

Talking Jazz

A Jersey Jazz Interview with Pianist Helen Sung

By Schafen Fox

Helen Sung has been “on the scene” for the last nine years. Originally from Houston, Texas, she arrived in our area with an impressive resume. A childhood affinity for classical piano endured until she had completed her Masters degree at the University of Texas. By then her focus had shifted to jazz and she won one of the seven places in the inaugural class of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance at the New England Conservatory. That two year program gave her the opportunity to both learn from and perform with a long list of jazz masters, including Clark Terry, Wynton Marsalis, Harry “Sweets” Edison, Barry Harris, Herbie Hancock and Jimmy Heath.

In 1997, Helen became a part of the Boston jazz scene, where she lived and worked for an additional year before moving to New York City. Since then, she’s performed with luminaries such as Clark Terry, Wayne Shorter, Regina Carter, Steve Turre and T. S. Monk. While working with these and other jazz greats, Helen is steadily growing as a bandleader.

Performances have taken her throughout the United States and Europe. She’s been featured on both NPR’s “Piano Jazz” with Marian McPartland and XM Satellite’s “In the Swing Seat” with Wynton Marsalis. Helen was among those appearing on the PBS program “In Performance At The White House” broadcast in April. One month later, she won the Mary Lou Williams Women In Jazz Piano Competition at the Kennedy Center.

Helen also makes time to conduct master classes and clinics. Recently she has worked with students in Newark, Camden and Philadelphia.

JJ: How did your family, friends and teachers react when you switched from classical music to jazz?

HS: Most of my friends were classical pianists and they were excited for me. My parents and classical teachers were surprised and disappointed, understandably! I think my parents’ reaction stemmed from their not knowing anything about jazz and also their fear that I wouldn’t be able to support myself as a musician. It seemed precarious enough as a classical musician in their opinion, but as a jazz musician?

My classical teachers had invested a lot of time in me and thus were disappointed that I was possibly going to pursue something totally different. However, over time, seeing that I was serious about jazz (that it wasn’t a temporary “phase”), most of my teachers have been happy for me and excited about the things I’ve been doing.

JJ: How do you feel about in having spent so many years in classical training rather than jazz?

HS: I only wish I had pursued jazz sooner! In my experience, it’s a generally held belief that classical training, when done right, teaches one how to play the instrument with good technique, thus preventing physical injuries/problems (tendonitis, muscle strain, etc.)...so it’s seen as an advantage.

I think my technique allowed me to quickly move into dealing with “jazz stuff” (swing, feeling, vocabulary, etc.) versus struggling with the notes.

JJ: Would you describe what those two years were like in the Monk Institute? How was it



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around 700 students, and a program that only had seven students. And a program in its first year ever! It was one of the most intense and challenging two years of my life, filled with excitement, anxiety, stress, scrutiny, and lots of hard work. I wouldn’t trade a minute of it...well, maybe a few minutes!

JJ: How did being an Institute graduate affect your career? You already had performed with many of the top musicians.

HS: I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing today if I hadn’t attended the Monk Institute. I would be a very different player and musician, and person. The Institute put me in contact with and gave me access to the great masters, something I wouldn’t have gotten anywhere else. Learning from them, being pushed by them, challenged and disciplined by them, what a blessing!

JJ: With all those years focused on classical performance, how

similar to or different from the University of Texas, etc?

HS: I went from a university with over 50,000 students, with a music school of probably at least 500 students, to a conservatory of

did you first react to the practice of a jazz audience applauding after each and every solo?

HS: I think every musician loves applause, the more the merrier!

JJ: On a similar line, now when you perform do you “read” your audience and play what you think they will like, or do you make your selections beforehand?

HS: Choosing what I play for a concert depends on the gig situation and whatever music I’m working on at the moment. I usually make a tentative set list and go from there. Depending on the mood, etc., one might add or change a song...I guess I try to strike a healthy balance of pleasing the audience and pleasing myself, and the band.

JJ: Naturally, you do your share of traveling; have you found any other section of this country that compares to the NYC area as receptive to jazz?

HS: I really like playing in Chicago, in New Orleans, Seattle, and recently, I was amazed by the enthusiasm of the folks in Cleveland!

JJ: How was traveling abroad, both as a musician and a tourist?

HS: When one travels abroad as a musician, it really is work and one doesn’t usually have a lot of time to be a true “tourist.” Some people love traveling, some don’t. I personally do, and always find it a lot of fun to be in

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new places and to meet new people.

JJ: You wrote some beautiful music inspired by your time in Andorra a few years ago. Will you be recording it? And, do you have any other original music inspired by the road?

HS: I've already recorded the music I prepared for Andorra. It was just released in August by Sunnyside Records, and it's called *Sungbird* (after *Albeniz*).

JJ: Your previous recording is the well reviewed *Helenistique*. Would you explain how you select what to play? I was delighted to find "Carolina Shout" on *Helenistique*. Is there a story with that selection?

HS: For my CDs thus far the selections came together in advance of the recording — I think of the record as a single entity, try and focus what I am trying to communicate with this project, and pick music that "fits." Then I flesh it out from there, trying to have a nice balance of material. I consider *Helenistique* a very straight-ahead jazz record, being mainly jazz standards, and it was purposely designed to be so. I had been working so hard for a while on "Carolina Shout" and thought what the heck, let's record it!

JJ: What about your experience as a guest on Marion McPartland's Piano Jazz, did you submit your work to the show, or did they contact you?

HS: I'd been trying to get on the show for a good while, but the wonderful publicist I hired for my *Helenistique* CD, Jana La Sorte, got me on the show.

JJ: Where is the program recorded?

HS: They use a studio in the Herald Square area.

JJ: Did you spend time with Marion before the taping?

HS: We spoke briefly on the phone to say hello and then five minutes before taping to pick some tunes to play together. I'd never spoken to Ms. McPartland before the phone call. She is a delightful musician, and at 88 is probably as charming, witty, and musical as she has been all her life! We had a short but funny discussion over the merits of elastic vs. non-elastic pants waistbands as we waited for the session to start!

JJ: How long did it take to make the hour long show?

HS: I forget how long we recorded, maybe off and on 2 hours total?

JJ: To me, that show always sounds comfortable. Have they done anything to the studio to give it a more relaxed feeling, or is that just from having such a gracious hostess?

HS: I credit Ms. McPartland!

JJ: How was your experience doing "In the Swing Seat with Wynton Marsalis?"

HS: That was a thrilling experience too, and quite different since I took my trio with me for that one. Mr. Marsalis is an incredibly articulate and intelligent musician, and really does a great job of breaking things down for his listening audience. One of the songs I played for the show was one of my originals, and it was amazing listening to him analyze and talk about the song in a way that a non-musician could grab onto.

JJ: What was it like to do a performance in the White House?

HS: What a thrill and honor to share the stage with all those musicians! The day we taped was also my birthday, so that made it extra special, the White House kitchen even made me a chocolate cake! And to play at the White House, wow, that was pretty cool.

JJ: How did you get into the White House? Did you drive up to a gate and show a pass or were you picked up and driven there?

HS: The musicians were driven there in shuttle buses.

JJ: Once inside, did you all have time to rehearse, or was that all done beforehand?

HS: We rehearsed in the White House because the cameras needed to prepare for the taping — it was a live performance.

JJ: The PBS "In Performance..." was an hour-long program. How long was the actual performance?

HS: The actual concert was about 40 minutes long.

JJ: Did you get a souvenir or, at least, a better than average White House tour?

HS: We didn't have time to go on a tour of the White House, but the next day after the concert we went on a tour of the US Capitol, which I really enjoyed.

JJ: Finally, was any of the cake left over



and, if so, did you have a problem taking it out?

HS: No that cake was too good — it was gone in 10 minutes!

JJ: You have also gone out of your way

to involve yourself in music education. How did that start?

HS: While I was a student in the Monk Institute, we were required to present clinics and master classes. Since moving to New York, I've been involved with various jazz education organizations. Such experiences have given me the confidence and skills to do educational projects with my own band. I see the importance of exposing young people to music, great music like jazz! Not only does it help build audiences for the future, it broadens and enriches their lives. I know from my own life, how it has been incredibly enriched by music.

JJ: Would you comment on your recent work in Philadelphia and Camden?

HS: In Philly I worked with the students at the University of the Arts, so they were undergraduates. I did a master class with the piano majors, taught a few private lessons, and then taught an improvisation section...very daunting to face a large group of college students, but I think we came to a nice understanding, it was a fabulous experience! In Camden, my quartet did a JazzWeek Residency, made possible by a Chamber Music America/Doris Duke Foundation Residency Project grant. We worked with students from K – 8, presenting a final concert and student artwork inspired by jazz. The community in Camden is underserved in many ways, and it was a thrill seeing how excited the students were about their performances and how proud the parents and faculty were over their young ones!

JJ: Do you think you may follow Mary Lou Williams and so many others and teach at a college?

HS: Wow, I didn't know that Mary Lou Williams taught at a college? If the circumstances are right, yes I would!

JJ: Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview.

HS: Thank you! It was my pleasure. JJ

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