

## PROFILE — ALISSA CHEUNG

Alissa Cheung is a violinist and a member of Quatuor Bozzini (QB), based in Montréal. Her solo and chamber performances have taken her throughout Canada, the US, Europe and Asia, and her work has been featured in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Edmonton Sun*, and has been broadcast on the BBC (UK), ÖRF (Austria), SRF (Switzerland), NPO (Netherlands) and CBC Radio (Canada).



Alissa Cheung

As a composer, her works have been performed at the Chapelle Historique du Bon-Pasteur (Montréal) by Ensemble Arkea, at Salle Bourgie (Montréal) by Quatuor Bozzini, at the University of Michigan by percussion duo Arx Duo, in New York and Chicago by electric guitar quartet Instruments of Happiness, in Jordan Hall (Boston) by the Boston and Turtle Island String Quartets, in Australia by Duo Myburgh-Feakes and in Switzerland by Duo Luce. She is regularly featured as composer-in-residence at the C'mon Festival in Edmonton. In recent works she has experimented with improvisational aspects and open forms, resulting in a co-composed piece that differs from performance to performance.<sup>1</sup>

*Which came first for you, composing or performing?*

Performing came first in my life. I started violin at age four and already had a strong musical basis because my sister played piano and violin. She was the in-house accompanist and arranger and we would often play her arrangements of hymns in church contexts. Growing up, I preferred playing strictly written music in classical or musical-theatre contexts, or being an improviser, filling out melodies, textures and harmonies in church bands.

I am mostly self-taught on piano and enjoy playing Schumann's *Kinderszenen* or easy Mozart piano sonatas. I picked up guitar in my teens enough to play for church, and joined my high-school jazz band on vibraphone and conga drums. I have recently added viola and ukulele to the mix, as young students approached me for lessons.

Composing came about around 2010. Seminal moments in my undergraduate years, such as playing Ligeti in the McGill Contemporary Ensemble, working with Oliver Knussen on Elliott Carter's music at Tanglewood and choosing a Canadian work to perform in my final recital, sparked an awareness and interest in contemporary classical music. Sometimes I could not find the music I wanted to play, so someone suggested to me to write it myself. My first piece was for me and my roommates while I was doing my master's degree, scored for two violins and steel pan that we played in a restaurant bar. Having 'caught the bug', so to speak, I continued writing pieces for

<sup>1</sup> [www.alissacheung.com](http://www.alissacheung.com) (accessed 31 January 2022).

myself and friends to play, and now have received more commissions for pieces that I do not perform myself.

***And when did you know that you wanted to become a musician?***

I think on some level I always knew I wanted to become a musician. I was never a big competition winner but I knew I had a gift for it and enjoyed making meaningful musical experiences with performers and for audiences.

Nevertheless, I was strongly encouraged to do a science degree when I started university, as it was thought it would be a more lucrative and stable career choice. After my third year of organic chemistry and multiple summers of scientific research, I knew deep down that I wanted to pursue music. Around the same time my father had made a major career change in order to pursue his own dream job, so it was a 'now or never' situation for both of us. As I finished my last year in science, I prepared my audition to transition to an undergraduate degree in violin.

Interestingly, some of the aspects of scientific research that I enjoyed the most, such as contemporaneity, project-based work, teamwork and collaboration, are equally applicable in music.

***How do you find the relationship between playing so much new music as part of QB and your own music? Does your composerly sensibility inform your approach to a new piece? Do you ever find that some part of a particular score has found its way into your music?***

I am so lucky to be able to glean from the performative and compositional aspects of contemporary classical string-quartet playing. Every time I receive a score that is new to me, I try to see it through a composer's lens first: material, form, texture, orchestration, mood, etc. Then my task as a performer is to find how I would interpret it to arrive at the 'truth' of the score. Keeping an open mind, especially in workshop or residency settings, is paramount to the experimental process, to exploring the 'what ifs', particularly with composers who are unfamiliar with stringed instruments or are looking for new sounds. Bringing a composer's ideas to life is truly one of the great joys of playing music, even more so when one develops a relationship with them and journeys together in discovery and realisation.

As a composer, I have definitely borrowed ideas from the composers that I have worked with through Quatuor Bozzini. Some composers have also informally become mentors who I consult, which is more often the case when my music contains open-score or text forms. Working with the quartet has also boosted my confidence in my own composition, because we often champion music that is not flashy or impressive from the outset but about craft and essence.

***It's always seemed to me, as an envious brass player, that there's something very special going in string quartets. You play in many different ensemble settings, and as a soloist, too, so can you say what it is that makes quartet playing so distinct?***

So much to unpack, but here are three quick points.

First, four is one of the most perfect numbers in terms of group dynamic. With one player, one has all the agency but lacks diversity of perspective. Two players, the dynamic is always one or the other, or one with the other. Three players, it is hard not to leave the third

person out because the number two is so intimate (I find it the most difficult to compose for any sort of trio). Five and more players becomes many opinions, so compromise or leadership becomes necessary. Somehow the number four is the perfect balance of agency and democracy and allows for different successful combinations.

Second, the string quartet has such a monolithic history in Western classical music and dates back longer than some of the common chamber ensemble combinations we hear today, such as wind quintet, Pierrot ensemble or percussion quartet. Sometimes this history paralyses contemporary composers with its weight, but as a performer it means there is so much great music to choose from. One of the only other forms I can think of that surpasses the wealth of string-quartet music is solo piano works.

Working with Quatuor Bozzini, we continue to write the history of string-quartet concert music, but it has also been fascinating to discover how our art form can intersect and integrate with other disciplines, such as theatre, dance, film, art installation, in new and authentic ways. Quatuor Bozzini has its own running bucket list for past, present and future musics, and we hope to get to it all!

Third, I think the cliché of likeness between stringed instruments and human voice has some truth to it. I am convinced that the perfect textural blend in a string quartet, as in a brass ensemble or choir, resonates (pardon the pun) with a primal desire in every human being for harmony and solidarity.