

Interview with Elena Cheah

Jury member in the category Piano Trio

Interviewer: Jennifer Ronyak, Senior Scientist at *Institute 14: Aesthetics of Music*

Jennifer Ronyak (JR): Thank you, Elena Cheah, for serving on the jury and for being here. I thought I'd start by asking you about the diversity of approaches that you've seen from the different trios. In an international competition, you have trios from widely divergent places – perhaps even different schools of playing. Could you reflect on this aspect of the competition?

Elena Cheah (EC): There have been very divergent styles, some real extremes. There was a group that played together very well, and they had thought about everything, but their aesthetic was very different than a German-Austrian aesthetic. They didn't advance to the second round. There was a group that stylistically embraced Schubert – seemed to eat, drink, and breathe Schubert. But there were other issues, and they also didn't pass to the second round.

JR: Interesting.

EC: I also find that style is something that only comes after many years of performing and reflection on your own performance experience, as well as hearing a lot of other things. Some of these groups are not yet at a stage where they have a particular style. There were also diverging styles in one group.

JR: I can imagine that. It is interesting that you mentioned a group that seemed to “eat, drink, and breathe” Schubert, since in the second round, the groups were required to play the two Schubert trios. We heard the B flat and E flat major trios. What aspects of these two trios struck you as most important to convey in performance, as a juror?

EC: Some of the aspects that are important to me are, for one, the melodic singing quality. Since Schubert was a great Lied composer, so much of his chamber music reflects this. Also, the dance-like qualities. There are even some real folk dances in there, like *Ländler*. Those are things that need to be felt quite naturally. And one thing that makes Schubert particularly difficult is a certain simplicity of structure in phrasing in melodies, that makes it too easy to go too far in one direction or another – what I would call the wrong kind of simple. For example, in the difference between major and minor in Schubert, which comes up constantly, it is something so difficult to define, especially in words...

JR: That's the trouble with this – words about music.

EC: Yes. And dancing about architecture. But moving through major and minor has to have this perfect naturalness and ease – as it is so natural to be awake, and then asleep, both are part of life – yet each one has to have its own specific flavor. If you overdo that flavor, if it is too salty or too sweet, and then you don't get the subtle beauty, the subtle difference. These are the most

difficult aspects to pin down, but they are the aspects that make great interpreters to what they are.

JR: Your very apt use of metaphor reminds me that you have been active as a writer. Could you speak a bit about your activity in that area and how you see it in relationship to your activity as a performer?

EC: For me writing is like an inward retreat. Performing and teaching are very extroverted. I always felt that I have these two extremes. I need to be with people, I need to be with a group to make something happen; I enjoy performing. It is really important for me to have a stillness – this doing nothing – to reflect on so many things. We forget in this day and age that so many great works of art have come as a result of doing nothing for long periods of time – and being confused and being uncertain.

JR: Yes.

EC: And in education there is such a tendency to fill up the curriculum today – it is so packed. There is no time to reflect, to let everything sit and just breathe out. So my writing is like breathing out and like looking inwards, whatever it is that I am writing about.

JR: Thank you. Your comments here remind me also of your role as a pedagogue. I am wondering what you feel is especially important in the realm of chamber music teaching.

EC: I was reminded this morning how much more comfortable I am as a teacher than a judge. In chamber music, first of all, you have to be lucky to find partners who fit. It really is a matter of luck. There were some groups here who were very uneven. One was particularly good, or two were particularly good, but not the whole group. Or where the style was just very different between the two string players. Personally, I think there is a kind of chemistry that either works or doesn't. You can rehearse and rehearse and you may not achieve this homogeneous sound and style.

JR: Yes. What other aspects are important to your role as a chamber music teacher?

EC: I don't teach chamber music very often. But when I do, I try to activate the students' fantasies. I ask them a lot of questions to see how much they know about the score, the history, the time frame. To get them to know more: what an accent means in Schubert, what it means in Beethoven – differences like that. And of course there are all sorts of nit-picky details that you can get into after you've decided on a large structure. You have to talk about dynamics, articulation, how you begin, how you end them. It is a long list.

JR: It is such a detailed field of work. Moving on to your role as a cellist, how might you describe the role of the cello in trios? What do you find most stirring about that role – not just in Schubert, but in the nineteenth-century piano repertoire?

EC: The nineteenth-century is where the cello starts to become interesting in the piano trio. Before that the cello just plays the left hand of the piano, and a few legato lines that the piano

cannot sing. So, it is an exciting period. As one cellist pointed out today, when he asked: “How do I deepen my knowledge of Schubert as a cellist, when there is just this one sonata, the Arpeggione sonata?” The sonatas are one way to get to know these composers more deeply, since it is also the beginning of the solo role of the cello during this period.

JR: Given that Schubert imports music from his songs into his chamber music, how do you feel about the option of transcribed songs for cello as a way of getting to know Schubert?

EC: I think it is a great exercise, although I don’t know about the performability. I think it varies – I have done it with Charles Ives songs, and I think there are songs that can work very well for string instruments. But I think it is a great way to learn to sing on a string instrument.

JR: Cool. When it comes to the piano repertoire more broadly, do you have some earlier trios or current groups that you find particularly interesting?

EC: Well, I grew up with the Beaux Arts Trio. They were my favorite for a long time. And really, I haven’t closely followed any other professional piano trio. I also grew up with these old recordings of thrown-together soloists, such as Rubinstein and Heifetz. Although they probably only rehearsed once, they still made a fabulous recording!

JR: This brings us back to the question of how long a chamber ensemble needs to have rehearsed and played together. Can it sometimes actually be better to have played together less, to perhaps spark new ideas?

EC: I wouldn’t say it is better. But it isn’t necessarily better to spend longer together. Not every group develops further the longer they stay together. Some groups develop in the opposite direction. And some groups really grow into their sound. I play in a quartet, for example. The three of them were already together, and I replaced the former cellist. And we came together almost instantly. What has changed over time is that there is more trust. Now, we can be more spontaneous. I know that if I take a little time, they will wait for me. Everybody is listening so well, and we know each other’s nuances well enough that we can know what is coming. So that’s the beauty of staying together.

JR: Over the course of the career, you have been involved with projects reaching outside of the classical canon. Could you say a bit about the importance of that kind of work in relationship to classical music or chamber music, and what kind of opportunities it presents to artists?

EC: I think, actually, that the borders are disintegrating. I see more and more cross-over and world music in the classical scene, and less arrogance about including various kinds of music in respected concert halls. So it can be on a very commercial level or more a mixture of classical and world music, and everything in between. For me, it is part of what I like to do, and that’s it. I encourage my students to do whatever they enjoy doing. I had to come to classical music as if I was learning another language, even though I grew up with it. But then, when I came to Germany when I was twenty, I felt like I had a whole language to learn: something similar, but not what I grew up with – actually completely different. And some of these other genres are easy

because they are familiar. So I encourage my students to play what comes naturally to them and what is fun.

JR: As far as some of the more recent repertoire that has been in the competition so far, what have you found particularly inspiring or unusual?

EC: In the first round I found the choices were very conservative. A lot of people chose to play Shostakovich op. eight, which I wouldn't call contemporary music at all, and a lot of people chose the Kelly Marie Murphy piece, which I would call some sort of crossover, and not really contemporary in the sense of extended techniques or anything like that.

JR: This is an interesting thing, because the matter of contemporaneity can be just how new something is, but it can also imply that we are looking for something experimental or hard to listen to.

EC: I don't think that it has to be hard to listen to, but I appreciate innovation when it is authentic. Of the pieces that were performed, the Takemitsu I love, it's a beautiful piece, and it's so rich in harmonies from Messiaen, and it requires a lot of subtlety in performance. Nobody chose Wolfgang Rihm. Only two groups played Henze, which I also like. Nothing really experimental and nothing really challenging for both the players and the listeners. It is not something that I value in itself – that it is challenging for the listeners. But this competition, I think, if I understand its real motivation, is to encourage musicians to deeply explore the classical period and to be at home in the contemporary world. And I didn't really see that readiness.

JR: It is a difficult order. Versatility is good, but at the same time people are maybe going to naturally feel more at home in certain repertoires than in others. Given these factors, what is the most important contribution this competition can make to the contributors?

EC: I think it is exactly that. Of course there is the regular aspect of getting to know your chamber music ensemble better by preparing all this repertoire for the competition. But I think that this really unusual combination of Schubert and contemporary music – that is the challenge, to become fluent in both worlds, in both languages. It is unusual, most people gravitate toward one thing and don't really develop the other. But I think that even if you are not interested in going into contemporary music, or you are really into contemporary music but don't think you're ever going to play Schubert, it is so valuable to get to know those piece deeply enough to let it influence your musical DNA.

JR: It may be possible that it is only by doing the one that you can import it into the other.

EC: Yes, indeed.

JR: Thank you for taking the time, it has been a pleasure.