

Vivian Gu: Living in Harmony as Mother and Cellist

Judith van Praag

Vivian Gu's day starts when her two-year-old Annabella calls out for her mommy at six o'clock in the morning. Shortly after 7:30 a.m., Gu's mother arrives to relieve her daughter, who disappears to the basement for a 30-minute run on the treadmill. After a shower and breakfast, "always the same – oatmeal, with nuts ground by my father," Gu's off to Seattle Symphony's Benaroya Hall. No need to carry her instrument, for she keeps one cello at home and another at work.

Gu was born in Shanghai in 1965. At the age of six-and-a-half, she was given a violin. Three years earlier, Wei-Fang, her older brother by four years, had started studying the same instrument. Not to cause competition between siblings, their parents quickly decided Vivian should study the cello instead. Since a regular instrument was too large to handle, Gu's father had a child size cello built for his little "Yun-Yin" (meaning "agreeable music").

Young Vivian studied music after school on weekdays and was tutored every weekend by her grandfather on her mother's side, her first mentor and inspiration. Later, when the children were more advanced, Gu's grandfather, his daughter and grandchildren would play a quartet.

At the Conservatory, cello was Vivian's major, piano her minor. While Western recordings were banned, Gu remembers Pablo Casals being her first professional inspiration. Later, and still, inspired by Yo-Yo Ma and contemporaries, she has added modern Chinese composers such as Tan Dun (best known for the film music of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon") to her list.

Starting in 1987, students who would receive their degree at the end of the fourth year had to either pay back the tuition (which until then had been free), or stay in China for five

years.

"This was to keep good students in the country," Gu says.

At age 22, after finishing her third year, she left for the United States on a full scholarship, sponsored by Wei-Fang, who was already a graduate student at University of Southern California. After two years, she obtained an advance study certificate and began subbing for the Sacramento Orchestra.

In September of 1994, Gu started at the Seattle Symphony (which celebrates its 101st season this year). By chance she had heard of an opening in the cello section of the orchestra. Of the audition, Gu remembers playing in a concentrated manner, eyes closed, enjoying the music. At the end of the concerto she was shocked out of her reverie, when she opened her eyes to see Maestro Gerard Schwarz (who celebrates his 20th anniversary as Seattle Symphony Music Director this season), standing right in front of her. Expecting that someone more familiar with the Orchestra might have got the job, she was in for another surprise.

She has a 20-hour workweek. "That includes concerts and rehearsals, but not the 8-14 hours I practice at home," Gu says. "Practice is necessary for technique, for limber fingers."

In 1999, Vivian Gu married Joe Cook, the Technical Director at Benaroya Hall. Cook plays jazz piano. Trained as a classical musician, Gu cannot improvise, though she would love to.

"It sounds so fun," she says, "Joe tried to teach me, but I just can't do it. You can't just start playing something unexpected when you play in a symphonic orchestra. You have to play in the same tempo, with the same dynamics."

She adds that playing in an orchestra is physically and

mentally tiring. "Classical musicians all count, that comes naturally when you are at rest, but you need total concentration."

After practice, Gu plays with Annabella, and after dinner she returns to Benaroya Hall to perform.

Combining motherhood with being a professional musician isn't easy. Sometimes the baby is still awake when her mommy comes home late at night. Sometimes Gu's husband has to work even later. He may need to strike a set, prepare the stage for a different company the next day. At such times Annabella's parents don't see each other much. So they cherish their hours together. And, they're thankful that Gu's mother helps them out.

The couple's advice for parents who want their kids to follow a musical career: "Expose them to every kind of music. Introduce them to all different art forms, support the arts, visit the Seattle Art Museum. Let them go to Symphony Outreach Programs, so they can see established well trained musicians at work."

In other words, show them that learning can be fun.

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