

Peeling back the label

Sarah Chang grows up into a gifted adult musician

As Sarah Chang moves from late adolescence into adulthood, the image of Sarah the child prodigy is fading in the short memory of her audience as she begins to look more like a competent, gifted musician and less like a child playing an adult's role.

The more that old "prodigy" label peels away and reveals the hard-working adult career musician she is becoming, the better Sarah likes it. A serious 17-year-old classical violinist, Chang said she cannot remember when she started playing violin - it was at age four-and-a-half. At age 8, she auditioned for Zubin Mehta and Riccardo Muti, and was immediately engaged for performances with the New York Philharmonic and Philadelphia Orchestra. She cut her first album at age 9.

Since then, with coaching, management, and every other kind of technical assistance provided by her (violinist) father and her mother (a composer), and with professional support as well, she has travelled all over the world and has played with every prominent orchestra in the U.S. and Europe. She has been a soloist with the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Chicago Symphony, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and with the most prominent European orchestras. In April, Chang was the soloist with the Minnesota Orchestra at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. She performed the Concerto No. 1 in G minor for Violin and Orchestra, by Max Bruch.

If her talented parents, Min Soo and Myoung Jun Chang, who immigrated to Philadelphia before she was born, have passed on their musical talent to her, their great love for music has also come with it. A student at Juilliard School of Music in New York in their "pre-college" program since she was very young, Chang said she was never "pushed" by her parents, and the additional day of the week spent with her music never made her life more difficult. On the contrary, Juilliard became like a second home, and her music always a source of great joy. "Really, I was never interested in anything else," she said.

Chang seems to have more than the usual dose of adolescent impatience about growing up, perhaps because she has for so long had to express adult musical virtuosity through a child's body. Her first album was recorded using a "toy" violin, she recalled with good humor. Her music has become only more important to her with time. It seems that she wants nothing more than to continue doing what she has always loved most, playing her violin as a musician among fellow musicians, and performing before people who enjoy the music for itself.

In many ways, Chang is uncannily mature for her age, making conversation with practiced poise. In her performances, she plays with cool composure before a packed house at Orchestra Hall, weaving into her music the kind of color and fire, risky dissonance and personality one would associate with a much more mature musician. In other ways, she acts comfordingly like a 17-year-old, thinking about the SAT exams she just took, and looking forward to the autonomy and new experiences the next couple years are sure to bring as she approaches her college years.

Chang said her parents' original plan was for her dad to finish his doctorate at Temple University and for the family to return to Korea. "But then, I started with the violin, and I got into Juilliard (School of Music, in New York City) and started performing, and then pretty much their plan was messed up," she related. "So we recently moved. We've made a decision to stay in the states, because there's so much opportunity here for me and my brother. Also, my management, and my record company are both based in America, so we need that."

Her mother, Myoung Soo Chang, said it was not originally her or her husband's intention to raise a concert violinist. "We just wanted her to study it, to have a good teacher, nice friends and good opportunities in music," she said. The rest just seemed to happen by itself.



Sarah Chang rehearses with the Minnesota Orchestra, Eiji Oue conducting, right

In addition to a huge reserve of raw talent, Chang's virtuosity is based on a lifetime of formal studies and a lot of hard work, but that was not always the case, she said. She did it because it was fun and something she was good at. Her musical training at Juilliard was also a fun thing for her. "Oh, I remember never practicing," she admitted. "Or I would practice maybe ten minutes a day. I remember my first concert when I was five. I remember at least going on the big stage and playing in front of the orchestra. I remember going into Juilliard when I was eight, and starting to go to



Sarah Chang's latest CD release

class there. It was about a two and a half hour drive, and mom or dad would drive me each Saturday. Classes would start around 9 or 10, and then you would take theory and ear training classes and orchestra, as well as your private lessons. So, I would be dead in the evening when we drove back. Mom would go shopping, or just hang with the other mothers.

"Actually, I had a lot of fun," she remembered. "People said to me that 'oh, it must have been so hard when you were so young.' And of

course I was the youngest person in Juilliard by far. When I started, the other people there were well into their teens. But it was a huge part of my growing process, and I loved every minute of being in New York, in Juilliard. And it was fun, not work at all! My mom would take me shopping and to Broadway shows, and it was just a really nice weekend," she reminisced. "In fact, sometimes I really miss it. That with all this travelling, I can't go to Juilliard every Saturday any more."

Concerning her performing contract which started at age 8, she recalls that it did not seem too unusual to her at the time, but also that she knew nothing about contracts, negotiation, or management or any part of the arrangements made for her performing that began at such a young age. "Even now, I'm such an airhead about all that stuff, and I guess I would rather be. There's so much going on with the musicality. That, in itself, is very challenging. I like having the two

things separate. I take care of the one part. And it's easier for me to just concentrate on the music itself.

"I remember when I was eight, my friends thought it was a little bit unusual that I was going off to Europe or to Asia, and playing concerts. And they would go to Tower (Records) and see my CD out. So that was a little different! But, I guess they've gotten used to it now, and really could not care less," she asserted. "It's nice because most of my friends are not musicians, and it keeps me grounded."

Travelling is year round for Chang right now, but she goes to school whenever she is home. "We try to schedule tours so we don't have to miss too much school. We plan out everything. Most orchestras will schedule one or two years in advance. Right now we are talking about performances I will do when I'm 19 or 20. So, you can really pace yourself," she said. She keeps in touch with classmates and instructors by fax or e-mail, which is also how she turns in assignments when she's on the road. "I'm really good at doing work on the airplane."

Her career is becoming more challenging since she is competing with other adults now, and working on living up to her own standards of musicianship. "It's easy at first of course, because you're a kid. There's nothing to compare it to. As time goes on, you have to meet your own expectations. What I really like is that when I am with these orchestras, I'm treated just as another musician now. Some of the conductors I've known since I was seven, so they maybe treat me still like I'm a little kid, but that's the exception," she said.

On top of the hard work of regularly scheduled concerts, Chang must now balance graduating from high school and other important decisionmaking steps that determine life after high school. "It is a huge responsibility, but these are responsibilities I have chosen for myself," she said. "Many of the things that I'm doing are exactly the same as other people my age. It's just that I have this career that I'm already doing and that's something extra"

College decisionmaking is coming up for Chang and other high school juniors in the next six to eight months, and "it's all up in the air," what that will mean, she said. "Of course, I've been going to Juilliard for so long it's like home, so that's definitely an option." Through all of it, she will continue with her musical career. "That goes without saying." ●