

Chou's performance brings comfort women's stories to life

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Stephanie Chou '05 returned to the school on Monday to perform *Comfort Girl*, a musical tribute to the lives of the many Chinese women abducted into sexual slavery by the Japanese army during WWII.

Comfort Girl explores the sufferings of these women, not only during captivity, but also after they returned home to their families, who were not always welcoming. It is a story about humanity and a celebration of the strength of the human spirit, Chou said.

Accompanying Chou was singer Orville Mendoza; Andy Lin on erhu, viola, and violin; Jason Yeager on piano; and Ronen Itzik on drums. The incorporation of the erhu player in a jazz setting was untraditional, Chou said.

"The work that I've done before has definitely been culturally influenced, but *Comfort Girl* is my first time creating a narrative song cycle, where all the songs flow together, and my first time incorporating historical content with a specific social justice impact," Chou said.

The history and music departments collaborated to bring the event to fruition, history teacher Dr. Elisa Milkes said. Music Department Chair Doug Epstein and Milkes worked together every step of the way, communicating with Chou to ensure that the performance was appropriate for a school setting, she said.

"Before this specific presentation, I had done three performances of the work in clubs in New York. Some faculty suggested I do it here, and when I came back this February for Music Week, it just all came together," she said.

Milkes was concerned about making sure the performance was an event where people were challenged but did not feel overwhelmed, she said. "We needed to be mindful that people would come into the room with different personal stories and different understandings of their own family history."

For Music teacher Timothy Ho, the most fascinating aspect of Chou's work was her

thoughtfulness in fusing different aspects of her identity into her music. "The story she was telling was fascinating and very important to hear, especially coming from an Asian woman. She's the right person to tell that story," he said.

"I didn't really know much about the history of comfort women, so it was interesting to have an oratory and visual representation-- the expression on Stephanie's face seemed very real

mainly instrumental, and her most recent one, *Asymptote* (2017) reworked arrangements of popular and traditional Chinese folk songs.

This specific performance differed from her prior ones because of additional commentary by Chou which included a question and answer session at the end. "When we usually do this as a show, there's a narrator, but no talking done by me," Chou said.



A MUSICAL HOMAGE Chou honors comfort women through ensemble performance.

and very attached to the issue. It helped me understand how heartbreaking it was," attendee Aidan McAndrew (10) said.

Though Chou originally planned *Comfort Girl* to be a 40 minute concept album where the songs were loosely connected, she soon realized it would be more effective as a narrative story. Thus, the piece is a combination of a multitude of different interviews with comfort women she had read about, Chou said.

Most of Chou's prior music has been collections of songs. Her first album, *Prime Knot* (2010) was

Originally, Chou was introduced to the horrors that comfort women endured by her sister, Valerie Chou '10, who completed a double major in biology and East Asian history at the University of Chicago.

"I found [their lives] to be very moving and just very fascinating," Chou said. "I wondered how the women endured it, and what their individual experiences were like."

Chou researched the topic for almost a year after her sister familiarized her with it by reading books and online articles as well as watching

documentaries. Furthermore, Chou had the opportunity to speak with one of the chief researchers of the subject in Shanghai, who has interviewed many comfort women over the past twenty years, she said.

"I wasn't going around looking for a topic to write a piece on, but as I learned more, I thought that a musical treatment would be a great way to bring exposure to give a voice to the women who had been silenced for so long, and to bring exposure to the topic," Chou said. "Art is a great way to express emotional tragedy, because it captures emotion in a different way than a documentary or book can."

Euwan Kim (11) expected the performance to be more broad, but thought that following a plot added dramatic elements and made it easier to follow than numbers or statistics would have, she said.

"The band was able to embody the emotions and the hardships of people without movement or props, just through sound and expression, and I thought that was brilliant," McAndrew said.

"It's important to be honest and open about our collective past," Milkes said. "If we can't talk about it in an informed, deliberate, and thoughtful way, it's possible students will learn about it from another source, which wouldn't treat different perspectives with the same level of respect," she said.

"I'm hoping my students see the potential of what they themselves can do, in general, specifically through the field of music," said Ho, who took his Treble Choir class to the performance.

"My goal with the entire piece, and presenting it, is always to raise awareness about this issue, because it's often overlooked," Chou said. "It's an important story, and it still has echoes today, as survivors continue to fight for justice, and sex trafficking is an online global issue. I hope that musically, or on an emotional level, people are able to connect to a story in a way they otherwise wouldn't."

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