

QUARTER NOTES

An extra thank you for HSO donors *Plus**

*Or for the music nerds in our midst, Dotted Quarter Notes!

HSO MUSICIANS UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

A CONVERSATION WITH HSO CELLISTS, JIA CAO AND CARA CHEUNG

During this pandemic year, we created a new virtual donor benefit: an in-depth conversation with two of our musicians, along with a link to a special musical collaboration they've prepared just for you.

For our fourth and final musician collaboration this season, we happily introduce you to two HSO cellists, Jia Cao (Assistant Principal) and Cara Cheung. Cara has been with the Symphony for four years, since 2017, and Jia won her position in 2019. We were delighted that they offered to participate in a joint interview for Quarter Notes Plus and their gift to you is a unique performance that you can access via the link at the bottom of the last page of this issue.

QN: You are both cellists, new mothers and good friends who met at the HSO. And it seems that you both began on cello because there was someone in the background who selected that instrument for you.

Cara: For me that is certainly true. It was my mom, a pianist, who really wanted me to play cello, because



Jia, with her grandmother, Yishan Qian

she always wished she could play the cello. I remember starting cello at age five, but my concentration was not very good! My parents then enrolled in group lessons at age seven.

Jia: I began cello lessons at age four because there's an important cello tradition in our family that my Dad wanted to continue. My early memories are the sounds of my father's mother, my grandma, as she practiced cello and taught her students.



Cara in rehearsal

QN: And both of your families have strong musical traditions, right?

Cara: That is so true. I do come from a musical family. My mom is a pianist, and my dad was a choral director at a university. My maternal grandfather was a composer, whose music is still being performed in Hong Kong and Taiwan. His compositions are mostly for voice, and although he used a western style of music, he based his compositions on the pentatonic scale, which is more common in the



Jia, learning from her grandmother, Yishan Qian

music of China.

Jia: I'm also proud of my musical heritage. My paternal grandmother, Yishan Qian (pronounced E-shan Tsien), was born in 1923. She was one of the first Chinese cellists and was trained at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. It's such an honor to continue her legacy. There's more - she was the first and only student from mainland China to ever study with Pablo Casals.

QN: Jia, please tell us how your grandmother connected with Pablo Casals!

Jia: My grandparents lived in Paris for several years right after World War II. As she was a cellist, my grandma really wanted to meet with Mr. Casals who was quite famous. My grandma somehow found his address in Prague, wrote to him, and asked if she could visit and play for him. He agreed, and she studied with him for three years. I knew very little of her story, but by piecing together what I heard from my three uncles, I was able to learn more of who she was. She was truly a remarkable woman.

Cara: My family is from Hong Kong. My father went to Canada to study, and that is where he met my mom, who was also from Hong Kong and a student at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Both of my parents applied for Canadian citizenship, but when my father was offered a position teaching at a university in Hong Kong, they moved back. During my childhood, we traveled routinely between Hong Kong (where I grew up and was educated) and Vancouver, where there is a large Cantonese community.

QN: When did you arrive in the United States?

Jia: Before college, I traveled to the States on a tour with the Shanghai Conservatory, when I was a student there. We traveled to L.A., St. Louis and Philadelphia and I knew that I wanted to continue my music studies in the west. There are many great exchange programs in Canada, Germany but it was Bard College that offered me a "free ride." I

was in the inaugural class of the Bard Conservatory of Music for my undergraduate studies. I had met Leon Botstein during an intense summer music festival program in the Grafenegg Academy Orchestra in Austria. Maestro Botstein invited me to study at Bard. I later won the concerto competition at Bard, and then performed as a soloist with the American Symphony Orchestra conducted by Maestro Botstein. I graduated from Bard in 2011, and immediately was accepted for graduate studies in cello at Yale. That's where I met my husband, who was pursuing his PhD in environmental economics.

Cara: My undergraduate studies were at the Academy for the Performing Arts in Hong Kong but I came to the United States to pursue a graduate degree at Rice University in Texas because I was offered a full tuition scholarship. I met my husband, Matt Muehl-Miller, at Rice. He's also a musician. He plays the French Horn, and he was the principal French Horn in the Hartford Symphony Orchestra before our current principal, Barbara Hill.



Cara with her teacher and mentor, Ray Wang

QN: Both of you studied music in China. Is that different from studying in the US?

Cara: Well, one key difference is the musical notation. Chinese music is notated very differently from western music. Western music uses notes on a staff, with a clef that tells you the register of the notes (bass, alto, treble.) Chinese music looks completely different and there is no staff. Instead, it appears as numbers. I've located a sample of music for Amazing Grace with Chinese notation so you can see how different it is. My grandfather's music, which uses the pentatonic scale, is notated in a western style, so it is more widely accessible. A cellist in China can study western or Chinese instrumentation.

Jia: As a matter of fact, I studied both forms of notation, so I can read both forms of music.

QN: Is there a particular mentor that had an important influence on your life?

Jia: Without question, other than my grandma, I would have to say Xuping Zou, who was my first cello teacher. She happened to be one of my grandma's students, and she helped create a great musical love and foundation which I still appreciate to this day.

Cara: My mentor was my high school cello teacher, Ray Wang. I should explain that cello came easy for me. I didn't have to work or practice nearly as hard as the other students. So, I always did well in all the regional competitions with little effort. Then, when I was 16, I entered one of the larger competitions and to my shock, I was eliminated in the first round. When you are 16 and have never experienced that kind of a failure, it is a trauma. I was in tears and raced from the competition venue to my teacher's studio at the conservatory,

AMAZING GRACE

1=C 3/4

5		$\dot{1}$ - $\underline{\dot{3}\dot{1}}$		$\dot{3}$ - $\dot{2}$		$\dot{1}$ - 6		5 - 5		$\dot{1}$ - $\underline{\dot{3}\dot{1}}$		$\dot{3}$ - $\underline{\dot{2}\dot{3}}$		$\dot{5}$ -
3		3 - 5		b7 - b7		4 - 4		3 - 3		3 - 5		$\dot{1}$ - 5		5 -
A- maz- ing grace! How sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me!														
5		$\dot{1}$ - $\dot{1}$		$\dot{1}$ - $\dot{1}$		6 - 6		$\dot{1}$ - $\dot{1}$		5 - 5		$\dot{1}$ - $\dot{1}$		7 -
1		1 - 5		1 - 5		4 - 4		1 - 5		1 - 3		5 - $\dot{1}$		5 -
I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.														
$\underline{\dot{2}\dot{3}}$		$\dot{5}$ - $\underline{\dot{3}\dot{1}}$		$\dot{3}$ - $\underline{\dot{3}\dot{2}}$		$\dot{1}$ - 6		5 - 5		$\dot{1}$ - $\underline{\dot{3}\dot{1}}$		$\dot{3}$ - $\dot{2}$		$\dot{1}$ -
5		3 - 5		b7 - b7		4 - 4		3 - 3		3 - 5		$\dot{1}$ - 4		3 -
1	once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.													
7		5 - $\dot{1}$		$\dot{1}$ - $\dot{1}$		6 - 6		$\dot{1}$ - $\dot{1}$		5 - 5		$\dot{1}$ - 7		$\dot{1}$ -
5		1 - 5		1 - 5		4 - 4		1 - 5		1 - 1		5 - 5		1 -

Amazing Grace, with Chinese musical notation

which was across the street. He stopped what he was doing to listen to me, then handed me a beautiful box of chocolates and told me to "eat the chocolate and wipe your tears." He never chastised me or told me what I should have done. Instead, he just made me understand that failure was a natural part of the journey of learning. He believed in me and helped me believe in myself, so when it came time to select a career, I trusted his advice. He told me, "You're smart and you can do anything you want in life. But you only get one chance to be a musician. You're on that career path now and you won't get a second opportunity, so give it all you have now." I took his advice and have never regretted it.

QN: Can you tell us something about the instrument you play?

Jia: I play on a beautiful cello made by Lawrence Wilke, a luthier who lives in Clinton, CT. This particular model is based on a Stradivarius cello made in 1730, owned by my teacher from Yale, Aldo Parisot. So, it happens to be a "replica" of my teacher's cello. It's one of the "late period" Strads that was known for its bright sound,

but as a modern copy, my cello has a very quick response, so it's a great combination of the past and the present.

Cara: I love my cello, but the funniest thing I can tell you is that people always ask if my instrument is a "guitar" or a "bass"!

QN: What musical achievement are your proudest of?

Jia: I am one of the founding members of the Chimeng String Quartet, which was formed while I attended Bard. We won the silver medal in the senior division of the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition in 2010. After we graduated, the quartet had to disband, but two members went to Curtis, I went to Yale, and another went to Germany. And in 2009, I was so lucky to play in the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, where I met so many great musicians, including the members of the Tokyo String Quartet.

Cara: Believe it or not, while I've accomplished so much in music, I think my proudest achievement is that I've learned to be gentle with myself and to permit myself to "be



Jia and son Adam

present” with the music. I worry much less about meeting the impossible standard of “perfection.”

QN: Do you have a favorite composer? And what styles of music do you enjoy?

Jia: My favorite is Richard Strauss, but I can’t precisely articulate why! And, I love a wide variety of music, especially jazz. For vocalists, I really enjoy Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald!

Cara: I’d choose Poulenc. His music is not as “popular” as Debussy or Ravel because it has more dissonance, but all of his compositions provoke an intense emotional response for me. I would encourage everyone to listen to his cello sonata, which I think is one of the most beautiful pieces ever written for cello. Here’s a link to a version on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV9aHiGSUPQ> As to other types of music, I love K-pop and my favorite singer is IU, who is a South Korean singer, songwriter, and actress.

QN: What would you be doing if you were not a musician?

Jia: This will sound strange, but I think I’d be a watchmaker who repairs old-fashioned mechanical watches. As a kid, I loved taking apart old watches so that I could try to figure out how they worked, but I never quite learned how to put them back together in working order!

Cara: It would have to be something connected with language. Growing up in a multi-lingual environment, I’ve been fascinated with languages, so I could imagine a career as an interpreter, teacher or translator. Finding ways to bridge cultures is very exciting. Languages do that, and so does music.

QN: Speaking of languages, each of you speak three languages, right?

Jia: I learned English as a child in elementary school, plus Mandarin and the Shanghai dialect, which sounds like a completely different language!

Cara: Growing up in Hong Kong and Canada, I learned English as a child. I also speak Cantonese and Mandarin.



Cara, and husband, Matt

QN: Did you ever consider playing another instrument?

Jia: Yes – piano – because of the vast repertoire. I was studying piano but stopped so that I could focus more intently on cello. I attended the elementary school affiliated with the Shanghai Conservatory, which begins in 4th grade, so piano was part of my education. Music in China is highly competitive. You must pass an audition of three rounds to be admitted, and I knew that I always wanted to be accepted into the Shanghai Conservatory program.

Cara: I would also choose piano and piano was actually my first instrument but only briefly. I love the versatility of piano and during the pandemic, I realized how much I miss hearing the different harmonies. As a pianist, you can create those on your own. But I do love the sound of the cello, which I think is so close to the range and tone of the human voice.

QN: What can you tell us about your family and children?

Jia: As I mentioned, I met my husband while studying at Yale. After completing my masters, I won my first professional job with the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, and for about three years, my husband and I tried to maintain a long-distance relationship between Connecticut and South Dakota. It was tough and in 2019, I left South Dakota to rejoin my husband. We have a son, Adam, who was born in January of 2020 and having Cara as my friend in the Hartford Symphony is an unexpected gift. I bring Adam to playdates with Cara and her daughter. Adam's Chinese name is Yanan (which means "first boy" in Chinese, and essentially, has the same meaning as Adam.) It made sense as he is our firstborn and was the first boy in my husband's family who was born in this country. I'm now pregnant and expecting our second child in September!



One of Cara's baked specialties!

Cara: Jia and I have become friends and having our first babies in a pandemic is quite an experience. My daughter, SeeYin, was born on March 11, 2020, and although my husband is not Chinese, he is totally committed to our daughter's Cantonese heritage. Our family also consists of a 25-pound rescue dog, a Lhasa Apso named Siufu, which means "little tiger" in Cantonese. The pandemic has been difficult as it prevented me from visiting my family in Vancouver. My paternal grandmother is 102, so I hope to travel to Canada in December and introduce my daughter to her great-grandmother.

QN: Do you have any hobbies? What about teaching?

Jia: As to hobbies, nothing compares with my passion for music. I occasionally like to cook but find that I quickly lose interest. I think my second passion would be travel. I'm lucky to have traveled widely and visited so many locations. My dream is to travel even more, and

experience all the different people and cultures of the world. I really haven't had the time to teach, so I don't have students at the present time.

Cara: As for hobbies, I love to bake! In fact, I made our daughter's first birthday cake, and I can create those luscious and fancy French macarons, which are so light. As to teaching, I do have a large studio with about 15 students from everywhere. My studio includes children, retired adults and even one woman who wanted to learn cello while she was pregnant! Since I have experience as a pregnant cellist (you have to figure out how to position the cello around your stomach), I was really able to help her adjust and devise a way to get the cello into the proper position.

QN: Can you tell us something we would never guess about you?

Jia: Here is something quite important. My paternal grandparents, who had been living in Europe, returned to China in the 1960's. As they returned, the Chinese



Cara and Matt, with SeeYin on her first birthday – and the cake prepared by Cara!

the cultural revolution, she had learned to practice without being discovered. My grandma passed away three years ago, but I am so lucky that she was such an important part of my life. She taught the college level at the Shanghai Conservatory, which is comparable to the Curtis Institute in this country. When Isaac Stern traveled to China, he visited the elementary division of the Shanghai Conservatory.

Cara: Two things. First, I didn't learn to drive until I was 23 years old and living in Texas, while attending Rice University. I never had a need to learn because I always lived in a city. But the best story is that my mom recently discovered a lullaby that my grandpa (the composer whose music is still performed in Hong Kong and Taiwan) wrote for me when I was born. The instrumentation is piano and voice. How lucky am I?

cultural revolution began, so they were sent to one of the Chinese re-education camps. The camps were harsh prisons that housed teachers, doctors, thinkers and others who were considered "counter-revolutionary." Since all western music was prohibited, my grandma was not permitted to play her cello, and in fact, many instruments at the Shanghai Conservatory, where she studied and later taught, were destroyed. Just recently, the son of one of my grandma's colleagues, who was her neighbor, wrote an article about my grandma, who he'd met after my grandparents were released from the camps. He never knew why my grandma's house was completely quiet and silent at 8 pm every night, but he later learned that she was practicing cello on a fingerboard in complete silence. During the years of



Jia and Adam

To hear what Jia and Cara have prepared just for you, please click this link!

[CLICK HERE](#)

