

In Conversation with Yue Deng by Isis Tse



Yue Deng is currently Artist-in-Residence at the University of Alberta. She has studied at Oberlin Conservatory and the Juilliard School, worked with Barbara Streisand, Josh Groban, Diana Krall, and Michael Buble, and performed in Carnegie Hall, Birdland, and Avery Fischer Hall.

Photo by Michael Lamont

"I think my first violin was around four dollars," says Yue Deng. "Part of the reason why I chose the violin was because it was affordable. Even getting the instrument was actually very difficult - in the first few months of my studying, I had to share a violin with my neighbour."

"My mom taught me how to sing, so when I was 2, I would sing and conduct in public. I chose the violin due to its similarity with the human voice. My parents were able to support my violin lessons because I was the only child."

At age eight, her teacher thought it might be a good experience for her to enter a competition; they registered in the National Violin Competition in China. "We didn't think I was going to win anything," laughs Deng. "I was really surprised to even get into the finals." She won the First Prize.

The next year, she was one of six violinists accepted to the Central Conservatory of Music in China. The nine year old left her hometown of Shijianzhuang, Hebei and got on the train to Beijing. The program at the conservatory was competitive and vigorous; she remembers the teachers systematically checking whether the students were practicing. For their juries, students were given scores by a group of ten professors. The student rankings were then announced, and those with low scores were placed in a separate class. She admits that her eight years at the conservatory were rather oppressive. As she consistently placed first in her year, she faced envy from her classmates and often found her violin strings and bow hairs cut.

She recalls leaving China for the first time at the age of fourteen to compete in the Menuhin Violin Competition in London. "It was sponsored by the Chinese government. I didn't win it; they'd picked six finalists, and the president of the jury told me that I was the seventh - and that it was such a pity." Her determination and perseverance through these years is a testament to the strength of her character. Also apparent is her sense of humour: reminiscing about the trip to London, she adds, as a natural afterthought, "I tried cheese for the first time there, and I was kind of just like, why do people eat this?" By the age of sixteen, she was headed to Oberlin Conservatory on a full scholarship for her Bachelor of Music. A friend had helped her send a videotape of her playing to Taras

Gabora, who was a violin professor there. "Oberlin was my utopia," she says. "There was an immediate sense of camaraderie that I hadn't felt before. Mr. Gabora came and picked me up from the airport and drove me to my dorm. Another student, without me asking, helped me carry my luggage. It was a small gesture, but I was so touched."

Four years later, she was attending the Music Academy of the West in Montecito (near Santa Barbara), California, getting ready to leave for masters' degree at Juilliard. It was then, by a series of coincidences, that the classically-trained violinist discovered her love of jazz.

One of her friends in California was Janet Lees, whom she knew from her summers at the Academy. Janet Lees was the wife of Gene Lees, famed music writer and lyricist. They knew that Deng needed a part time job while in New York. Gene Lees had friends at the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP); they would consider offering her a grant if they heard her playing.

Through Lees, she met pianist and composer Roger Kellaway, who offered to help her make a recording for the grant. The piece he had arranged to play with her was a version of Django Reinhardt's *Nuages*. She had never even heard jazz before. Kellaway was awestruck by her natural phrasing. The week after, he decided to feature her in a performance at the Jazz Bakery in Los Angeles. The audience went wild, demanding an encore. They had only prepared *Nuages*. They played it again to thunderous applause. Mark Rydell, who was in the audience, described it as "one of the defining musical events of [his] life."¹ She, of course, received the grant.

Kellaway later decided to produce an album with her titled *Both Sides Now* (a reference to the song by Joni Mitchell, with whom Kellaway had worked with previously). The album features a version of *Nuages*, along with an arrangement of the title track

Both Sides Now, and the jazz classic *In a Sentimental Mood*, but most of the tracks are written specifically for her by Kellaway. "The training I'd had was all from conservatories. Classical music builds a strong foundation," says Deng. "But playing the pieces written for me was liberating - it was on a personal level. It actually helped my classical playing." She dismisses the great divide between classical music and other forms like jazz and pop. "With jazz, of course the fingerings, bowings, vibrato, and timing are very different. But in the end, it's music - it's an art form. And if it's good art, it doesn't matter what form it is," she declares.

In 2007, she released an album with pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet (of Atonement soundtrack fame) titled *Ogermann: Violin and Piano Works*. She calls the collaboration "monumental." "After we finished recording, I didn't even know what to do. It was hard for me to imagine anything better. My dad always said that you start from zero every day. And so I kept going - it was a new day."

Deng moved from California to Edmonton in 2013 to join the string faculty at the University of Alberta. She is constantly discovering ties she has to Alberta: her roommate at Juilliard, Diane Leung (currently a violist with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra) is an Edmonton native who studied at the University of Alberta, and Joni Mitchell (*Both Sides Now*) was born in Fort Macleod.

She currently keeps a busy schedule as the university's Artist-in-Residence, coaching and teaching students as well as performing; she hasn't had time to complain about the cold weather. 

¹ Lees, Gene. 2003. *Friends Along The Way: A Journey Through Jazz* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 291.

Pictured below: Yue Deng with the Pacific Shores Philharmonic at Ojai's Libbey Bowl.

