

Threading tradition and modernity together

Designer Shiatzy Chen prepares for her label's historic Paris Fashion Week debut

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

Perched on a plush leather sofa in the VIP room on the fifth floor of her company's flagship store on Zhongshan North Road, fashion designer Shiatzy Chen (王陳彩霞) looked poised in the mid-afternoon sun as she sat through a stream of media interviews.

Her calm exterior belies the rigorous preparations Chen and her design team must complete over the next six weeks as Shiatzy Chen becomes just the second Taiwanese design house to show a collection at the official Paris Fashion Week (the first was Yufengshawn, 馮鳳騷, in 2005). The debut of Shiatzy Chen's spring/summer 2009 collection in October is also a highlight as the label celebrates its 30th anniversary.

Chen, who was born in 1951 in Changhua, never trained formally as a fashion designer, instead beginning her career with a dressmaking apprenticeship. Chen met her husband, Wang Yuan-hong (王元宏), a businessman in the textile trade, in the early 1970s and by 1978 the couple had set up a women's knitwear factory under the name Shiatzy International Company Limited. Chen began designing her eponymous label for the company and her aesthetic increased in sophistication as Shiatzy International expanded. By 1990 the company had launched a design studio and retail store in Paris; Shiatzy Chen also has stores throughout Taiwan and China.

"At the beginning I wasn't sure if I had an interest in designing or not. But I'm not a highly educated person, and if you don't have an education, you have to be self-reliant and have a skill. So my skill was making clothes," says Chen. "To have gotten to where I am now has been, I believe, a matter of persistence."

Shiatzy Chen's designs are known for combining influences and techniques from traditional Chinese clothing with clean, modern silhouettes. The label's winter 2008 collection, for example, features dresses and coats with stark lines

that skim over the body and rely on a ruffled collar, stylized floral appliques or intricate pleating to provide a touch of femininity. Several A-line coats and shifts echo the current trend for retro fashion, but the collection remains distinctively Shiatzy Chen, with style signatures like necklines borrowed from the qipao and bright colors. The designer is committed to developing and refining that hallmark aesthetic even as her customer base becomes more global: "If someone looks at a piece of clothing and is able to tell at once that it is a Shiatzy Chen piece, then I know I have succeeded."

Polished in a stone-colored sleeveless blouse with curved collar, Chen was reluctant to talk about the upcoming spring/summer 2009 collection, which she and her design team are currently refining for Paris Fashion Week. But she expounded on her design philosophy, the intermarriage of style and culture, how her brand is perceived and where she hopes to take Shiatzy Chen the brand in the future.

Taipei Times: Can you tell me what your design process is like and where you derive your inspiration?

Shiatzy Chen: This is very much a question of what comes first, the chicken or the egg? When I start designing every season, the theme comes to me in many different ways. Ultimately it is a question of being able to pick up on that second of inspiration that moves me the most and going with it. Sometimes the colors I want to use will influence the fabrics I choose, and then the fabric in turn influences the design of a gown. There are also times when I come up with a design first, and that determines the fabric I pick. Sometimes I also happen to come across a piece of beautiful fabric and I will design something around it. It is hard to pinpoint exactly where everything starts and, in fact, the design process is completely different for every season.

Clockwise from left: Shiatzy Chen, whose label will become only the second Taiwanese design house to show a collection at the official Paris Fashion Week; Shiatzy Chen's flagship store on Zhongshan North Road in Taipei; An ensemble on display in Shiatzy Chen's Taipei flagship store.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHIATZY CHEN

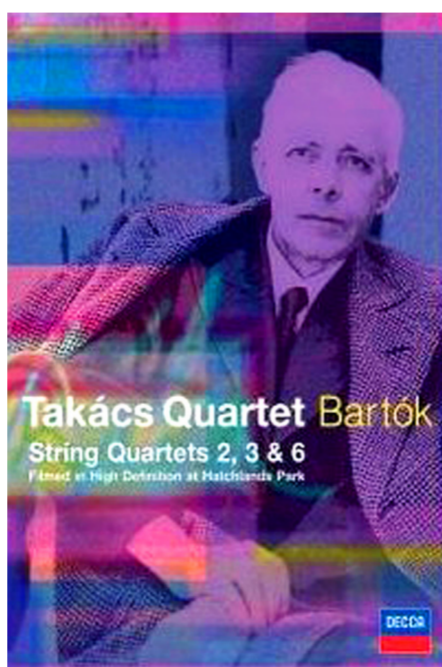


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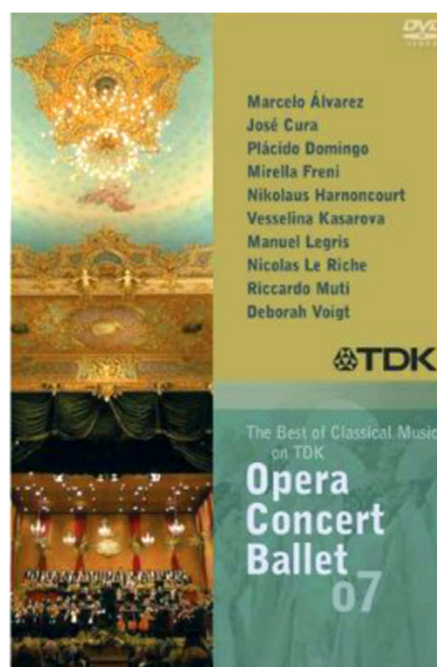
[CLASSICAL DVD REVIEWS]



JOHANNES-PASSION
Bach
Nikolaus Harnoncourt
DGM 073 4291



TAKACS QUARTET
Bartók
String Quartets 2, 3 and 6
Decca 074 3141



OPERA CONCERT BALET 07
The best of classical music on TDK
DVWW-OPBEST4



FALSTAFF
Verdi
Riccardo Muti
EuroArts FSKoAB 2001

Far and away the most enjoyable item I've watched recently is the version of Bach's *St John Passion* conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt back in 1985, released on DVD last year.

For four years Bach wrote a 30-minute cantata every week. He would rule the staves on the paper on Monday morning, select an appropriate text, then compose the music for instrumentalists, soloists and chorus. The first rehearsal was on the Friday, the second, with the soloists added, on Saturday. The performance was at 8am on the Sunday morning in St Thomas's Lutheran church in Leipzig.

But Good Friday demanded something special, so he wrote extended works based on the descriptions of Christ's last hours given by the different evangelists. These semi-dramatic compositions are called "Passions" because, like Mel Gibson's infinitely inferior film, they

depict the suffering ("passion" in its older meaning) and death of Jesus.

Bach's *St Mark Passion* has been lost, and the surviving *St Luke Passion* seems to be by someone else. But the *St Matthew Passion* is widely considered one of the greatest musical works of all time. The later *St John Passion* is scarcely less remarkable.

In the mid-1980s Harnoncourt was an enthusiast for "authentic" performances of Baroque music, i.e. ones using the instruments of the period rather than their modern equivalents. This is the case on this DVD, and it's its weakest feature. Recorders instead of flutes do give a pleasantly woody sound, but you feel the recording engineers had to work hard to catch their altogether quieter tone. The antique string instruments were clearly even harder to deal with, and at times you can barely hear them at all.

Nonetheless, this is an absolutely superb DVD. Its main strengths are

Harnoncourt's intense commitment and a stunning performance by Kurt Equiluz as the Evangelist — his music is written very high, but he delivers it with a compelling incision. Jesus is sung by a bass, Robert Holl. There are various other "characters" — most notably Peter and Pilate.

The twin choruses are of adult males and boys respectively. The boys (the Tolzer Knabenchor) are fabulous, hurling themselves with expressively nodding heads into the role of the angry crowd calling for Christ's crucifixion. Their frantic cries of "Jesus of Nazareth! Jesus of Nazareth!" have been haunting me in my sleep. There are also two boy soloists, of which the older is the better.

Most fascinating, though, is the nature of John's narrative. He has always provided a different perspective from the other three evangelists, and Bach seems to have sensed this and come up with

something original to match his vividly observed, personal account.

This is the finest classical DVD I've seen for a long time. Note when browsing for this item that the cover gives the work's German name, *Johannes-Passion*.

Modernism in music had many summits. They're all forbidding, but some are more accessible than others. Bartók's six string quartets remain central items in the quartet repertoire, but they do benefit from some explication. This is provided on an excellent product from Decca (DVD release 2006) in which members of the Takacs Quartet talk about and play quartets 2, 3 and 6.

First they introduce Bartók's quartets in general, commenting on the Mongolian and North African influences, for instance, and saying that their own intention is to humanize what they thought of as difficult music on first acquaintance. The result is a DVD that's

educational while at the same time offering extremely fine performances of the three featured works.

TDK's 2007 sampler *Opera, Concert, Ballet 07* offers 22 excerpts, ranging from operatic arias from Vienna, Zurich, Barcelona and Paris, via Roland Petit ballets to complete symphonic movements. The value of this, as with all samplers, is to help you decide which complete product you might want to buy — hence, being promotional in intent, it's offered at a special low price, around NT\$300.

When I first saw Riccardo Muti's version of Verdi's *Falstaff* I wasn't entirely convinced by it, but I've warmed to it since. It was filmed in the tiny opera house in Verdi's hometown of Busseto, using the La Scala, Milan orchestra, but reduced in size. The sets and costumes mirror those of a production in 1913 in the same theater when Toscanini conducted what he

always said was the master's finest opera to mark what would have been Verdi's 100th birthday.

A feature of this 2001 version (DVD release 2007) is that it gets better and better as it proceeds. Thus the fifth scene, in which Falstaff is persuaded to risk a second meeting with Alice and Meg, is a delightful chamber-music-like ensemble piece, with Quickly and Falstaff downstage and the others overhanging, and commenting, from behind. It's simultaneously powerful and delicate — Verdi never wrote anything more enchanting.

Vocally, Juan Diego Flores is outstanding as Fenton, Barbara Fritolli makes a predictably strong Alice, and Ambrosio Maestri proves excellent in the title role. You do, though, have to wonder at the wisdom of the costumer's choice when it comes to Falstaff's bizarre hairpiece!

— BRADLEY WINTERTON