

Oberlin Artist Recital Series: a chat with Angela Cheng of the Zukerman Trio

by Mike Telin



“I think many people have heard Pinchas Zukerman in a concerto setting, but to hear him in a chamber music setting is an incredible way of experiencing the artistry and magic that he brings to everything that he plays,” Zukerman Trio pianist and Oberlin Conservatory faculty member Angela Cheng said during a recent telephone conversation.

“And Amanda Forsyth is an incredible cellist, so I’m grateful to have the opportunity to work with two

wonderful artists. To be able to play this concert at home is something I will remember for a long time.”

On Friday, September 30 at 8:00 pm in Finney Chapel, the Oberlin Artist Recital Series will present The Zukerman Trio. The program will include selections from Reinhold Glière’s *Eight Pieces For Violin And Cello*, Op. 39, Dmitri Shostakovich’s *Trio No. 2 in e*, Op. 67, and Franz Schubert’s *Trio in B-flat*, D. 898.

Cheng, a native of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, said that the musically diverse program will feature some of the best pieces in the repertoire. “I heard Pinchas and Amanda play the Glière at Ravinia earlier this summer. They’re beautiful pieces and none are very long, but they’re full of character, and I think people will enjoy them a lot.”

Shostakovich composed his Second Trio in 1944, in the midst of World War II. Cheng noted that the work is a reflection of what the composer was going through in his life under Stalin. “Its emotional spectrum goes from deep despair to playfulness, then back

to anguishing cries of pain. It's a piece that can reach the audience in a most personal way, and people really love it."

The pianist described Schubert's Trio as magical. "It's incredibly sweet, inspiring, and so satisfying. The melodies and harmonies are just amazingly beautiful. It's in another world."

Cheng's and Zukerman's professional relationship began in April of 2008, when he was the music director of the National Arts Center Orchestra in Ottawa, and she was appearing as the soloist in Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 25*. "I had played with the Orchestra a number of times, but always with guest conductors. So that 2008 concert was the first time I worked with Pinchas, and after the two performances he asked me if I wanted to play some chamber music. I said, sure."

The pianist and violinist began to collaborate first by playing sonatas. Then, later in 2008, when a member of the Zukerman Chamber Players could no longer travel with the ensemble, Zukerman decided to turn what was originally a string quintet into a piano quintet. He asked Cheng to join the group.

"We didn't just play quintets, we performed in many different combinations. It was really a lot of fun. Before that I was always traveling by myself, so I had no idea that touring with a group was so much more fun. Then in 2011, Pinchas asked me how I would feel about playing trios with him and Amanda. I said, of course, the repertoire is beautiful. So we started playing trio concerts together, and I guess the rest is history."

Did the chemistry between the three members click right away? "Absolutely," Cheng said. "Amanda also grew up in Edmonton. I've known her since she was a teenager so we're old friends. And Pinchas is incredibly generous. Unlike myself, he's lived with this music for a very long time. But he's very patient and said we'll just take our time learning it. It's been wonderful and a lot of fun, and I'm really grateful to have all of these experiences."

When not concertizing, Angela Cheng enjoys being at home in Oberlin and spending time with her husband Alvin Chow and their children. (Chow also serves on the Conservatory's piano faculty.) "I have a prince of a husband," Cheng exclaimed. "He's amazingly supportive and knows how lucky I am to have these opportunities."

Cheng loves teaching and finds that it has helped her learn a lot about her own playing. "Articulating what I want them to do only helps me understand what I need to do myself," she said. Cheng also finds that being a touring artist makes her a better teacher. "Because I'm out there getting nervous and figuring out what the composer had in mind

by dissecting the score, I know what the students are going through when they are onstage.”

Friday’s concert will have a special meaning to Pinchas Zukerman, as well, because one of his children is a graduate of Oberlin College. “Pinchas knows Oberlin well,” Cheng said. “He remembers visiting his daughter, and he remembers playing an all-Brahms program on the Artist Recital Series in Finney Chapel. So this is not just another concert on the calendar. It’s something very special.”

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