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CULTURE ↓

What It's Really Like to Be a Classical Musician

In our 9-5 series, we ask boss babes what a day in their work lives entails. This week, pianist Silvie Cheng, one of CBC's top classical musicians under 30, gives us a glimpse into her daily grind

Feb 17, 2016 Ishani Nath 0



CLASSICAL PIANIST SILVIE CHENG (PHOTO CREDIT: QIN DING)

Age: 25

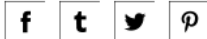
Length of time at current gig: I started playing when I was five and a half [Cheng grew up in Ottawa], but it wasn't until grade 11 when I actually ended up choosing music as my career. So I guess I've been a "professional" pianist for eight years, but I've been playing for 20 years.

Education: Bachelors and Masters in Music with a specialty in piano performance from the Manhattan School of Music.

How do you spend your day? Right now it's balanced between performing and teaching. I'm part of the distance learning program at the Manhattan School of Music where I teach students in the rural areas of the United States—like Nebraska or Maine where they don't have a lot of music funding—over video conference. I spend a lot of time traveling, too. I'm recording an album with my brother [Bryan Cheng, the other half of the [Cheng²](#) performance duo] in Germany and then we'll be playing in Port Hope, Montreal, New York, and this summer we're going to China.

How often do you practice the piano? 5 to 6 hours a day.

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What do you do before you sit down at the piano to get yourself in the zone? I warm-up, as if I was going to go for a run or to yoga class. I think of musicians as athletes because we use the same muscles, although they're much finer motor muscles, so I've been stretching a lot before and after I play and in between I take breaks.



(PHOTO CREDIT: JAMIE JOHNSON)

What is your workspace like? At home in New York City, I practice on a spinet, which is like a mini upright piano. I live a couple blocks away from the Manhattan School of Music where I teach so I'm also able to go in there and practice—I prefer to practice on grand pianos because the touch is very different.

What do you wear to work? When I'm performing, I'm usually wearing some kind of long gown and since the majority of pianos I perform on are black, and my hair is black, I tend to go for something colourful. I also try and pick gowns that will complement the music. For example, if I'm playing a concert featuring impressionist music, I might wear a dress that has fabric similar to an impressionist painting.

When you play pieces that are classics, do you put your own spin on them? These works have touched people in different ways through the centuries and really become gems of history. But, at each era, audiences react to the pieces differently. When Mozart was writing his pieces, he was playing in small salons or for royalty, but these days, they're played for giant amphitheatres so the way you'd play that for the listeners, it has to change. There's so much room to find your own voice.



What's the best part of your day? When I'm able to channel what I'm feeling through music. Having people come up after a performance with tears in their eyes, that's the most rewarding thing because you feel that we are able to communicate with people in a way that words can't.

What's the worst part of your day? The business and the administrative side. I definitely did not anticipate the influx of emails and things to take care of when I became a self-managed artist.

If someone wanted to be a classical musician, what qualities do they need? The most important thing is to truly love what you do, and not doing it for external factors like fame or fortune because those are largely unattainable and very fleeting. You have to have internal satisfaction to be able to wake up everyday and pursue this.

After a long day practicing or performing, how do you unwind? I like to cook. Guacamole is my go-to snack and I make a lot of Chinese dishes that I grew up eating with my family that you can't get in restaurants. I find it very relaxing and almost an art in itself.

What is it about classical music that speaks to you? There's so much depth to classical music because it captures the whole spectrum of human emotions. It resonates with my soul.