

# JENNY LIN

## Pianist

### Interview with Jenny Lin

New York Pianist, July 29, 2008

Jenny Lin captivates audiences all over the world as an orchestral soloist, recitalist, and chamber musician. The New York Times writes: "remarkable technical command" and "No one who has heard [her] will need to be told that Ms. Lin has a gift for melodic flow." She records for Koch International Classics, Hänssler Classic, BIS Records, Sunrise Records, and Poem Culture Records. New York Pianist spoke with Jenny at the Museum of Modern Art.

NYP: The most memorable moment at the release party for your new CD, *InsomniMania*, at (Le) Poisson Rouge was the opening of your first piece, "Dream," by John Cage. A hush fell over the club. Are New Yorkers hungry for silence?

JL: Absolutely.

NYP: No one made a sound.

JL: They can't. It's John Cage. As quiet as it was, it was still too loud, I think, for the piece. I don't think there's a really, really quiet place in New York.

NYP: Is that what led to *InsomniMania*?

JL: The *InsomniMania* CD came about because there was this piece that I really wanted to record, "Insomnia Redux: 4am," by Daniel Felsenfeld. Structurally, it's one of the strongest on the CD. As a young composer, I think he's going in the right direction. He really thought about it. He's still very young. He has a long way ahead of him.

I wanted to record that piece. I didn't know what else to put on the CD. I wish in classical music we had singles. Record companies need to release albums. I wondered, how can I fill an album with this piece? So we thought about it maybe for a year or two, and then I started digging and I realized that there were all these composers who wrote around the theme of sleep and nightmares.

At the same time, I was interested in Raymond Scott's pieces, which appeared in many cartoons, and I was amazed that there was music of his that hadn't been done. So there was this piece, "Sleepwalker," and I said, "Well, hey, that's something about sleep, and dreams, and nightmares," and slowly everything kind of came together.

NYP: Do you suffer from insomnia yourself?

JL: No, I can sleep anytime, anywhere. It's more a composer problem, I think.

NYP: You perform and record a great deal of new music. What do you look for in new music?

JL: A lot of composers don't study the history. You really have to study like crazy, starting from Monteverdi, Scarlatti. You have to know that so well. György Ligeti is somebody who really knew the history.

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A friend of mine who is a journalist had an interview at Ligeti's house and he remembers going into Ligeti's studio and on his piano there was this much music [indicating a pile several feet deep]. He was writing piano etudes at the time, and he had piano etudes from every composer that you could possibly imagine on his piano, which tells you that he knew what he was doing. He studied everybody's scores and that is why, also, that his music is here to stay.

I had a very vigorous, rigorous education going to conservatory. I came from a very conservative classical music background. I studied Bach, Chopin. I think the first new music I did was probably some Kirchner or Carter. And Ligeti I started playing when I was eighteen or nineteen, so I knew his stuff for a while, but it took a long time for me to really understand the whole new music thing.

NYP: Yet you really picked that up as a mantle.

JL: But the best music, for me, is the music that is part of a tradition, that has a lineage. The best composers have such great ears.

NYP: Who introduced you to the music of Kirchner and Carter?

JL: Julian Martin, who is like a father to me now. I met him when I was fourteen. My parents were making a transition to move me from Europe to the U.S. I had been educated in Austria where everyone was quite rigid and had a different approach to the instrument.

When I met Mr. Martin he kind of lifted something. He made me happier, more comfortable at the instrument. He's the one who introduced me to all this new stuff.

NYP: You've lived in many places.

JL: I grew up in Europe until about 15. Then I spent high school and college here. Then I went back to Europe and came back again. So I maintain that dual mentality. Meanwhile, I've got the Asian thing going, so it's all mixed together.

NYP: Do you notice differences between audiences?

JL: It's very different between Europe, Asia, and America. Europeans will just sit there, and they can sit there for quite a bit. They're there to listen. The new music audience is enormous compared to the U.S. America is, I guess, more business-like. They're there because this is Thursday night and we're going to do this. In Asia, the audience is younger, restless, but full of energy. They're more in the hip stage. They still clap between movements at times. They're not educated the same way, but they are curious. That's why everyone is going there right now. Asia is the new thing.

I started playing a lot of concerts eight years ago. I've been changing with the audiences. I'm adapting myself. I've started talking at concerts, and it works really well, especially in the U.S. When you're presenting exotic programs and you talk to the audience, the audience loves that.

NYP: Your *InsomniaMania* release party was hosted by Frank J. Oteri, editor of *NewMusicBox*, and he spoke with many of the composers from your program.

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JL: It breaks that intensity you sometimes get at concerts when people feel like they can't do anything. I did a festival for James Tenney two years ago, and the main concert was at the Whitney Museum. Tenney felt he never could sit still at a concert. So one of his pieces, called "Forms," is for 16-plus instruments, and the players would sit all around the space, and the people could walk around. People said to me that it was so much fun. They didn't feel like they were restricted. They were walking around the musicians. You could also sit. You could do whatever you wanted so long as you didn't interfere. The New York Times loved it.

I'm not saying that's where I'm going, but I'm saying that the format of concerts can be improved with the times. It's just not the same anymore. For one of the concerts I did recently, I had Ligeti, Shostakovich, Samuel Barber, and all kinds of different things together, and people loved that. They feel like they're hearing something they know and something they don't know. That was very effective.

I think that's the direction people are going now. Orchestra managers think that audiences just want to hear what they know, but it's not true. They're so sick of hearing the same people play the same concerti every season.

NYP: What concerto do you most wish you were requested to do more?

JL: The one that I just recorded on CD is the Ernest Bloch. No one has requested that, and I hope someone will soon. It's an absolutely amazing piece.

NYP: You have such a large repertory of concerti, 40 of them that you list on your website. What if 20 of them were requested for the same season?

JL: I'd love for that to happen! The most I've done is probably seven in a season.

It stays with you. Let's say I need to do the Rachmaninoff 3rd Concerto next week, I could probably do it. I'm really going to have to be at home and not go out for a whole week and practice 12 hours a day, but it's doable. It really stays with you, especially things that you've learned as a child.

Once you play a lot of concerts you're trained, especially these days when we're considered freelancers. You have to be ready. Musicians that are not fortunate enough to play just one concerto a hundred times and make lots of money; we have to be in a different mode from one concert to the next.

For example, this past March it was really horrible and stressful. I had to do the Tchaikovsky 1st Concerto, followed a few days later by a completely new program, followed by a recording session of Shostakovich. This is all happening in one month. You're trained so that your body does it. Most of us, under the stress, can deliver.

For one of my first albums, Chinoiserie, I got a call from the label one early morning, because they were calling from Europe, and it was 5:00 in the morning. They said, "We need this project done in two months." If I weren't in New York I could have never done that.

NYP: So geography is important even in a networked world?

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JL: Geography is very important. Just to get those scores and to research those things, if I were somewhere else in the world I would not have been able to do that project in two months. You have access to libraries, amazing resources, music stores, record stores, and also the postal service is pretty efficient. Things come into the city very quickly whereas if you were living somewhere else it would take days extra to have something come to you.

You can get whatever you want. Everything is available here. I could have stayed in Switzerland. Salaries were high. I could have lived really well there. I could move to Asia where my mom is and make loads of money teaching or something. I absolutely love New York. You can be who you want to be. Nobody bothers you.

I moved around so much of my life that when I got here, I could actually call it home. Being a pianist, we don't work too much with other people. At least I don't. Maybe I'm a loner. I like to feel that when I go out of my home, I'm surrounded by people. I need that. I've heard lots of creative musicians. Everybody comes to New York. I'd rather live in a really tiny place in the middle of Manhattan than a really big place in Brooklyn.

NYP: What about peace and quiet? Earlier you said there isn't a quiet place here. What about your neighbors? Does your practicing disturb them?

JL: I stuff a lot of sweaters in my piano.

NYP: Who is Jennifer Lin?

JL: Can I just tell you the story? Since last weekend, I've been getting emails from people asking for Jennifer Lin and they all saw her on Oprah two years ago. I don't know why all of a sudden last week everybody was emailing me. She improvised something and also played some Liszt, and since last weekend I've been getting emails from people asking me where they can buy this thing "I" created on Oprah. I watched the video. I had to. I was confused. Maybe Oprah heard The Eleventh Finger or something and played it on her show. I look nothing like Jennifer Lin. I'm twice her age. And now everybody's emailing me about this.

NYP: The culprit might be Wikipedia. There's an article about you there, and the citations mistakenly include a link to a video of Jennifer Lin.

JL: Maybe I should leave it there. Thanks to Oprah, people are checking out my site!

NYP: Who is Jenny Lin?

JL: I'm just trying to survive, I think. You know there was a moment I almost quit the piano. It was when I was graduating from college. I was majoring in German and I was majoring in music. I was still attracted by the idea of law school and business school. I almost quit the piano, but I didn't and I don't think it's possible for me to change again.

There was a moment I really thought being a musician was so difficult; money-wise, to have a career. It's not always about how good you are. It's really about who you know. It's about how

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you schmooze at parties. It's about how much clothes you wear. It's about a lot of elements that have nothing to do with how good you are, so the idea of law school and business school was very attractive.

I gave myself one last chance. I went to Italy for this competition, and I said if I do well, I'll just keep going. If I don't do well, you know what, I'm just going to apply to law school. And I did quite well. I got into the finals.

I packed up my bags and moved to Geneva, where I didn't know a soul, and started working with Dominique Weber. And it was amazing, like I was a changed person. I could never go back.

NYP: What advice do you have for pianists hitting the competition circuit?

JL: Just do it, and don't think about it. The problem is, when you're doing it you're probably very young. There's all this stress on your head, and you think that's the world and there's nothing else. What you don't realize is, that's not what's going to give you the next 10 or 20 years. What really matters is what you know about yourself.

We used to have a trend when competition winners got a lot of gigs and they had great careers. It's all changing now. People don't take competition winners anymore. There's so many of them. Let's say you win a first prize. You're under their management for two, three years. You play everywhere, and then you're done. They have a new winner now. If you don't know how to pick yourself up from that moment on when your hype is over, if you don't know how to brand yourself, you're done.

Do the competitions. Have fun with it. Collect your connections at competitions. Pick your repertoire very carefully. Competitions are not going to give you your life.

It's the same with conservatories. There's a major issue with what we're taught. When I was growing up, conservatories never taught us how to live as musicians. We had lessons, we had classes, exams. But when I was done, I felt like I was an orphan. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to put a biography together. I didn't know how to put a press kit together. I didn't know what a manager was. I didn't know how to negotiate contracts. You need to know how to be a business person as well. They could have done a better job.

NYP: Yet you learned all that. Your promotional support system is very sophisticated and effective.

JL: I learned all that on my own. A friend of mine who quit music came over to my place, and he was screaming at me for thinking I could just sit there and people were just going to come knocking. He gave me such a lecture that I started trying to figure out how to start a website, trying to figure out how to do a press kit, all the things that have nothing to do with practicing. You need to know how to do this. You need to know how to YouTube something, you need to know how to Flickr, Twitter. You have Facebook, MySpace; networking and getting stuff out there. It's a whole different world.

NYP: And blogs?

JL: I don't blog, but I talk a lot.

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NYP: You have a lot to say, both at the keyboard and away from it.

JL: I ask myself all the time, what am I doing that makes a difference? What do you have to do to make it interesting enough that people actually care, that makes a difference in the context of history? What do I need to do to make sure that what I'm doing stays and changes something? That's hard. Maybe it makes my programming more interesting.

I get really depressed when I don't play, don't have concerts. It sounds really kitsch, but it's true. I'm always curious about new stuff. Even with the amount of music that I get all the time, I still take the time to listen to what the composers send me. Maybe I want to discover the next Ligeti.

People ask me, do I compose? I say, why? There's so much stuff out there. There's not enough interpreters. If I can just play my part and help some of these composers and bring some interesting things to audiences, I'll be really happy.

I'm just a tool. I'm the medium between the composers and the audience. If I can just have a concert where people still talk about it five years from now, then that's great.

