

How the talented Vicky Chang, a pipe organ composer from Taiwan, found a home in Buffalo

Making Buffalo Home is a WNED|WBFO multi-year project looking at the impact immigrants and refugees are having in our community. As WBFO's Nick Lippa reports, Dr. Peilun Vicky Chang has played pipe organ at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lancaster for 16 years now. The internationally renowned musician and composer has come a long way since leaving Taiwan.

What if I told you the first person to ever play an organ concerto in Taiwan called St. John's in Lancaster her home?

"I'm the first one to play an organ concerto in Taiwan, the Rheinberger organ concerto. Why that happened to me, I have no clue," said Chang.

She teaches several music classes at ECC, conducts the church choir, and can be found every Sunday playing during St. John's morning service. Churchgoer Gary Rudz is one of many who say they didn't know about all of her talents when she first arrived in 2003.

"My brother in law Mike was telling the same story," Rudz said. "Basically, he would hear her practice. He was outside here working on something in the church and you could just hear her playing wide open and filling the church with music. Outside you can hear it. It's a pretty amazing level of talent she has that you don't always see when you're just doing a hymn."

Chang ties her life's journey to her faith. While getting her undergraduate degree in Taiwan, the Presbyterian Church she attended received a new pipe organ.

"And they say, 'Hey Vicky.' I was majoring in piano performance. 'You know how to play keyboard. And you supposed to learn how to play in order to play for church service.' So that's why I started to get to know pipe organ. And then I loved it," Chang said. "In the beginning I didn't like it. Besides practicing the piano, it's very competitive. I'm thinking I don't have time for organ. But when as soon as I played the pipe organ I just fell in love with it."

"For the organ, especially there is something when you play church music, my soul just sings with it. I can feel that. Sometimes I was in tears, even just playing it.

Chang was about 19 when she started playing organ.

"My former teacher, he resides in Kentucky right now. He was a church music chairmen. A few of us from that church in Taiwan, we studied with him to know the pipe organ. And it's also he himself who encouraged me to come to USA," she said.

Chang jokingly said she thinks organ is one of her callings because she's tired of practicing a lot.

"I love music but I'm not a very diligent student to be honest," she laughed. "If I still was doing a piano major, I'd probably just become a teacher over there. I won't pursue higher education or everything. But because of the pipe organ, there's not many resources. So the only choice, you have to go somewhere."

Eventually her studies brought her to New York City in 1990.

"So the time I spent in USA is longer than the time I spent in Taiwan," Chang said.

"(At) the beginning I wanted to go to Germany. The conservatory there is popular and this famous teacher, he already accepted me. But my Mom, because at that time, not many people (there are) relatives or friends in Germany. She doesn't want me to go. But we have cousins, uncles, friends in USA. So she said, 'If you go to New York City it's ok.' So I ended up (going) to the Manhattan School of Music to study pipe organ."

When Chang got to Manhattan she knew how to play organ, but she didn't know the different styles of organ and how they sounded.

"When I first have chorus, it talks about registration. (Things) you need to know. First class I remember the teacher say, 'I want you to build a French style organ. But only three manuals. Write it down. The list of the stops you want to build. And I was sitting there. I'm thinking, 'What are you talking about?'" she laughed. "I was there, but I was very blessed because I had really good teachers all the way. They helped me in what areas I was lacking (in). And after I graduated from Manhattan. I got my master degree there."

After getting her Master's in Music and Piano Pedagogy Certificate at the Manhattan School of Music, Chang had a job lined up for her back in Taiwan.

"So if I took that job, I would be somebody in Taiwan right now," she laughed. "It's very interesting. I never (thought) of pursuing a doctorate degree. And I think it's god's timing. Everything just, the opportunities. So I decided to stay. So I went to Cincinnati Conservatory of Music."

That's when she started composing music for organ.

"Actually I started composing when I was a teen in Taiwan. But only songs. Not the organ. But when I was in Cincinnati, that's the time. And I never thought I could compose. For the songs? It's easy. It's melody. But for an organ it's totally different stuff," Chang said.

"I remember after a concert, somebody came to me and said, 'So you composed that?' I said 'Yes.' He said, 'Then it's based on a folk tune?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'How about the harmony?' I said, 'Well folk tune is only the melody.' And the guy I forgot who he is. He said, 'You have a really unique harmony. You know (your chord) progression and everything.' And to me I'm thinking it sounds right and to me I didn't study that. I'm not formally trained in composition," she laughed.

While working on her dissertations, a chance for a new opportunity arised.

"When I was in Cincinnati, I was so busy doing other stuff. At the time for my doctorate degree, the only thing I needed to write were my dissertations. And I'm thinking, I'm not going to finish there because I know too many people, too many activities," Chang said. "A friend from Canada says, 'Vicky, my roommate left. Will you come stay with me?' I'm thinking ok. Why not? So I have two suitcases. One is the material I write/research. One is my personal belongings. I don't even have a laptop. So I kind of just move there to finish my dissertation. And then that friend also is the one who is an immigrant from Taiwan to Canada. And she encouraged, 'Why don't you apply for citizenship in Toronto.' I immigrated to Toronto."

After spending a few years teaching at the Royal Conservatory of Music and working at Birch Cliff United Church, she made her way to Buffalo in 2003.

"Why Buffalo? Buffalo is close to Toronto," Chang laughed.

It wasn't until moving to Buffalo that she became an official US citizen.

"I came back to USA as like a religious worker. It's kind of my job right. But for me, I'm not only seeking a job, but also a church home," Chang said.

And she's been at St. John's ever since.

"Actually during this year I got a lot of invitations to work somewhere else. But every time, because I am a believer, I pray. Is this time? Does god want me to change my service location? Or change (my) job? There's a few times I pray about it. I don't think god tells me ok it's time to go. And for me, we have a new pastor coming. And every time when something changes, then I will pray, 'God do you want me to stay?' Or this and that. A lot of times church members, they worry about me leaving. I say, 'Don't worry about that. I'm not the one who make the decision. Oh I want to quit or doing this or that.' It's also part of my family," Chang said.

"But I cannot say I will stay here forever. It's just according to god's timing. When I was in Toronto, I stayed there for four years. And there was a lot of opportunities. But I still stayed at one church because I'm thinking it's the place I work and also I worship with people. And it's also my church home. That's my theory."

And since arriving, she's received international acclaim not just for her playing, but her compositions.

"It's all god's timing. It's very interesting. About the songs. My first suite for organ. How it got published. Professor Calvert Johnson, I never met him. He noticed me because I published articles in AGO (American organist magazine)," Chang said. "I write something about the organs in Taiwan and this and that. So Professor Johnson is the one who studies Asian works. So he contacted me and said, 'Hey. I've been gathering a lot of music from Korea, Japan, this and that. But not a lot from Taiwan and China.' And because I'm the organist and I write something about it (Johnson said), 'Can you give me some information?'

"So at that time I have a book about Taiwan. And I also include famous composers compositions related to organ. So I'm thinking, 'Oh I have the information I'm more than happy to give to you.' But when I want to send him the information, I just feel like when he said there wasn't that many people composing organ works, I'm thinking, 'I compose. But I'm not famous. But I compose.' So last minute I

throw a few of my organ works there. Just to look thicker. And it turns out that he loves my music. So he's been performing everywhere promoting it. He's quite famous in that field, so he talked to the publisher without me knowing," she said.

Shortly after, Chang received a call from the publisher asking how she knew Johnson.

"So the first question they ask me, 'What's the relationship between you and Professor Johnson.' I said, 'I never met him.' So they say 'Well, you know what send your music for us to review. We will see.' And they love it so they publish it. So one thing leads to another. So I didn't do anything about it. To me I think it's a gift. I'm very blessed," she said.

Chang never thought people would be interested in her compositions.

"I don't know because I grew up in a very conservative family. People they don't praise your kid. My parents are very modest people. So even though when I compose this and people say, 'Oh you should publish it.' And I'm thinking who am I? Nobody is interested in my music," she said.

Now Chang's works can be found on multiple CD's and books.

"I think god wanted me to keep the piano major, then I would have a chance to study organ and come to USA. So I'm still finding the way god wants me to do. But now it looks like he's calling me to compose more music."

One person that consistently encourages Chang outside of her teachers is her brother.

"He challenged me last year. Hey, compose something like an organist manual or handbook. For a lot of young organist church players, a lot of people (are) like me. They play piano then later on they want to try the organ or they want to serve the church. And my brother challenged me, 'Why don't you write something. Like a church year. Including Easter music, Christmas music, even Mother's Day music. You know but it's easy. It's like around three minutes.' For those people, they have a book that is easy to start playing for the church. And (the book) is due out this summer," she said.

So how do you know if organ may be right for you?

"If you can dance well, I think like maybe 85% of you are ok to play organ. But a lot of people, even if they are (a) piano player. They cannot handle organ. Because once their feet is on the pedals, they forget how to coordinate with their hands. It needs a lot of coordination. And it's fun, it's like a dance. When you play something it's fun to play," Chang laughed.

"When I was a kid, it (was) really hard for me to sit still. And organ, not only by playing, you can have like really good keyboard technique. But you also need imagination or a good ear, keen ear. Because you can arrange different sound. So different people playing same organ repertoire, actually because of the sound registration, the design, you will be in awe. How come it sounds so different? That's the beauty of organ but it's also the pain. Because every time you go to a different instrument, like different organ, they have a different combination. This and that. Acoustic. No entirely, exactly, instrument is the same."

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