



Violinist Claire Chan Chats Strings and ‘Music at Bunker Hill’

Transcript

Story by Gina Marie Rodriguez

[MUSIC: “A LITTLE WIGGLE”]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (00:03):

This is Gina Marie Rodriguez and you’re listening to the Jersey Arts podcast.

“I know that the most joy in my life has come to me from my violin” - Albert Einstein
An apt quote from a notable yet surprising source. We may not be talking about physics or the sciences today but it would seem that Einstein himself may have been a fan of today’s conversation.

In advance of the Harlem Chamber Players program “100 Years of Women Composers,” I spoke with violinist Claire Chan, a member of their String Quartet.

As their website reads, “The Harlem Chamber Players is an ethnically diverse collective of professional classical musicians dedicated to bringing high-caliber, affordable, accessible live music to people in the Harlem community and beyond. The Harlem Chamber Players help build diverse audiences for live classical music through community and educational outreach and collaborations with other arts organizations, schools and cultural institutions. They also promote community wide access to the arts and arts inclusion.”

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (01:00):

And in honor of Women’s History Month, their program “100 Years of Women Composers” will grace the stage of “Music at Bunker Hill” in Sewell on March 17th.

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Claire Chan is a graduate of Brown University where she earned musical honors and a Bachelor of Science in Neuroscience. We'll look at that, maybe science did come up.

However, she chose to pursue music, becoming a Doctor of Musical Arts; having earned her masters and doctoral degrees at the Juilliard School, as a scholarship student of acclaimed violinist, Joseph Fuchs. She went on to teach at the Juilliard School as an assistant to both Professor Fuchs and the Juilliard String Quartet before serving as faculty in Beijing at the Central Conservatory and the Capital Normal University.

She now teaches at Third Street Music School Settlement at the Chamber Music Center of New York in addition to performing as a member of the Harlem Chamber Players Quartet, the Sweeney Todd orchestra on Broadway, and the New York City Opera.

Her resume is vast as she boasts having performed with the likes of the Kneisel Trio, the Jade String Trio and artists like Sam Smith, Lady Gaga, Andrea Bocelli and more. Our brief interview today will simply graze the surface. I hope that you enjoy my conversation with Claire and then I encourage you to seek out more of her and the Harlem Chamber Players work!

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (01:54):

I'm always really curious as to how an artist finds their instrument. So, what is it that led you to the violin in particular?

CLAIRE CHAN (02:33):

It's usually a very mundane story, and mine is as well. My mother was a piano teacher, and my sister took piano. My older sister took piano, and I saw how they continuously bickered about how to play the piano, and so I decided really early on that I was going to choose something different. And I grew up in a suburb of Detroit and we were going to the Detroit Community Music School, and there were lessons happening and I was able to sit in on a violin lesson. Actually, violin and cello, and I just said, 'okay, Mom, I'd rather play the violin.' And she's like, 'great.' And that's how it started.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (03:15):

I don't think that's mundane at all. It actually almost feels like a tale of, I don't want to say spite per se, but that you were avoiding arguments with your mother. It also sounds like music was never not going to be an option.

CLAIRE CHAN (03:32):

That is true. That is true.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (03:34):

How many siblings do you have?

CLAIRE CHAN (03:36):

I have one older sister.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (03:37):

One older sister, okay. Does she still play?

CLAIRE CHAN (03:40):

She doesn't play anymore. She decided that going into high school that she sort of didn't want to play, and so she went in a different direction, which is fine. Also my kids, who grew up in the household playing at least one instrument, I think are not deciding to play anymore. So, it's all fine.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (04:03):

Well, at least they have a base for it, right? I mean, my base is, when I was a kid, I played piano for a very, very brief period of time, and I think I knew how to play the very beginning of "Yankee Doodle" and that's it. And then I gave up because I couldn't make my hands do two separate things at the same time.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (04:23):

Like, oh, left hand is going to do what it wants. And that is the exact same thing that the right hand is doing. So apologies to my piano teacher, there was no way I was going to understand that. But I say all that to say how much I'm enamored with musicians because I love listening to music, but I clearly do not have the dexterity to do it myself. But I was listening to you- some of your videos, your violin videos

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online, and you're just so talented and it's such a beautiful instrument, which I feel like I hadn't really noticed before because it's not an instrument that I hear singled out quite often. So I'm sure that I'll hear it as part of larger pieces, but I personally haven't heard a lot of violin solos, but it was really nice to listen to you.

CLAIRE CHAN (05:13):

Oh, thanks. I feel like the violin is very much an inner voice. It's one of the instruments that can imitate the human voice quite closely, and so your sound and your inflection and all of that is very apparent when you play the violin. So that's one of the reasons why I'm glad I was somehow divinely guided to choose the violin.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (05:47):

That is so cool. I didn't really know that, but it just made me think of, I'm already getting off tangent here, but did you see that viral video of Justin Bieber conducting a live orchestra recently?

CLAIRE CHAN (06:01):

No, I didn't. I'm not on a lot of social media, but I'm sorry I missed that one.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (06:07):

No, I don't blame you. But there was a discourse around it where, is he really conducting? Does this count as conducting or not? Because he was, he's not classically trained, so he was just mimicking the sounds that he hears in his head and trying to convey those notes to the musicians in front of him in that way. And of course, the musicians could pick it up by ear, and they were playing it back to him, and it sounded beautiful. So, I do encourage you to find it if you're at all interested in that. But I was going to ask your opinion. It was, I think on TikTok or something, it must be a part of a documentary or something, but a one minute clip had gone viral because he was, forgive me because I'm not musically inclined, but he was just doing his bah bah bah bah bah bah [vocalizing], and then he was expecting the violins to play it back to him, which they did beautifully. But there was a whole discourse surrounding that like, well, he's not a real conductor. That's not what conductors do. And I was very interested to hear if you've had any experience with someone that you would consider a conductor doing that, feeding you information by their voice. Does that make sense?

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CLAIRE CHAN (07:13):

Well, yeah. I mean, it happens all the time and in so many different ways. I mean, those of us who are classically trained have a certain vocabulary that we all understand, but when you work with crossover artists, more popular or even Broadway, that language is expanded to bah, bahs and a little ta ta ta or a little more. So we all just try to communicate somehow. And that's sort of music. I mean, we communicate with body language and sounds and words sometimes. So yeah, it's, I think everything qualifies.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (08:09):

That's a valid note. Everything qualifies. I feel like music, it transcends language, and that's the beauty of it, right? Because you can communicate with people who don't speak the same verbal language as you do.

CLAIRE CHAN (08:22):

Right.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (08:22):

I love that. You also just mentioned Broadway, and I believe you're currently working on "Sweeney Todd," correct?

CLAIRE CHAN (08:29):

Yes. Oh, it's so much fun. We started last, not this past January, but a year ago, January, and the show has just been, how can I say it? It's got its own momentum, and it's just the creative geniuses behind every aspect of it are just so apparent from the lighting to the sound to the, of course, the cast and of course the orchestra. And of course, it's an amazing thing to behold. And I love having the conglomerate of all of that around all of it, around what I do and what everybody does. So, it's a lot of fun, and it's special also because the pit sound is acoustic and good. We are at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, and we have a 26 piece orchestra, which is quite large for Broadway now. We get to hear each other acoustically, and even in the house, in the audience, in the front part of it, you get a mix of the acoustic and the amplified sound, which is quite powerful. You feel it viscerally. And our cast, of course, is we have a new cast now, and our old cast was incredible. Our new cast is fantastic. And so yeah, it's a joy to go to work. I love it.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (10:07):
That's amazing.

CLAIRE CHAN (10:08):
Did I talk enough about that?

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (10:10):
No, no, that's great. I'm a huge Sondheim fan. I actually recently saw, I saw the show when Josh Groban was still in it, so just before the changeover, I think. But I love Sondheim, and I have to ask, do you have a favorite? I will say, do you have a favorite Sondheim song in general, or do you have a favorite song from "Sweeney Todd?"

CLAIRE CHAN (10:34):
I had say, maybe my favorite is, am I going to say it right? Even nothing's, 'nothing's going to harm you.' That's got to be, it pulls on my tugs on my heartstrings, and it's so beautiful, and it's not just beautiful. It's infused with that sort of danger element. It's not just a comfortable song. It exists on so many different levels in the show and in the ether. So yeah, I guess that's my favorite.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (11:11):
I love that. I don't know that I have a favorite necessarily. I think if I had to choose probably "Pretty Women," but I love the song, 'nothing's gonna harm you' because it's such a, I mean, it's not necessarily about a parent and a child, but it's about the parental figure and a child, and it's so endearing. Anyway, all of this to say, I love musical theater, and when I was in high school, I was in two shows, and I always admired those in the pit because again, that's not where my talent lies. So I thought it was so cool. But it's extra cool to hear you talk about being in the pit on Broadway, because obviously that's huge, right? So many people aspire to. But I wonder if, have you always been a fan of musical theater, or do you prefer classical music?

CLAIRE CHAN (12:02):
I have not always been a fan of musical theater. I tend to, I mean my upbringing was fairly tame in a suburb of Detroit. There wasn't a lot to do. There wasn't a lot going on. So basically, I think I'm most interested in what I'm doing at the time, and if you were to ask me what my favorite composer was, it would be equally difficult for me to answer you because it's usually what I'm playing at the time. I love

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Broadway. I didn't do it growing up. I only got into it after moving to New York. I love playing opera. I never did it before I became a member of New York City Opera, and that was a whole new world and a wonderful discovery. I had before that just done symphonies. And I also loved chamber music. That's one of my steady continuous loves.

[MUSIC: "ENTR'ACTE" BY CAROLINE SHAW]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (13:14):

At this interlude, you're listening to Caroline Shaw's "Entr'acte," which you'll be able to hear live at "Music at Bunker Hill," part of the program, "100 years of Women Composers."

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (13:34):

Let's talk about "Music at Bunker Hill," and that performance is "100 Years of Women Composers" with the Harlem Chamber Players. So, if you could please tell me a little bit about what it's like working with that particular quartet and what it's like to work with chamber music.

CLAIRE CHAN (13:49):

Yeah, this is an incredibly special group. The Harlem Chamber players is diverse in every way. In its players and in its presentation of composers; in its audience. And so this concert, which is "100 Years of Women," is from different ethnicities. We've got Black, we've got Peruvian, Chinese, we've got White, we've got Cuban. And honestly, the music is so varied. It's all over the place from, we've got really romantic Florence Price. We've got Rhiannon Giddens, who is more of a crossover pop artist, Valerie Coleman. We're playing her "Umoja," which is the title means 'unity,' and it's just this, just a wonderfully positive piece. And then we've got Gabriela Lena Frank, who takes us on a walk through the Andes, and it's incredible. We've got Tania Leon, who is our, she's, her music is being played all over and she's getting commissions. She's huge right now. She just had a, oh, I'm blanking on the awards that she's gotten, but just incredible. And we're playing, and actually, her piece called "Esencia" is one of the most difficult pieces we've had to learn, and not a lot of quartets play it. I think we're probably the only one. And so, we love to play it everywhere. The more we play it, the better we get at it. And it's a very unusual voice.

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CLAIRE CHAN (15:54):

I mean, all of these composers, we've got Julia Wolfe "With a Blue Dress," which is also sort of a country-crossover contemporary. And so the program is incredibly entertaining, and yet it walks you through history. It's great. So I'm very honored to be a part of it and really happy to be working on all of this, of these choices of repertoire. I never thought I would be doing this type of music 20 years ago or 30 years ago, and I'm just thrilled to be here doing it.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (16:39):

That program does sound really lovely, and I hate to sound like Lin-Manuel Miranda and say, love is love is love is love but, is music is music is music? – In that, do you feel a special pride when you're playing music written by a female composer that would be different than when you play by a male composer? Or is music is music is music is music?

CLAIRE CHAN (16:59):

Music is music is music, and they all have their different facets and expressions and gesture and imagery, and it's just any music has that. And to be able to bring that out is a privilege and an honor. And it is, of course. It's also my voice and the voice of the four of us that come together. So yeah, I don't know what - music is music is music. Yes.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (17:33):

Well said. I feel that I had to ask that because Women's History Month, so it's that question of, well, is it at all extra special that a woman has composed this for us? But I am totally on board with what you said. I believe that music is music is music, but I'm grateful that we are taking the time to at least honor these female composers and highlight, I suppose, highlight their work.

CLAIRE CHAN (17:59):

Right. Well, the thing is, they're just not always played. And to have them on the same program is what is really special. Florence Price, for example, was the first woman of color who had a piece played by a major symphony orchestra. So it's our job to present these things. They're so special in each, in each of their own ways, really great stuff. I can't speak more highly of the incredible directions that they all go in and how they do that in such a special way.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (18:42):

I can tell by the way you speak about them, it's going to be a really, really beautiful program. This is a selfish question. I'm going to ask it, but I have a nephew who is studying, he's actually studying cello right now, but I'm wondering if you have any advice for an aspiring musician, strings or otherwise?

CLAIRE CHAN (19:02):

How old is your nephew?

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (19:03):

He's 13. Oh my God.

CLAIRE CHAN (19:06):

My advice is keep at it. The more you do it, the better you get at it. And I think that was a quote from Robert Mann of the, formerly of the Julliard String Quartet who just said, keep at. The more you do it, the better you get. You just don't stop. And I think that's true.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (19:27):

I think that makes sense. And it was one of the things I was really bad at. Like I said, when I was learning my C-C-D-E, C-E-D-C-C-D-E-C-B [to the tune of "Yankee Doodle"], right? I think I got "Yankee Doodle."

CLAIRE CHAN (19:39):

You got it.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (19:40):

That's all I remember. And getting me to practice, it must have driven my parents up a wall. They bought me a piano and everything, and I think I practiced maybe once a month. So, ya know, there's reasons why I'm not a musician. Again, all that to say, I know how much practice it should take. I know how hardworking musicians really are to master their craft. So all of the applause for you, because I clearly did not have it in me to do it myself. Let's say this, the show is coming up, and I always ask this question because I'd like to invite audiences who aren't perhaps typically interested in or aware of chamber music. So I'd like to, for those listening, invite those who are unaware. How would you encourage someone who maybe is feeling like they're not quite ready for chamber music? How would you encourage someone who's never experienced it before to come and see this show?

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CLAIRE CHAN (20:39):

I'd say give it a go. Our program is such that I think there's something for everyone. And instead of 30 minutes of a four-movement work, we've got short movements of different styles and really something for everyone. So, come.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (21:04):

So it's a little more eclectic?

CLAIRE CHAN ()
Yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (21:09):

Great. Well, I mean, I hope that this does open up those who've never seen chamber music before. I am one of those people. I really haven't seen it live. So hopefully some people will be bold and try something new. And for those who are fans already, the Harlem Chamber Players will be at "Music at Bunker Hill" on March 17th, so that's really exciting. And it has been a pleasure speaking with you, Claire. Thank you so, so much for taking the time.

CLAIRE CHAN (21:32):

My pleasure.

[MUSIC: "ENTR'ACTE" BY CAROLINE SHAW]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (21:36):

I have one minor correction to address. You'll have to forgive Claire and I. In our excitement for Sondheim's work, we confused a lyric for a song title. Claire's favorite song is entitled "Not While I'm Around" whereas 'nothing's gonna harm you' is a lyric from the song. I hope that doesn't detract from the brilliance of the piece. I would encourage you to listen to that and my favorite, "Pretty Women." Perhaps you'll fall in love with "Sweeney Todd" the way that Claire and I have.

And to get your taste of Chamber music, whether new or a longtime fan, you can see Claire and her Harlem Chamber Players family on March 17th at 3pm at the Bunker Hill Presbyterian Church in Sewell. For more information be sure to visit musicatbunkerhill.org

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This episode was hosted, edited, and produced by me, Gina Marie Rodriguez. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Isaac Serna-Diez. And my thanks to Claire Chan for speaking with me today. I'm Gina Marie Rodriguez for the Jersey Arts podcast.

Thanks for listening!

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