

Interview: Sam Wu '17

Sam Wu, a composer from Shanghai, is a joint concentrator in music and East Asian Studies. He has won the Robert Levin, John Green and Hugh F. MacColl Prizes, an Artist Development Fellowship from the Office for the Arts, and the Harvard Bach Society Orchestra Composition Competition, among other international awards. His work has been performed by the Melbourne Symphony, Shanghai Philharmonic, Beijing National Center for the Performing Arts, Shanghai International Arts Festival, Callithumpian Consort, Antioch Chamber Ensemble, Princeton Pianists' Ensemble, and pipa master Wu Man, among others. This fall, Sam begins a master's program in composition at Juilliard.

Is it possible to summarize what your experience as a composer at Harvard has been?

"I'm grateful on many levels for the liberal arts education I received here. I was able to study both music and East Asian Studies, both of which helped me develop reading and writing skills, and critical thinking, all of which comes back to inspire my musical work. Even in courses like history or literature or religion, those approaches to thinking about issues translate back into music. I had some inkling that this would be true when I entered four years ago, and it was why I came there, but my last four years confirmed it.

My most extreme experience of music has been in the music department, but Harvard is also vibrant with extracurricular music. I've worked with the Gilbert and Sullivan Players, the Early Music Society, and was music director of the Mozart Society Orchestra, guest conductor of the Bach Society Orchestra, and assistant conductor of the HRO. I also wrote music for the choirs. A lot of musicians here don't want to go into music but are conservatory caliber. I was attracted to the idea of having more than music in life, and I found like-minded people. I wasn't alone.

Who are your composition mentors?

I worked with Chaya [Czernowin], Josh Levine, Hans [Tutschku], Richard Beaudoin; they were instrumental in my development. They challenged me to think more broadly and deeply.

Specifically?

I became more conscious of pre-composition, the time you examine your reasons for writing and all the ways you can think about a piece coming into being before you start it. I



The interconnectedness of our postmodern world is a major theme in my music. My experiences growing up make this pertinent: an Australian citizen who calls Shanghai home as he navigates American college life in Massachusetts. In an age where a night's sleep is all it takes to travel halfway around the world, and where Bach and Mongolian throat singing can occupy adjacent YouTube tabs, I explore and seek inspiration in non-Western musical traditions, even as I write and perform works within the classical lineage. I am interested in bridging apparent differences between cultures and musicians, and in doing so, seeking the subcutaneous common ground that we share as human beings.

didn't have that coming in—this way to think and talk about your music; to dive deeper, broaden strokes. I first ask myself what kind of sound world I am creating, and what are the logical threads and boundaries within which I operate. And then I start writing.

Was it possible to get your pieces performed?

If you're a pianist you can practice, but a composer is not practicing until you hear the piece live. The Harvard Composers Association is fantastic, as it produces concerts of our chamber music performed by professional musicians, for the last few years the Callithumpian Consort. Students and faculty both have broadened my listening palette over my time here, especially within new music. That was my big goal – to be open-minded.

You did quite a bit of conducting while you were here – how does that fit in?

Conducting and composing are intricately connected. In the kind of score study I do for conducting I'm asking myself why is this here, how does it inform my conducting, how could it inform my own work? There's so much to learn from every piece of music. Conducting broadens your knowledge of repertory.

How did your thesis piece, ephemerae, come about?

ephemerae was inspired by Fujian *nanyin*, ancient melodies from southeast China. It's classical chamber music that traces back to court music. For the Department of East Asian Studies I wrote an ethnographical survey of *nanyin* today. I traveled to Fujian Province and to Taiwan to interview scholars and educators in the tradition. I used this research as background knowledge to write *ephemerae*.

When I listen to *nanyin*, I have the impression that time is slowed down, that I'm suspended in a sound world submerged in a viscous fluid. So, how can I infuse my personal musical language with traces of *nanyin* to create a musical experience that can give this sense of suspended time?

Have you been able to work closely with faculty?

Chaya was a great help. I had bi-weekly lessons with her throughout the year to work on ephemerae. When I took Richard Beaudoin's 160 I was working on commission for Beijing Center for Performing Arts for a piece for didgeridoo and orchestra. Professor Beaudoin let me write this in class – I had the seminar to hear what others were doing and to do the work for the course, and private lessons with him as well.

Has your music changed over the past four years?

I think mostly I've broadened my interests. There are more avenues I can explore; I can hear more in my head. I can recognize new areas that I never knew existed before. I still have the core

Angela Tang, Enchi Chang, Sofia Tong and Sam Wu preparing for the Senior Composition Thesis Recital, which featured work by Ari Korotkin, Auburn Lee and Sam Wu.

