

Outspoken and assertive, Siow Lee Chin is not one to shy away from asking what she wants



john lui

She has not been prodigal with her talent, but she is looking forward to returning home all the same. Globetrotting violinist Siow Lee Chin says she is willing to listen to any offer that will allow her to spend more time in Singapore.

"If I could have it all, my wish would be to spend half my time in the United States and the other half in Singapore, where my family is and whom I miss dearly," she says.

Her parents are getting on in years, says the 43-year-old who, as a gifted young musician, became the first Singaporean to be admitted to the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in the US. She was also the first Singaporean to join the faculty of Oberlin Conservatory of Music, the oldest conservatory in the US.

"I am more homesick now than I used to be," she says.

One of Singapore's most celebrated violinists says she feels like "a bad daughter" because of the distance.

Siow has spent much of her life in the US, performing, studying and teaching. Since 2001, she has lived in Charleston, South Carolina, where she is the director of strings programme and professor of violin at the College of Charleston, one of the oldest schools in the US and a leading centre for liberal arts in the region.

For two years before that, she was a visiting professor of violin at Oberlin Conservatory in Cleveland, Ohio. She was also based in Chicago for a time.

"I am happy in my current position. But Singapore is my home and it would be wonderful if there were opportunities for me to make a more sustained contribution," she says.

She is here this month to play at a charity concert next Monday, which launches her first CD.

**the monday interview with Siow Lee Chin**

She spoke to Life! last week at the Ridgewood Close condominium home of her physician brother Yew Nam. She had dressed for the photo shoot in a bright red jacket from French designer Ungaro ("Red gives me energy"), a black top, slim-fitting jeans from Citizens of Humanity and a pair of cowboy boots from a shop in Charleston.

She would be interested in a position in Singapore that made use of all her talents - performing, teaching and programming musical events.

"I would love to shake things up a little," she says.

Because of her strong affection for both Charleston and Singapore, one of her ideas is to connect the two cities through a concert series.

"That would be so cool," she says.

She is reluctant to reveal much about her private life, especially about whom she is dating at the moment (see box).

Instead, she carries on at length about her family and students. Interrupt her with a plea to return to a question and she is apt to raise a hand in a teacherly way and say: "Let me finish."

This assertiveness is a trademark of both the way she speaks and the way she has built her career. It also comes through in her passionate, expressive playing style, people who know her say.

Mr Enrique Graf, 55, artist-in-residence at the College of Charleston and a colleague of hers for seven years says: "The strings programme was a bit in disarray when she came. I have rarely seen somebody work so hard to build up a programme. She immediately started raising money, recruiting students, founding a chamber music series and promoted the college, its orchestra and chamber music programme. She does not take no for an answer."



ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

# Pulling strings

## Dating, yes, babies, maybe

Siow Lee Chin is reluctant to discuss her relationship status but reveals that she is seeing someone - an American who is not in the music industry.

"We were friends for a few years, then it gradually got more serious," she says.

As for marriage, she says: "I would be lying if I said that has not crossed my mind. It just has not happened for me."

She thinks she would make a good mother, albeit a stern one, she jokes. "I have it in my blood to teach and with my students I get my fix of telling people what to do," she says with a laugh.

"Jokes aside, having children means sacrifice," she says.

She says she is willing to cut back on the aspects of her career that are incompatible with motherhood, such as travelling.

Still, she would not "force the issue" of marriage as she believes that "maybe some people are destined to be mothers and some are not".

She is passionate about her career but believes family is important.

"At the end of the day, you want to embrace a human being, not a career. That is not going to keep the bed warm."

er of a music education company, says she is "quite single-minded when it comes to doing a job well".

Ms Goh says with affection that Siow can "drive people up the wall" in her quest for perfection.

Her high standards are understandable, given her musical pedigree. At the age of 15, the former pupil of the now-defunct Anthony Road Girls' School and Raffles Girls' School was talent-spotted by Aaron Rosand, a visiting violin professor from Curtis who was playing with the SSO, and won a place at the school.

Students there are given scholarships and in the 2009 Best Colleges ranking by US News & World Report newspaper, the school's tiny, under-200 enrolment and strict entrance requirements made it the hardest to get into among top schools.

Curtis alumni include the late American conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein and China-born pianist Lang Lang.

Her childhood friend, Ms Goh Seok Wan, 42, a teacher trainer, remembers that even from a young age, Siow's musical talent made her stand out.

"Even from primary school, she was already known as 'the violinist'. She would play at school concerts and was different because she could play the complex pieces the rest of us could not," she says.

Siow is the eldest of three children. Brother Yew Nam, 39, is a paediatric anaesthesiologist at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital and brother Yew Mun, 36, is a computer programmer. Mother Choong Siew Kum, 60, is a housewife.

She lived with her family in a four-room flat in Clementi right up to the time she left for the US to study.

Today, the woman who was once feted as Singapore's brightest hope for international superstardom nearly two decades ago has yet to join the exalted ranks of violinist Joshua Bell or pianist Lang Lang, but that goal was never a very realistic one to begin with, say classical music observers.

The music industry today is different from the one in the 1990s and the profit pressure is even more acute in the classical genre, which has seen its audience greying. Recording contracts for new classical artists are rare and many performers finance their own disc releases.

Siow is well aware of the issues, which partly explains why she has added teaching and music evangelism to her portfolio, she says. She co-founded the Charleston Music Festival three years ago and serves as its artistic co-director.

"What one considers to be success in life changes. Fame is fleeting. It is dicey and fickle. I am comfortable in my own skin," she says.

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Stradivarius violin so musicians like her could use it. The plea did not work but it helped spur on the loan scheme.

Giving up her loaned Guadagnini was difficult, she says.

"It was my voice for years," she says and she was "in denial" about having to return it.

"It was a very emotional concert and I wanted to cry. Fortunately, that did not happen."

As always, the no-nonsense side of her asserts itself and she says she is now happy that it will go to another musician.

Besides, she says with a laugh: "It is not good to talk about past boyfriends all the time. Let's move on."

She now plays an 18th-century violin from Italian maker M. Deconet, on loan from the Cheng Kim Loke Foundation, which also paid for her living expenses at Curtis. She says she does not know the

value of the violin but a similar instrument went under the hammer for US\$88,000 (S\$132,000) seven years ago.

But it was the Guadagnini she played when she recorded her CD, *Songs My Father Taught Me*, comprising music of emotional significance to her. It is dedicated to her father, Mr Siow Hee Shun, 72, a former violinist with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

During the three-hour interview, she brings up her father several times as the man who introduced her to the violin, taught her values and the one she turned to for advice during the recording of the CD at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music's recording studio.

She declines to state how much the largely self-funded CD cost her, although industry estimates range from \$20,000 to \$40,000.

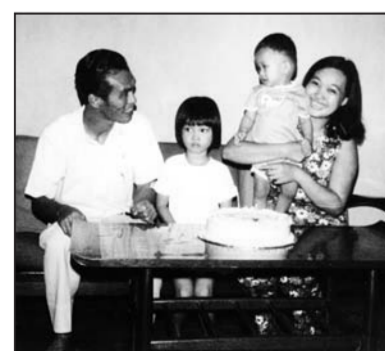
Though releasing a first album in one's 40s is not unheard of in classical music, this is not Siow's first go at recording her own album. Some years ago, she recorded a disc but the self-confessed perfectionist scrapped the project because she felt the squeaky-clean production had erased her personality from the recording.

Her friends admit her desire to reach the acme of performance can be trying.

Ms Chiat Goh, 48, her friend and own-



**my life so far**



Siow celebrating her birthday with her father, mother and brother, Yew Nam.

'Young musicians sometimes whine. 'Why didn't I get this?'. Life is tough. Get on with it'

Siow on her do-it-yourself attitude to create the opportunities she has had

'I have made lasting friendships. My ex-boyfriends have become my good friends. I can't complain'

On whether she regrets the sacrifices she has made to pursue a career in classical music



She was the first Singaporean to be admitted to the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music. She graduated in 1988 and her parents flew to the US to attend the graduation ceremony.



She met the late President Ong Teng Cheong in 1993. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SIOW LEE CHIN, ST FILE

'If you had asked me about being among the elite 10 years ago, I would not have had a perspective. What one considers success in life changes as you grow'

On how she views her career today. In 1999, she performed at the National Day Parade (right)

