

= Mei @-@ Ann Chen =

Mei @-@ Ann Chen ( simplified Chinese : ??? ; traditional Chinese : ??? ; pinyin : Chén M?i @-@ ?n ; born 1973 ) is a Taiwanese American conductor currently serving as music director of the Chicago Sinfonietta and the Memphis Symphony Orchestra . She has been described as " one of the most dynamic young conductors in America " . Encouraged by her parents , Chen began playing violin and piano at a young age and later taught herself how to play the trumpet . By observing her conductor , she began to teach herself how to conduct and even collected batons . Chen attended the Walnut Hill School , a preparatory school affiliated with the New England Conservatory in Boston , Massachusetts , starting at age sixteen . She continued her undergraduate and advanced degree work at the Conservatory and became the first student to graduate from the institution with a double master 's degree in conducting and violin performance . Chen later obtained a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Michigan .

Chen became the Portland Youth Philharmonic 's fourth conductor in 2002 . During her five @-@ year tenure , the orchestra debuted at Carnegie Hall , earned an ASCAP award in 2004 for innovative programming , and began collaborating with the Oregon Symphony and Chamber Music Northwest . She also served as assistant conductor of the Oregon Symphony from 2003 to 2005 and as cover conductor for the Los Angeles Philharmonic . In 2005 , Chen became the first woman to win the Malko Competition , which recognizes young conductors . That same year she won the Taki Concordia Fellowship . Chen left the Philharmonic in 2007 , to become assistant conductor of the Atlanta Symphony . Chen served as assistant conductor of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for its 2009 ? 2010 season . She was appointed music director of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra ; her three @-@ year tenure began in September 2010 and was renewed for an additional three years in 2012 . Chen also began serving as music director for the Chicago Sinfonietta during its 2010 ? 2011 season .

Throughout her career , Chen has appeared with the following symphonies throughout the United States and Canada : Alabama , Chautauqua , Chicago , Colorado , Columbus , Edmonton , Eugene , Florida , Fort Worth , Grand Teton Festival Orchestra , Honolulu , Kalamazoo , National ( Washington , D.C. ) , Pacific , Phoenix , Princeton , Rochester , Seattle , Toledo , and Toronto . Appearances outside North America include all the principal Danish orchestras , BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra , Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra , Graz Symphony , Norwegian Radio Orchestra , Taiwan National Symphony , Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra , and the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra . Chen has also participated in the National Conducting Institute ( Washington , D.C. ) as well as the American Academy of Conducting in Aspen , Colorado . During the 2011 ? 2012 season , Chen will debut with the Jacksonville , Naples , Nashville , Pasadena , and Sarasota symphony orchestras , as well as the National Symphony of Mexico and the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra .

= = Early life and education = =

Native to Taiwan , Mei @-@ Ann Chen wanted to be a conductor since she was ten years old . She began playing violin and piano starting at a young age with the support of her parents , and later taught herself to play the trumpet . However , Chen 's parents also discouraged her from pursuing conducting as they felt it would be a difficult career path for a woman . She was intrigued with the concept of making elaborate noise , particularly without the use of an instrument . Chen would observe her conductor closely and began to learn how to conduct on her own . She collected batons , believing that " different pieces needed different kinds of batons " . Chen left Kaohsiung to study music in Taipei . There , she lived with her aunt and served as assistant conductor of her school 's chorus .

In 1989 , Chen attended a concert in Taipei by the American Youth Orchestra , a touring ensemble of Boston 's New England Conservatory . Following the performance , Chen 's accompanist escorted her backstage , introduced her to the conductor and asked if she could play for him . Chen 's opportunity came the next morning when she played for conductor Benjamin Zander in a closed

basement hotel bar and was offered a scholarship immediately . She performed with the American Youth Orchestra before being invited to attend the Walnut Hill School , a preparatory school linked to the New England Conservatory , two months later at age sixteen . She left her parents , who thought she would study to become a concert violinist , and for more than three years lived with a couple in Boston she referred to as her " American parents " ( Mark Churchill and Marylou Speaker Churchill , the latter of which was once a member of the Portland Junior Symphony ) . Chen continued her undergraduate and graduate work at the Conservatory . Speaker taught Chen , who also received violin instruction from James Buswell and Eric Rosenblith as well as conducting supervision from Frank Battisti and Richard Hoenich . Chen became the first person to graduate from the New England Conservatory with a double master 's degree in conducting and violin performance and received two honors from the institution : the Chadwick Medal for outstanding undergraduate work and the Schuller Medal for " extraordinary contribution to musical life in the community " .

Chen remained in Boston for nine years until she attended the University of Michigan to obtain a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in conducting . There she studied with Kenneth Kiesler and Martin Katz , served as music director of the campus orchestras , and also became conductor for the Arbor Opera Theater . Chen said she pursued the doctorate degree because she did not receive any job offers and she questioned whether that was due to her being " young , a woman , Asian , or the combination of all three . "

= = Career = =

In 2001 , while attending the University of Michigan , Chen guest conducted the Toledo Symphony Orchestra 's " Halloween Spooktacular " concert . That same year she was the youngest finalist in the Maazel @-@ Vilar Conductor 's Competition in Tokyo . Leonard Slatkin invited Chen in 2002 to conduct the National Symphony at the Kennedy Center in the National Conducting Institute . Chen received a fellowship to study at the Aspen Music Festival and School with David Zinman . The following year the American Symphony Orchestra League ( now known as the League of American Orchestras ) invited Chen to be showcased at the National Conductor Preview .

= = = Portland Youth Philharmonic = = =

Chen became the Portland Youth Philharmonic 's ( PYP ) fourth conductor in 2002 after being selected by a committee of " musically inclined " parents , a member of the orchestra , and representatives of the Oregon Symphony and Portland Opera . She conducted both the Philharmonic ensemble as well as the Conservatory Orchestra . One board member of the organization recalled that during her audition Chen very quickly captured the rapport of the orchestra and displayed " wonderful communication skills and genuineness " .

During her five @-@ year tenure with the organization , PYP debuted at Carnegie Hall , received its third ASCAP award in 2004 for innovating programming , and began collaborating with the Oregon Symphony ( Chen was the ensemble 's assistant conductor from 2003 to 2005 ) and Chamber Music Northwest . In April 2005 Chen became the first woman to win the Malko Competition , the " world 's most prestigious prize " for young conductors . She also won the Taki Concordia Fellowship in 2007 , an award established by Baltimore Symphony Orchestra music director Marin Alsop to support " promising " female conductors . Chen was presented the Sunburst Award from Young Audiences for her contribution to music education and was named " Educator of the Week " by KKCW .

While conductor of the Philharmonic , Chen set up a box in her office so that students could leave notes for her about themselves . One musician of the orchestra felt that Chen was " kind of formal " during rehearsal but felt " like a big sister " once practice ended . Chen has been described as a " firecracker : small , bright and full of ka @-@ boom " , and her enthusiasm at times caused her to lose her breath . One board member of the organization praised Chen 's attitude and felt that her lack of ego was a " rare quality in top symphony performers " .

Chen turned down a position with the Oregon Symphony to continue work at PYP , later recalling :

They became my kids , they were no way for me to give them up . So I made a very unusual decision . I gave up my professional position with the Oregon Symphony , I stayed with the youth orchestra . People thought that I was crazy that I stayed with a youth orchestra instead of pursuing a more professional opportunity . Because I told you my life story , and a youth orchestra changed my life and gave me the chance to fulfill my dreams , I feel working with young musicians is a way for me to give back . It changed my life and I would like to do my part to change other people 's lives .

In 2007 , she accompanied the orchestra on an international tour to Asia , where her parents saw her conduct for the first time . The Philharmonic offered a total of six performances between June 29 and July 17 in Kaohsiung , Tainan and Taipei , Taiwan as well as in Seoul and Ulsan , South Korea . Though Chen initially thought she would remain with the Philharmonic for ten years , she left in 2007 to become assistant conductor of the Atlanta Symphony . She said of her departure : " The musicians at PYP have become my kids . When I look back , these five years will always be the most memorable time of my musical career . " Guest conductors during the 2007 ? 2008 season included Ken Selden , director of orchestral studies at Portland State University , former Seattle Symphony conductor Alastair Willis , along with former PYP conductors Huw Edwards and Chen herself .

= = = Baltimore , Memphis , Chicago = = =

Chen served as the Los Angeles Philharmonic 's cover conductor during her tenure with PYP . Following her departure , she became assistant conductor of the Atlanta Symphony for two seasons ( 2007 ? 2009 ) . In April 2009 Chen withdrew her candidacy for music director of the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra . Her next role was assistant conductor of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for the 2009 ? 2010 season , though she never led a subscription program and mostly conducted programs for children . Both positions were sponsored by the League of American Orchestras . Following successful auditions held in December 2006 , she was formerly appointed music director of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra in February 2010 , becoming the organization 's fourth . Chen 's three @-@ year tenure began in September 2010 . Chen 's contract was renewed for an additional three years in 2012 , extending her leadership through the 2015 ? 2016 season .

In October 2010 Chen returned to the New England Conservatory to guest conduct the Philharmonia . Chen dedicated the concert to the late Marylou Speaker Churchill , and thanked Benjamin Zander and dean emeritus Mark Churchill for " making her career possible " . Chen began serving as music director for the Chicago Sinfonietta during its 2010 ? 2011 season . Her belief that " multiculturalism , diversity and inclusion are increasingly global matters " is partly why she accepted a position with the Chicago Sinfonietta , one of the nation 's most diverse orchestras with a " strong focus on black and Latino musicians , composers and audience members " . Her four @-@ year contract with the Sinfonietta began on July 1 , 2011 . Chen plans to record a commercial album with the Sinfonietta in June 2012 and hopes to launch an international competition for rising musicians and composers .

Chen returned to Atlanta in October 2011 to guest conduct the symphony . She also returned to Portland in April 2012 to guest conduct the Oregon Symphony .

= = Interests = =

As a child Chen was interested in earth science . Chen finds satisfaction in " loud " and " elaborate " noises , particularly ones generated without musical instruments . Her favorite composer is Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky ; other favorites include Ludwig van Beethoven , Leonard Bernstein , and Aaron Copland . Her favorite composition is Beethoven 's Symphony No. 5 , which she will be conducting during Chicago Sinfonietta 's 2011 ? 2012 season . She likes Romantic music the most " because the music in this era was an expression of your life " . In addition to working with minority or unconventional artists , Chen prefers to incorporate classic compositions as well as new works into her repertoire . She enjoys reading detective stories , fiction or non @-@ fiction , and has shared

that she would want to be a detective or a professor if she were not a conductor . She moved to Mud Island , Memphis in order to be close to nature , inspiration and the Cannon Center .