

MUSIC

For Chen, being a conductor is 'being the music'

By Colin Eatock

IN the classical music world, a new face is always before the public. But where orchestral conductors are concerned, the face usually belongs to a white guy.

This is the world that Mei-Ann Chen has stepped into. The 40-year-old Taiwan-born woman stands out among America's conductors as a "maestra" rather than a maestro.

Chen, who has lived in the U.S. since 1989, is enjoying a buoyant career. She's recently led orchestras in San Francisco; San Diego; Phoenix; Cincinnati; São Paulo, Brazil; and Umeå, Sweden.

And she's no stranger to Houston. She's appeared at the Texas Music Festival and in June made her debut leading the Houston Symphony.

She returns to the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra next weekend to open its new season leading a pair of programs, including "ROCO Celebrates Asia."

Chen is the music director of two orchestras: the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and the Chicago Sinfonietta. She spends about 18 to 20 weeks a year in Memphis and another 10 in Chicago. When she isn't in either of these cities, she's guest-conducting elsewhere.

"Guest conducting is like speed-dating," Chen says. "You only get three or four rehearsals to get to know the musicians."

She points out, "If the chemistry is there, it's magic. If not, it can still be a good performance, but it won't be as magical."

Yet in Chen's case, the

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra

When: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 27

Where: Asia Society Texas Center Performing Arts Theater, 1370 Southmore

Tickets: \$20-\$25; rocohouston.org.

When: 5 p.m. Sept. 28

Where: St. John the Divine: 2450 River Oaks Blvd.

Tickets: \$10-\$25; rocohouston.org.

magic seems to happen with impressive frequency, say some of the glowing reviews she's left in her wake.

"Chen is terrific," declared the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, reviewing her first appearance with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. "For her debut's big showpiece, Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony, her account was emotionally warm, rhythmically alive, beautifully structured, even a bit showy and theatrical."

And when she led the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, the Rocky Mountain News described her as "thrilling to watch, passionate and committed, yet on the money with cues and pacing."

In its own cautious way, classical music is changing. Conductors from non-Caucasian backgrounds — such as the Houston Symphony's new Hispanic maestro, Andrés Orozco-Estrada — are stepping up to major orchestras.

And female conductors — such as Marin Alsop in



Mei-Ann Chen, who will open the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra's new season, is focused on molding all the musicians on stage into one voice.

Baltimore or JoAnn Falletta, who was in Buffalo, N.Y., for many years and now leads Belfast's Ulster Orchestra — are also appearing on the podium.

So what's it like to be a conductor in America who's neither white nor male? Chen ponders the question and then offers a nuanced response.

"If we're talking purely about conducting, I can say from experience that musicians judge conductors on whether they give them what they need to play the music well. They don't care about background, or gender or race. They care about whether you can make music with your body language."

She continues: "However, if we're talking about the position of music director, things can be different. In America, a music director is not simply the person on the podium — the music director is the face of the orchestra in the community. So that's a little trickier. It all depends on what kind of person a community is ready to embrace."

Chen's ascent to prominence as a conductor began in 2005, at Denmark's Malko Competition for young conductors, held every three years in Copenhagen. She was completely unknown in Europe at the time and up against conductors who were more experienced than she was. Yet she walked away with the top prize.

Her musical journey began with childhood violin lessons in Taiwan. However, she says that she knew from age 10 she wanted to be a conductor.

"I was attracted to using



Rosalie O'Connor Photography

"I was attracted to using body language to communicate with other people in order to influence the sound," Mei-Ann Chen says of her budding interest in conducting at 10 years old. "That, to me, was magic."

body language to communicate with other people in order to influence the sound," she recalls. "That, to me, was magic."

At 16, her violin became her ticket to America.

"I was discovered when a youth orchestra from the New England Conservatory, in Boston, was on tour in Asia. After the performance, I went backstage to ask the conductor, Benjamin Zander, if he would hear me play. He said yes, so the next day, I showed up at his hotel. I think he was impressed with my passion, and I was offered a scholarship onto the spot to the New England Conservatory."

She convinced her parents that her goal was to become a professional violinist — while

"My most influential mentors were Robert Spano, the music director of the Atlanta Symphony, and Marin Alsop, the music director of the Baltimore Symphony — I was assistant to both of them. They helped me in many ways — it isn't an easy journey to become a conductor. The opportunities are few, and the competition is great."

Mei-Ann Chen

secretly hoping her studies in Boston would be the springboard for a conducting career.

However, now that her dream has been realized, Chen finds it hard to describe exactly

what it is that conductors do.

"I would say that conducting is about 'being the music,' not beating the music," she says, tentatively. "It's about feeling the music from the inside out.

Also, conducting is about molding all the musicians on stage into one single voice."

Searching for an analogy, she compares her work to her other passion in life: reading crime novels.

"I think there's connection between detective stories and conducting because studying a musical composition is very much like solving a puzzle. There may not be a dead body involved — except maybe in opera — but when you study music, you look for clues left behind by the composer to understand what the music is trying to convey."

Colin Eatock is a composer who covers classical music. He lives in Toronto.