

Sharon Kam

One of the world's leading clarinet soloists speaks to Chris Walters about the competition that launched her career, staying true to herself in an ever-evolving profession, and her new recording of works by Hindemith



PHOTOGRAPHY: NANCY HOROWITZ

Chris Walters: The pandemic has been such a challenging time for musicians. How has it been for you?

Sharon Kam: In the beginning, I really had a feeling of the end of the world – lying in bed thinking, there's no way I can get up. I have three kids – two of them not living at home, but one that just turned 13. And that means you have to get out of bed, to be there for her and make sure she's okay.

Also, everything that has to do with music – management, instruments, factories, manufacturers, stores – was relying on us to find a way to continue the profession. This was something very new to me, because normally I'm doing my art, concentrating on practice, going out teaching and inspiring people. But I didn't realise that it's not just me and my audience – there's also a whole industry around me which is very fragile. And this made me sit up and think, this is a situation we have to deal with.

Even after difficult times and wars, art came back, and it was important for building up society again. We have to believe that's going to happen now too.

CW: I wanted to congratulate you on your new album and ask you a little bit about Hindemith. What is it that you admire about this composer's works for clarinet?

SK: Well, I grew up in a viola family, and Hindemith and the viola are very connected because he played viola himself. And he wrote so much for the instrument, not all of it great.

As a young artist here in Germany, I had the chance to record the Hindemith Sonata. I played it studying in Israel already, but I didn't go into it very deep. It's true for many composers, but especially for Hindemith – the fluctuation between fantastic, experimental and horrible is huge. And I felt his music did not deserve to be all put together in one drawer – there are some pieces that really should be played.

I still have my first score of the Hindemith Sonata where my mother wrote the Hebrew definitions of the German words. He writes all his tempo markings in German, which was not a language I spoke back then. And then I came to Germany and realised I can actually read and understand what he wants. That fascinated me, because as I got to know this language and this country, I felt I was getting closer to him by the minute.

I was then asked to perform the Hindemith Concerto, I think the first time was in Basel. I learned it by heart, becoming totally fascinated by the piece – and the fact that nobody plays it! That was in my late 20s. I have tried and tried to replay it, and I've managed maybe three or four times in my whole career. Nobody wanted it. I just found that so sad.

I listened to recordings of the work and found that clarinetists mostly put in the time needed, but not always the orchestra, and sometimes the recordings are just lacking something. And I thought, I have to do it differently. I found a young conductor who was willing and able to spend the time required, who wanted to understand the piece and was fascinated by it as much as I was. And I found an orchestra [Frankfurt Radio Symphony] who understood the importance of making this piece really shine.

I know the wind players in the orchestra mostly by first names, and I've played chamber music with some of them. Everybody wanted to make the best, most intimate recording. I think we achieved this, and I couldn't have done it on my own.

CW: Do you think that this disc will help you promote the Concerto as a concert work?

SK: I really hope so. Covid has put a handbrake on innovation, and I find that orchestras don't want to plan in advance. They are a little bit afraid of putting on things that the audience doesn't really, really want to hear. This has been my experience in the last year. But I hope that when normal times return, orchestras and promoters will say, let's take the risk. Let's allow our audiences to maybe enjoy a Hindemith piece.

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CW: You're highlighting the challenges of deviating from the very small core of works that audiences are keen to hear again and again. This must be something that occupies your creativity all the time – to have conversations around that issue in a new way.

SK: It's easier to sell a completely new composition from a composer that an orchestra doesn't know and has never heard of – maybe even a piece that hasn't been written yet. And that bothers me in a way. I'm infatuated by new music, and having new music being performed by artists who are alive and kicking is important. All these great pieces we've played again and again were once played for the first time, so we have to play contemporary music now. I really believe that.

But today, it's still either something completely contemporary or it's Mozart, Brahms or Beethoven. I find there's a gap there, and it's too big. We have to try to get to know all composers, even if we then decide we don't like them. But to not play particular composers... I don't feel that's okay. The Germans are playing German composers, the French are playing French composers, the English are playing English composers... Instead of getting to know all the compositions of all different periods from all over the world, the world is actually becoming smaller.

So, why don't we just take a leap and try to get to know different composers from different eras and different countries more? I think that's important, especially if the pieces are as good as this Hindemith Concerto.

CW: What about the Quartet, which is an intriguing work?

SK: I've played that a lot more. It's the most complex piece on the CD, and the most complex that I know from Hindemith. It's not possible just to pull it together and play it. You really need

to understand it, from the first to the last note of the piece. We just had a fantastic time, putting it together and rehearsing and talking about it – and finding a special sound we wanted to create for each movement and the whole work.

CW: How do you go about managing and planning your career as a solo artist? When I think about it, it seems like a very complicated task.

SK: It is, and the level of playing is getting higher. I'm mind boggled, sometimes, by some young artists who really can play a lot of different things. And the border between styles is getting softer.

Of course, money is tighter now, so an orchestra maybe doesn't really know what its budget will be next year. They are uncertain what soloists and what class of soloists they can afford, or what conductors they're going to have. So everything is shorter-term and faster, which makes it more difficult.

Also, record companies don't have the type of budget that they used to. So a lot of the planning is no longer about making a big orchestral CD, then a recital, then chamber music. It's more about what they have money for. This can be unsettling, but also inspirational in a way because we have to work with the money we have.

Equally, we might have to deal with a tour where a promoter might say no to some things because we don't have the money. And you wonder, should I offer to take the money off my earnings? Or do we change the programme? These are things that I didn't have to deal with a long time ago. We could just be artists and do our thing.

CW: Tell me more about the creative approach you have taken in building your career.

SK: I decided a long time ago that I needed to develop myself and do what I want to do, not what's expected. Otherwise, I'd be doing my Mozarts and Webers and Coplands all year long, and I wouldn't be getting anywhere. So I go my own way, and not necessarily with the planning of orchestras or record companies. I just decide what I want to do and rehearse and practice things that are not useful for anybody but myself, and maybe in two years it will have developed and I can try to build something from it.

I need to practice for a long time, to develop for myself at a very slow pace – and then, boom, okay, I have this idea. Then I'm all 'power woman', pushing and shoving until I get that idea of mine on the stage, on a disc, into the public, into the world. You need to be really strong minded to do that. And you also need finances – the chamber music, recitals and concertos that I'm playing regularly keep my budget going so I'm able to take the time to develop new ideas.

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CW: Tell me about your journey with the Copland Concerto, which I understand you were instrumental in bringing to wider attention in Germany?

SK: When I came to Germany nobody knew it. I played it in the ARD International Music Competition in Munich in 1992, and the competition said, you have to play Copland in the televised concert, because this is a new piece to all of us. The orchestra ➡

worked hard to be able to play it. It was not in their repertoire. Then it went boom, and everybody wanted to have it everywhere. And now it's a normal piece for the clarinet in Germany – I have students coming to play me this piece because their teachers maybe don't know it so well. Nobody thinks about the fact that it wasn't here when I came.

These are very small but important steps. International artists can make it possible to hear a piece in Mexico and bring it to England, or bring an English piece to Finland, or wherever. This is what we have to do – this is our important role.

CW: It is interesting to hear about how the ARD competition played an important part in launching your career. How was that experience for you? How would you feel now if, for some reason, somebody said that you had to do it again?

SK: As I did the competition, I was finishing my studies at the Juilliard School in New York. And I actually had management in the States already and was playing concerts.

I was basically giving myself a deadline – by the time you finish your bachelor's, you need to be making money from clarinet playing as a soloist. If you don't, you have to mix the cards again and see what you want to do. My idea was to be a clarinet soloist and not do any orchestral playing in my life. I was actually saying, if I don't make it as a soloist, I'm not going to be a clarinetist. I'll go back to Israel, I'll finish my army service and go study physics or something like that, because I was very interested in sciences also.

I grew up in an orchestral household. My mother was a violist in the Israel Philharmonic for many years and very happy as an orchestral musician. But I saw her life and realised that for a person like me, with a strong personality and the ability to really annoy people, I'd probably not be able to sit happily in an orchestra! Seriously, I was a very edgy, pushy, annoying person, and I needed to be that way to start my career. You need to be very bold to just stand there and say, this is my interpretation, and it is the right one – giving answers even if nobody's asking the questions. I learned a lot and became a passionate, genuine musician, but I still do not play in orchestra.

My teacher back then said, if you want to have a solo career, you need to go all the way and do an international competition. And I was not the competition type, and I'm still not. I'm not the type of person to stand in line and get a number. I don't believe it's the right thing to do. But of course, you need to get out there. And how do you get out there? A competition is the only possibility.

So, I went to this Munich competition and basically pushed myself to do it. I felt like I was in a war zone the whole time. Everybody else had a much better sound and played much better. I was really terrified. When the competition started, people who were fantastic were getting kicked out – all the solo clarinet players of all the greatest orchestras in Germany, I met them all in this competition. And every day, it was just one more round, then one more round. You just go into your practice room and try to survive. I had my own pianist with me, which was very comforting,

and I tried to make my circle around me as cosy as possible.

Of course, however, it changed my life. It gives you sort of a stamp of approval. I don't think I played any better the day after the competition, but the world saw me. Especially in Germany, having Sabina Meyer there, opening a huge stage for clarinet solo playing – and her 200 concerts a year and being able to play 400 if she said yes to everything – there was just a market out there. Plus, I was sort of the 'contrast' person – the non-German, French-system clarinet, dark hair... it sort of fit. It was one of those things that just was a stroke of luck.

If I had to play in a competition today, I'd do it with a pinch of salt and a wry eye. It's 30 years of experience – I could easily do it. How lucky I was, though, that I just did one competition and the world accepted me. Now, reflecting back, I don't believe how I did any of it! It was good that I didn't have the time to think.



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CW: How have you approached developing your sound and style, especially given that you play a French system clarinet in Germany?

SK: The sound itself was quite intuitive. I still play the same type of mouthpiece I found when I was 18 years old. This was a copy of a Peter Eaton mouthpiece, which I soon replaced with an actual Peter Eaton mouthpiece. I'm Israeli, playing a French system clarinet in Germany with an English mouthpiece. I picked everything that I liked about clarinet playing worldwide and put it into one box.

I was looking for, and still am looking for, the connection to the voice. This is what I was taught by a violinist, the concertmaster of the Israel Philharmonic. He was always talking about singing and how a singer intuitively does things, and also about building a structure of phrasing in Classical music. This is definitely something I think about consciously, every time I play the Mozart Concerto. If I'm not happy with something – why? Am I sticking to the rules, or do I want to break the rules to create something that somebody would want to listen to? How many rule breaks are OK before I break the Classical style? I am totally fascinated by this, almost in a scientific way.

This is why I don't have any time for special techniques. If I need a technique for a piece I learn it, and I can do all of them. But it's not something that I practise or want to do. I am much more interested in phrases – constructing a piece out of phrases and structure, from small to big. This is my musical life, and what I think I can do better than other people.

Technique is important, but what do you use your technique for? Going to competitions and listening to players, you say 'wow', but by the time they play the Mozart or Brahms Quintet, you realise that they are not using their impeccable technique to make music. And then they fly out the system.

CW: Do you think clarinet players worldwide are becoming more homogenised?

SK: Since we have YouTube, everybody can see everybody all the time, and people may not know they are infatuated by someone and copying them. I never had anything like that growing up. In Israel, no one was even playing the Mozart Concerto in front of an orchestra; even my teachers didn't, and I never heard it before I played it myself. I heard the Brahms Quintet and Mozart Quintet, but never a concerto for clarinet. I made my own idea of what I was supposed to sound like.

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Then I went to New York and was taught by Charlie Neidich, who was the opposite of what I learned in Israel – he was really focused on technique. It was like getting a big box of toys to play with that I had never had before. But then I realised that there were all these students around me who were copying him. This was strange to me, and I could not understand it. As I said, I was

a strong individual – I was just busy with myself at that age. But not everyone is like that, and there are many people who are infatuated by fashions.

Still, though, if you look at the clarinet world today, you have individuals out there who are different from each other and are doing different things. Maybe some of them are specialising in things they don't really want to be specialising in, but that is what they are good at, or what the world saw them as being good at. The more mature you become, the more you realise that people who stay in the profession are not people who were forced into a corner – they chose their own corner and have been nourishing it for a long time.

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CW: Can you talk more about playing a French system clarinet in Germany? What challenges or opportunities arise from this?

SK: In terms of teaching positions in Germany I have found a brick wall in front of me – more of a brick wall than is faced by other people playing French system, but not as openly. I have a Wurlitzer [German system clarinet] and I can play it, but it's not me and it's not who I am. And I'm not into researching mouthpieces and reeds, so I just stick my normal mouthpiece on, which bothers some people!

I need to always make sure that when things go wrong, it's my fault. That's my way of continuing to develop all these years and being able to speak into my clarinet – making sure that I can really use articulation and colours. I need to have those as stable as possible. This is why I keep the same mouthpiece and why I have a heartbreak every 10 years or so when I need to get a new clarinet. Of course, I buy the same one I had before, just a little bit tighter and newer.

That is a little bit of a downside here, especially in terms of instrument development, where makers are blurring borders between French and German systems. I just say to the makers that I like my Buffet R13 and I'm happy with it – I don't need anything else. This is why I can survive in the German market because I can't be put into any box, and I don't want to be put into any box. I speak German into my clarinet, which is why I can articulate German repertoire, and I can play well with German system clarinetists. But I'm not here to convert anyone. I'm not the normal French system person either – I play an English mouthpiece and a standard Buffet clarinet first produced for the American market [R13 model].

CW: What are your plans for the near future?

SK: This month I am playing the Mozart Concerto twice – and I haven't looked at this piece since before the pandemic! The Concerto is a lot of fun in terms of the basset clarinet side, and it's just so much fun generally, trying to find new things to do with it. I'm also trying to put a new Romantic recital CD together, but I won't talk too much about it as it's still forming. But I think it's going to be a wonderful project. ■

Hindemith: Clarinet Concerto, Clarinet Quintet & Clarinet Sonata is out now on Orfeo.

www.sharonkam.de