

In a galaxy full of radiant violinists **CHO-LIANG LIN** shines bright

By Benjamin Ivry

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Now that Cho-Liang Lin, one of the supreme violinists of our time and the director of two acclaimed music festivals, has reached the age of 41, it may be a good time to stop calling him Jimmy. The splendid Taiwan-born virtuoso, renowned for his soulful expression of emotion in classic, romantic, and modern music, acquired his nickname—used universally in the music world—during his student days at Juilliard, where he worked with Dorothy DeLay. An upbeat, energetic, and handsome man in his prime, Lin talks freely about his life and career.

"When I started in my early 20s," he says, "I insisted that everyone call me Cho-Liang, but Americans gravitate to what's easier, and so my schoolmates and teacher called me Jimmy. Finally, I gave up." Back in the 1980s, Asian names were not as common on American concert posters as they are today, and referring to his longtime pal Yo-Yo Ma, Lin adds, "My parents didn't give me an easy name like Yo-Yo. By the way, Yo means friend, Yo-Yo means friendly, and Yo-Yo Ma therefore means friendly horse."

As for his own name, Cho-Liang means brightness or a show of brightness. Lin means woods, but a given name in Chinese has more significance than the family name. A show of brightness might indeed sum up his career so far, with resplendent recordings of concertos by Sibelius, Nielsen, Stravinsky, and Prokofiev, all conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen—plus Saint-Saëns' Concerto No.3 conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, and a French chamber music program accompanied by pianist Paul Crossley. All of these recordings were made for Sony, which has since dropped Lin along with many other artists at the top of their powers, a great loss for everyone who cares about music. Fortunately, the small but ambitious Finnish label Ondine asked Lin to follow up on a brilliant recording of Tan Dun's "Out of Peking Opera" with a session to record Christopher Rouse's new violin concerto, written expressly for Lin and premiered in May with the New York Philharmonic.

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In the early 1970s Lin went to Australia, where he studied with Robert Pikler. By 1975 he had become a precollege student at Juilliard, working with the legendary star-maker Dorothy DeLay. She later said of her student, "His thinking, if you can get behind his joking, is elegant, the way a physicist might say an equation is elegant." Lin's physicist father specialized in nuclear and radiation research, and his wife Deborah Ho Lin is a pediatric immunologist, suggesting the important role that science has played in the world around him. "The funny thing is, I was never good at mathematics," Lin admits, "which would frustrate my father a lot. Mathematics required a huge amount of logic, and all my talent in logic goes into music. I think there is constantly a lot of logic in my analysis of the music I play, and in teaching and interpretive matters. I try to achieve a combination of heart and soul with a good sense of logic. Miss DeLay's teaching is very logical, by the way—very organized and meticulous—and I benefited a lot from her sense of organization."

So advanced was this organization that by the age of 18 he was invited by his European management to play the Tchaikovsky concerto with the Berlin Philharmonic under the direction of Riccardo Muti, an offer DeLay promptly turned down for him. "Miss DeLay felt I wasn't ready to play the Tchaikovsky Concerto under those circumstances," Lin explains. "In the 1980s, 18 years old was considered young for a violinist, not like today. When I was signed to ICM Artists, the late Sheldon Gold said I should not be exposed to major orchestras until I was ready. Child prodigies were not in fashion then. I think Midori broke that mold, and now people are eager to hear child prodigies—and if an 18-year-old got an offer to play with the Berlin Philharmonic today, he or she would jump at it!"

Beyond protecting her young pupil, DeLay offered precious advice about dealing with the fierce egos of professional musicians. As Lin politely puts it, "Miss DeLay warned me of musicians who try to impress you at the first meeting and dominate you."

A case in point is the veteran Eugene Ormandy, longtime maestro of the Philadelphia Orchestra, who first invited Lin to perform when he was 20 years old, as a last-minute replacement for Henryk Szeryng in the Sibelius Concerto. Lin was called about 36 hours before the concert, and went quickly to Philadelphia with no time to practice, stopping at Ormandy's apartment to go through the alphi

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Zygmuntowicz, an instrument builder and restorer. Lin leaves his precious cargo there for a few days, most recently in hopes that the methodical craftsman would build him a new fingerboard. "Sam's fantastic," Lin says, "and such a brilliant maker that I've commissioned him to build a violin for me. I commissioned it five years ago, in fact, and I'm still waiting! He has an old warehouse loft, so spacious and with the right lighting—northern exposure—ideal for violin-making."

Zygmuntowicz, who has been making violins for about 20 years, is equally thrilled with his illustrious client. "He's part of a circle of people I've got close with, part of the upper rung of Juilliard-trained people who play at international festivals like La Jolla—the violist Toby Hoffman, violinist Danny Phillips from the Orion Quartet, cellist David Finkel from the Emerson Quartet—a kind of energized, very intelligent group who enjoy playing solo and chamber music. That kind of community has become the core of what I do. I started taking care of Jimmy's Guarneri, a really fabulous instrument. This fiddle's workmanship is from Guarneri's most refined period, the early 1730s, arching like the Kreisler Guarneri, an instrument I've studied and reproduced. The f-hole is beautifully cut and proportioned. The Guarneri sound from this period is very concentrated and direct. Some later Guarneris can sound almost woolly, but this one has a good, centered sound with lots of carrying power, and it fits Jimmy well because it's a very elegant, articulate sound, not overly dramatic. It's very balanced and graceful, like Jimmy's artistry. As a person he's extremely gracious—when you meet him, you feel he's an almost natural aristocrat, with an old-fashioned graciousness. The new violin he'

If no Joe Venuti or Jean-Luc Ponty in the making, Lin still has plenty of hair on his bow, and a real understanding of a repertory that suggests a bright recording future, even if it is not with Sony. The company holds two as-yet-unreleased recordings. One is a set of works by Fritz Kreisler with the English Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Andrew Litton. Another hidden treasure is a program of chamber music, including the Brahms viola quintet, with Isaac Stern, Jaime Laredo, Michael Tree and Yo-Yo Ma. "Since these people are also being kept waiting," Lin notes dryly, "I somehow don't feel so bad." Whether the recording future is with Ondine or some other small label, Lin will certainly land on his feet.

In recent years he has intensified his work with accompanists—vocalists as well as instrumentalists. "In terms of piano accompanists," says Lin, "the more I play, the more I crave input. In early days I wanted someone who strictly accompanied me, but now I really want an equal partner who can contribute directly in the interpretive process." Pianist Sandra Rivers was his first regular accompanist, playing with him for ten years. He then began an association with Andre-Michel Schub, in which both musicians are keen to explore new works. He also plays regularly with Li Jian, a pianist originally from Shanghai who is now on the faculty at Curtis; and most recently he has done concerts with Jon Kimura Parker, another old friend. He performed a Mozart concert aria with Sylvia McNair a few years ago, and also did Beethoven's Scottish songs with the tenor Robert White. For his triennial Taipei festival, being held next in 2003, he hopes to perform some more Mozart arias "with a super-duper soprano."

And there are his groundbreaking collaborations with contemporary composers like Christopher Rouse, Bright Sheng, Aaron Jay Kernis, and Tan Dun. Lin revels in their diversity. "Rouse is a very dramatic composer and loves big gestures," Lin says. "Even if the music becomes bombastic as a result, he doesn't care. He wants the utmost effect, with music that is louder and faster all the time. He is very exact in the effect he wants to achieve. I find it fascinating to see what end result contemporary composers want, what they notate, and this can also help in interpreting past generations of composers. The Barber Concerto, for example, is scored in a Mozartian way, with very few indications, and you can develop the way you want to play it. By contrast, Bartok and Elgar's works are very precisely marked down, to the slightest detail. Rouse means every metronome marking he puts down, no matter how hideously fast it may be for a performer. So it's very frightening for a performer to encounter it for the first time; he can't believe the composer really means what he has written. Kernis is generally sweeter and more romantic, more like Mendelssohn, whereas Rouse is more like Berlioz. In fact Rouse thinks he's Berlioz reincarnated—big gestures and everything grand. Kernis is more intricate, delicate, transparent."

Different still is the work of Tan Dun, which Lin calls "very theatrical music—so theatrical that I wonder how it translates onto CD. His 'Ghost Opera' for string quartet and pipa, which I have performed, is a multimedia work, with extra props. How can that be conveyed on CD? A composer like Tan Dun needs a more visual medium. I prance around the stage and recite excerpts from Shakespeare and play with stones and metal. I find it very liberating."

Also liberating are his roles as husband and father. His little daughter, Lara, born in January 2001, makes a healthy amount of noise through trivial things like interviews. "Yo-Yo told me many years ago that once you have kids, all your priorities in life change," Lin says, "and he was right. She is a very welcome anchor in my life now." Another anchor is his wife Deborah, whom he met when she was a page turner at one of his concerts in Atlanta. Asked if she was a good page turner, he chuckles. "The reason we got to talk backstage was that she was so conscientious about turning well that she came to the dress rehearsal, instead of just appearing at the performance. So when we had a pause and began chatting backstage, I found her enchanting. Had she only come to the concert itself, I probably would have been preoccupied and not have noticed her. So it was fortunate she was such a conscientious page-turner!"

Lin relishes friends like the irrepressible Yo-Yo Ma, who told one interviewer that Lin knows more swear words in Chinese than he does. "Yo-Yo is much more devious than I am with the bad

