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*From Taiwan to Boston to Rome and recognition*

**The sounds -- and space -- of silence  
are music to the ears of BU alum and  
composer**

**By David J. Craig**

"Sixty-six times have these eyes beheld the changing scenes of autumn," reads a traditional Zen poem. "I have said enough about moonlight, ask me no more, ask me no more." The poem's plea for silent understanding, which could refer to the terse quality of Chinese poetry itself, also perfectly describes the sparse music of composer Shih-Hui Chen (SFA'93).

In *66 Times: The Voice of Pines and Cedars*, a chamber piece that was the culmination of Chen's doctoral work at BU, silence is employed as if it were an instrument. In the music, remarkable for its simplicity and lack of pretension, playful string, wind, brass, and vocal melodies are surrounded by long pauses much as the precise imagery in a Zen poem is accentuated by its clipped verses.

And like a Zen poet, Chen, through her reticence, says chapters. This summer she was one of 27 artists awarded the Rome Prize of the American Academy in Rome. The prize will allow Chen to take a sabbatical from her teaching position at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge to study and compose in Italy for the next year.

It was in the lobby of a working-class hotel owned by her grandmother in Pa-Tu, Taiwan, that Chen, as a small child, first heard Taiwanese opera. The music was "not very sophisticated," but was filled with emotional testaments to the dignity of ordinary lives, she recalls, and it somehow moved her. At age 6, she began to play piano and by 15, she was composing in the Western classical style.

Upon graduating from the National Academy of Arts of Taiwan in 1982, Chen realized that she would need further Western training to pursue a career in modern music. Music in Asia was "30 years behind what was modern in the West," says Chen, who had already fallen in love with the music of Bach and hungered to receive a more intellectual musical background. She received a master's degree from Northern Illinois University in 1984 and came to Boston in 1985, where she enrolled in the SFA doctoral composing program, and joined two local modern music troupes, the Underground Composers and NuClassix.

"With Western training, I've learned how to be precise and to execute what I want to hear," says Chen, who spoke with the BU Bridge from Rome by telephone this month. "In Chinese music, what's important is a sense of spaciousness, but here I learned more about how to think about the big picture when writing a long piece -- such as how the timing of one section affects the feel of another section."

Nearly 20 years after Chen came to the United States, the Eastern influence in her music is subtle but still apparent. According to Marjorie Merryman, a composer and an SFA associate professor of music theory and composition under whom Chen studied, the most accomplished aspect of her music is its use of space, and in that way it recalls the art and poetry of her home.



Composer Shih-Hui Chen (SFA'93) helps musician Wu Man, shown here playing a pipa, a traditional Chinese instrument, rehearse Chen's composition *Fu II*, which premiered last month at Carnegie Hall. **Photo by Vernon Doucette**

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"Chen's music is very sensual and highly poetic, and at the same time rather spare," says Merryman. "Her use of space

isn't something that you would say is characteristic of Chinese music, but the spirit of Chinese visual art and poetry, which are simple in their catalogue of imagery and not as busy and as heated as Western artwork, definitely gets into her music. In addition to having a wonderful sense of space, her music uses a limited vocabulary of gestures."

While the dramatic pauses in Chen's music give her compositions an emotional depth, they also create challenges when directing performances, she says.

"I don't want a pause that's a specific time, like two or three seconds," Chen says. "I want to feel the music flow and to let it breathe, because that makes the music that comes before the pause -- and after it -- so much more precious. But conductors never know exactly what to do, and they never seem to leave enough of a break. That's always a problem."

### **Returning to her roots**

While Chen has avoided writing music that is heavily influenced by that of her homeland, she recently began embracing Eastern music more fully. Her latest piece, entitled *Fu II*, uses a pipa, a traditional Chinese instrument that has four strings and resembles a lute. The piece was performed at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall last month.

"Before, I would never have used a Chinese instrument in any of my work," says Chen. "But now I'm coming back to the Eastern music." That it took her nearly 20 years to do so, she says, is "just because I'm slow, I guess. Some kinds of maturity take a while. When you're young, all you want to do is be daring and different. After a while, you realize that what's important is finding yourself."

Chen arrived in Rome last month, so she will have plenty of time to do just that. She is planning on composing another piece featuring the pipa, and currently is finishing a clarinet and piano composition that will be premiered at Stanford University next March. Rome has proven an inspiring atmosphere so far, she says, as Romans remind her of the strangers she would chat with during long afternoons spent at her grandmother's hotel as a youngster.

"I love to talk to people who are down-to-earth," Chen says. "I'm not too much into hanging out with overly sophisticated types. It's that intimacy of relating to people about normal things that inspires me."

Winning the Rome Prize will boost Chen's growing reputation as one of America's best young composers, says Merryman, who has judged the Rome Prize in past years. "The prize is

very competitive," she says. "Prominent composers apply for it. Chen has a growing reputation, and the Rome Prize will enhance it. She is going to get better and better known."

A film entitled *Once Removed*, with a score written by Chen, opens December 2 at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.