

## Swans captured via Net

Charlie Chan is one of a growing number of modern musicians who are mixing old and new techniques in order to do something different — on their own terms.

**LESLEY SLY** asks how, why and what next?

Technology has set the contemporary composer free. Not only to compose in new and different ways, but also to reach larger and more diverse audiences.

Developments in music and computer technology, and in communication systems, have created a musical global village such as we've never known. As well as offering listeners greater access to new music, they've also affected the way music is made. They've encouraged a cross-pollination of ideas on a scale beyond the wildest dreams of composers of earlier times who could usually look no further than to folk music of their own or nearby cultures for inspiration.

If experimentation, independence, interaction, and international distribution are the things which matter most, then musicians now have unprecedented freedom to create and control music on their own terms. Those who have just been frozen out by the latest round of cuts in arts funding may not agree, especially if they still write to manuscript paper with a quill and are unable to perform their own work. Because, in order to take advantage of these new freedoms, a modern composer must embrace (some aspects of) technology.

Charlie Chan is proof of how this theory works in practice. She calls herself a virtual corporation. What she means is that she's landed in the 1990s somewhere left of the big musical playing field but dead centre in her own sonic universe. She's mixing traditional and cutting edge musical styles and sounds; working through a multinational publishing company and her own independent record label; performing live with acoustic instruments as well as in digital mode via Internet 'broadcasts'.

Chan plays six instruments fluently and was one of the first women in Australia to embrace music technology. She's now finding new ways to blend both spheres.

She began on piano at the age of three, trained as a double bass player, played in youth orchestras, and by 15 was already composing for small ensembles. Then, while still a teenager, she immersed herself in the explosion of music technology which had

begun with synthesisers in the 1970s. In the last few years she's played in several rock bands and has written numerous soundtracks for film, theatre, dance and television. And she's released three albums.

She took a touring ensemble to Malaysia in 1996 to promote her first album, *The Adventures of Charlie Chan* (Sony), and performed in various instrumental configurations in Australia last year at jazz festivals, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival, theatres, and clubs. When not performing, she's recording, making her own CD-ROMs or designing gadgets for her website, in a state-of-the-art studio and programming suite in her Sydney-based home. Although she has record company support, she's using the Internet to find a bigger international audience. Her website attracts thousands of musical tourists each week and she sells her CDs directly through the site.

However, she admits that these new freedoms come at a cost. Time is expensive and these activities, plus all the learning curves which come with the territory of new technology, can be a daunting load in the life of the self-employed musician.

'There is a danger of keeping so much control that you become an administrator of your music rather than a performer of it! Some days I don't know where to start and I often don't have time to play the piano. I'll more likely be doing my books or writing email messages, sending CDs to people, or organising a tour. But I do, at least, get to make all these decisions and I also think it's amazing that when I get up each day, I'm excited about the things I might do.'

She says hers isn't music to intellectualise about and yet she wants people to understand it. Hence the Web page and the CD-ROM. 'I'm using those things to explain what this sound is about and who I am. The Internet is fantastic for that because I'm not the kind of artist who would have a fan club or an interest group.'

'Authoring my own website is just an extension of my creativity, and so in this 'marketing' I'm able to be myself and not

someone else's perception of who I am. I want people to hear my music and I want a response, and I have to keep finding creative ways to develop that audience.'

When synthesisers first emerged, Luddites gnashed and wailed about how technology would kill 'real' music. Their fears weren't entirely groundless — there are a lot of albums in the world which have been made by people who have no musical training and they're not all ground-breaking! But for the serious composer, technology has, among other things, closed the gap between composition and performance, and many composers use these tools merely as a capturing device. Chan's second album, *East and West*, was a collection of improvised solo piano pieces, a major departure from the first which was a mix of acoustic and synthetic sound sources in a fairly ambient setting.

'I'd always wanted to do a piano album,' she explains. 'It's a very naked thing and I didn't know how people were going to react to my 'stream of consciousness'. It was so improvised that while recording it, I wasn't even sure if I'd release it because I thought it might be seen as too self-indulgent.'

'But, in another sense, this wasn't abnormal behaviour for me. Everything I've played has always been improvised, very makeshift. I do enjoy perfecting things and with technology you can do that — go back over the music and make it all very neat. But I also really like the raw energy of just doing it.'

Although she has a well-furnished studio, she's now replaced a penchant for technological perfection with a quest for dynamic performance. She doesn't mind that a recording she did recently at home with classical guitarist Slava Grigoryan has crickets chirping in the background. Or that *East and West* has a few 'errors' on it.

'I want the technology to be transparent these days and errors in some cases become part of the piece for me now. What is really important is the energy you bring to music and I don't care what people say, technology can't fix that when it isn't there.'

The new album, *Wild Swans* (Martian

## NON TROPPO



Charlie Chan: 'I think Luddite musicians are going to have to take a long hard look at their future.'

Music MM103, through MRA) is a sum of influences, and is more exotic and World-ish than her first. Guest musicians include Tasmanian singer/songwriter, Monique Brumby and cellist John Napier. 'I have very personal choices when it comes to collaborators ... it's about energy, and my principles must align with theirs.'

Like most contemporary composers she laments recent funding cuts for the arts because she believes this will seriously inhibit experimentation. 'We really need money to support experimentation. Nobody can freely give of their time and resources without suffering in some way. One must have a considerable amount of personal wealth — both emotional and financial — to be able to do that. It's true that if I'd had more support I may have gone in a very different direction. I've had to do a lot of "commercial" work and that music has to be made very quickly, there often isn't time for refining it.'

'But it's always been that way. Take Bernard

Herrmann as an example — he really did need to work on movies because he needed to earn a living. He's probably one of the greatest score composers of this time, but it's interesting to wonder what he might have done had he not been under that financial pressure.'

While funding is diminishing, classical labels are broadening their rosters and many now have new labels for artists who can't be easily labelled classical, jazz, or world music. Bang On A Can, Geoff Smith, Joe Jackson, and Synergy are a few examples.

Chan has a publishing deal with Sony. Her second album was released through their ACML label but her new release is on her own label, Martian Music. 'I think the old adage "classical label" is being redefined because in this country we've never really seen the broadest spectrum of what "classical" really is. We get what a record company chooses to release. The advent of CD sales on the Internet has made a lot of companies aware of the fact that we're not a

bunch of dummies still listening to the 100th recording of the *Moonlight Sonata*. We want to hear music from everywhere and technology is making that possible.'

For a technologist, Chan cites some traditional influences — Chopin, Beethoven, Mozart — and for three years has been working on a large orchestral piece. 'I've been experimenting widely for years and I think that's something that can be difficult for a lot of "classical" composers. I can, at least, hear the music as I'm creating it, and that's exciting. I can perform it too, and in a lot of different ways. I don't have to wait years for an orchestra to perform it.'

'I do think that Luddite musicians are going to have to take a long, hard look at their future. Sure, the orchestral and ensemble composition is alive and well and is performed in concert settings. But the delivery of music is changing and becoming so much broader, and technology allows us to experience music in new ways.'

'It's going to become much more interactive. In the very near future, you'll be able to connect to a website that lets you select a composition and place it in a (virtual) listening room of your choice, maybe Carnegie Hall or an amphitheatre in Greece. And then you'll be able to alter the mix of the recording — change the ratio of horns to strings, for example. You'll be able to select your own version and not be restricted to what the composer thinks is the best version. After all, who cares what the composer thinks!'

From the composer's point of view, is current technology still limiting? 'I want to generate music out of my thought processes, I want three-dimensional sounds and immersive experiences with audio, which is what I've been aspiring to with my more ambient pieces. The technology, to do everything I want, is nearly there.'

'These possibilities are very exciting but, while I love using technology and while it's a very big part of what I do, it isn't the technology which drives my music. I create music because it effectively communicates my thoughts and feelings, and because I believe that my perspective is important and that what I do makes a difference. Technology is just making it easier to do that. ■

Charlie Chan's website:  
<http://www.charliechan.com.au>