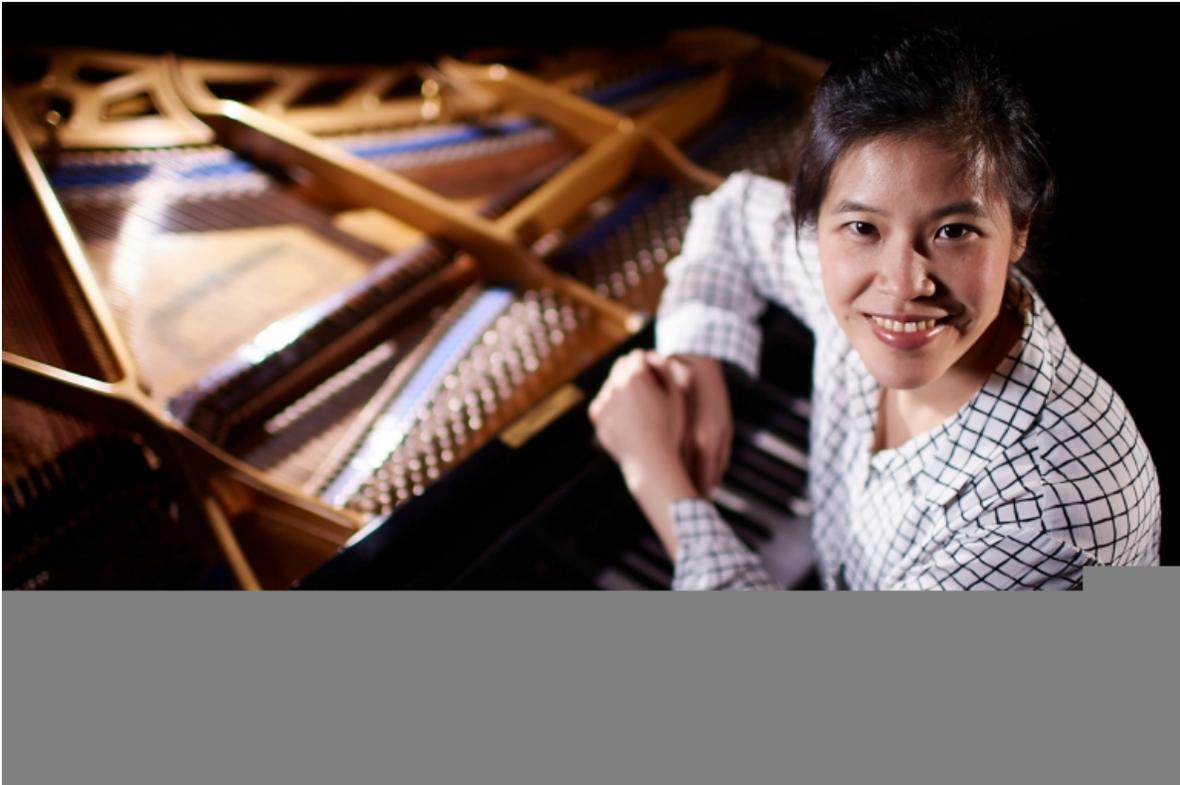


New Face: Cynthia Wong

From premiering new work at Carnegie Hall to collaborating on the Nextet new music concert series, this professor is proof classical composers are alive and kicking.

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Cynthia Wong, assistant professor of composition. (Josh Hawkins/UNLV Creative Services)

Music composition professor Cynthia Wong recently made the move to sunny Las Vegas following an East Coast upbringing, and brought with her the secrets to her success — stepping out of her comfort zone, overcoming procrastination, believing in herself, and challenging herself to grow.

Why UNLV?

Prior to UNLV, I taught K-12 students at New England Conservatory Preparatory School and non-music majors at Baruch College in New York. Now at UNLV, I enjoy teaching composition and theory to music majors at undergraduate and graduate levels. One of the rewards of teaching is that I learn a lot from my students. At UNLV, I find the diverse student body offers the energy, inspiration, and potential for the

development of new ideas, discoveries, and perspectives. I am honored to join the talented and supportive faculty and staff at UNLV's School of Music. It is fun collaborating with them, especially on the Nextet new music concert series, which I co-direct with composer Charles Halka.

Lastly, being a bike commuter, I welcome the warmer climate. I can now tease my East Coast friends and family about how much I'm enjoying sunny Vegas!

What about UNLV strikes you as different from other places you have worked or where you went to school?

UNLV's School of Music is relatively young. This differs from Juilliard and New England Conservatory, which have been around for over a hundred years. This means the School of Music is still growing, and being part of its development is very exciting!

Where did you grow up?

I was born in upstate New York but grew up in Massachusetts. In my teens, I lived in Manhattan to study at Juilliard.

What's the biggest challenge in your field?

That really depends on what stage a composer is experiencing in his or her life. When you're a novice, the challenge is developing your craft. The more skills you've mastered, the more techniques you have at your disposal. Finding your voice and keeping the process fresh are additional challenges. You have to stay inspired, creative, and alert. You also have to invest time, patience, and effort to create something of substance and worth.

There's also a huge practical challenge for composers — finding opportunities to have your music premiered. Composing is like theater, a living art. You learn how to improve your music when you hear it come to life.

What inspired you to get into your field?

Composing has always been a part of me. I began composition lessons when I was 8, but I was already imagining music before then. Composition grew out of my enjoyment of experimenting and improvising at the keyboard.

Proudest moment in your life?

It's probably the premiere of my composition *Memoriam*, which was performed by Orpheus Chamber Orchestra on opening night at Carnegie Hall. *Memoriam* is

dedicated to my father and those we have lost to cancer as well as to caregivers.

My father, who had always supported my musical aspirations, heard only the first two minutes of the piece while it was still a work-in-progress. He passed on before it was finished. So, that premiere is very special and personal to me. It's not as flashy as other compositions of mine, but it's one of the most meaningful.

One tip for success?

Don't let fear hold you back. If you want to do something, commit to it fully and responsibly. This includes stepping out of your comfort zone, overcoming procrastination, believing in yourself, and challenging yourself to grow. You'll discover soon enough whether you truly want to do it for the rest of your life. If you skimp on the effort, you're only cheating yourself. Even if you fail, you would've learned from the experience. Life is short, and every moment is precious.

Who was your favorite professor and why?

I've been blessed by so many wonderful teachers, it's hard to choose one! One of my favorites is Samuel Adler, my first composition teacher at Juilliard. He was great because he not only knew his craft, but he taught clearly, consistently, and with a sense of humor. I always looked forward to his lessons because I knew I would learn something new. Moreover, he truly cares about his students. He's the kind of teacher who is there for you even after you've graduated. I really respect him as a role model. That's why I aspire to be as nurturing and dedicated toward my students as Sam.

Who is your hero?

I feel heroes are ones who display resilience and mettle. They not only rise above hardship but positively impact other people's lives. These heroes include my parents and another mentor who ran a visual arts foundation and made anonymous contributions to the arts. I admire them because despite hardships they've faced, they've helped others in truly meaningful ways. These heroes have inspired me to be a better person and have always supported my dreams.

Pastime or hobbies?

My mind is extremely restless — it always wants to create, no matter where I am. So, when my brain's exhausted from composing, I turn to drawing and creative writing. I always doodled in classes and imagined stories at night before falling asleep. Even during grad school, I was brainstorming stories while riding the New York subway. The doodling led to creating cartoons for the *Juilliard Journal*. (Eventually, I

was commissioned for prints by the head of Juilliard's Jerome L. Greene Foundation. Apparently, my cartoons are hanging in her office.)

I also used to experiment with fiction by posting stories online under a pen name just to get people's reactions. One was a morbid horror story. Another was a parody, using the same characters. It got a lot of laughs. One reviewer wrote she laughed so hard, she nearly snorted up her orange juice! The last was a supernatural romance. The romance generated over 400 reviews — probably because it was so cheesy. One reader, a student from Australia, interviewed me for an academic assignment, but I never gave my real name. Probably just as well since I never finished any of the stories and worse, left my poor readers on cliffhangers!

Tell us about a time in your life when you have been daring?

In 2012, I decided to participate in the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop. The BMI Workshop is associated with composer Alan Mencken (Disney musicals *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*) and hosts master classes with composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim (*Sweeney Todd*, *Into the Woods*).

The workshop experience was artistically daring since I'd never composed musical theater before. My experience up to that point was avant-garde instrumental composition. Suddenly, I was learning songwriting, collaborating with lyricists and librettists, and composing with new ears! It was one of the most fun and inspiring experiences in my life.

Tell us about an object in your office that has significance for you and why.

There's a candle in my office that is special because a student gave it to me over the holiday and told me how much she appreciates having me at UNLV. So, seeing the candle on my desk reminds me of my purpose as a teacher and why what I do is meaningful.