)

worked with her on playing her own music. She took Wong to music festivals and introduced to her international opportunities that enabled her to travel to Spain, Canada and Russia. She taught her that there’s a difference between playing like a composer and playing like a pianist.

“I had to switch modes to think like a performer in order to bring out the best interpretation of my own piece,” Wong said. “There’s an art to making every moment special.”

Her practice began paying off. As a teenager, she was making local headlines for her musical accomplishments. Her success in competitions landed her a tour in Moscow and a performance at Weill Hall, at Carnegie Hall.

At 17, Wong won the 1999 ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composers Award, and the next year, her “Piano Concerto No. 2” was premiered at Jordan Hall with the Youth Philharmonic Orchestra.

Her father's influence remains profound. After his passing, she composed a special tribute to him, "Memoriam," for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra's 40th anniversary in 2011. The piece is dedicated to her father, to those lost to cancer and to caregivers. "Memoriam" had its world premiere on opening night at Stern Auditorium, Carnegie Hall.

Since then, Wong has achieved numerous orchestral commissions written for major symphony orchestras. Last September, she was awarded her Ph.D. in music composition from the City University of New York, and recently began a tenure-track position as assistant professor of music composition at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

As someone who loves the challenge of creating something that can be enjoyed by others, it was sometimes difficult for Cynthia to tame her thirst for composing while focused on her dissertation.

"The creative urge keeps me awake at night," she said. "I've had some terrible bouts of insomnia, where I'd be wide awake from 3 to 5 a.m. There'd be some idea that refuses to go away unless I write it down."

Her creativity doesn't stop with music. She developed an interest in drawing and creative writing. Her doodles led her to creating cartoons for the Juilliard Journal, which have also been award-winning.

Now living across the country, Wong was pleased to provide an update on her achievements and pass on a message to her hometown.

"I hope to share my love of music and the arts with readers of Northborough, the surrounding communities, and indeed, the whole world," she said. "I believe the arts can fulfill an important humanitarian role, especially during increasingly violent, difficult and unpredictable times."

To learn more about Wong, visit <http://cynthialeewong.com>.