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A Teacher Of Note

Celebrated pianist, recording artist, broadcaster and writer — these are all Nancy Loo. But to her, the most important thing is family.

By Robin Bower

The soft sounds of Chopin flow easily from the fingers of Nancy Loo. She sits with eyes closed as if mesmerized before her father's magnificent piano. Her long hair falls in front of her face. While she speaks, she constantly turns to the piano to punctuate her dialogue, and fills pauses with musical cadences.

Music has been Loo's life since she was five. She was born in Hong Kong to a mother who sang on the radio and a father who made clothes for tourists. "Initially my mother encouraged me in my music but there was never any pressure." Loo won every competition she ever entered and at seventeen was accepted into the Juilliard School in New York. She has a Masters degree from Juilliard, lists of prizes from international competitions in Italy, Paris and Spain, and has performed with orchestras around the world.

More recently Loo has begun teaching, published a book and recorded two concertos with the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra. She also acts as a presenter for Radio Television Hong Kong's Radio 4 music program and is a columnist for a magazine. In addition, she is the mother of four children.

A quiet, sensitive person who is absorbed in her music and her family, Loo is also modest about her achievements. "When I was in Juilliard I had trouble with my writing and I couldn't play. I was very upset and miserable in my first year. The next year I entered a competition and I won. Everyone wanted to be my friend but they weren't there when I really needed them in the first year. I noticed the difference and it shocked me."

Loo's philosophy is to reach out to everyday people, not necessarily the academic or musically brilliant. Teaching and performing are very different she says. "One is more inward, one is more outward; teaching is reaching out. When I'm teaching I gain something in return. Performance is more like soul searching."

One of her loves is recording. A recent CD is a cello transcription of hymns with Loo as the soloist. Her producer went all over the United

States to find composers, and one of the pieces was specially commissioned for the recording. "This has always been one of my dreams. I want to produce a different aspect of hymns. I've managed to find some of very different styles. Some are rag, some are country and western, and some are classical," she says with a brightness in her voice. "I am a Christian and I've always believed hymns can reach out to people." Loo vacillates with ease between her diverse roles. "I have divided my life into four — performer, teacher, mother, freelance

writer/broadcaster. I keep looking into myself through my music. And teaching presents a big challenge in organizing my work, projecting myself and tolerating," she smiles.

"My family is very important to me. My mother was a big influence on my life." When her mother died in 1993, Loo had to reassess her life. "Nobody can replace you as a mother. You can be replaced as a teacher, as a writer, as a musician, but not as a mother. I have to give my children something. Not material possessions but I need to leave them something of myself."

Loo's need to write is also strong. It is a different force from her music. "I write crazy things about life and death and Chinese funerals, romance, fears about 1997, puberty and growing up, observances I find interesting..." Her fingers touch the keys and her words are almost lost within the notes of the music.

"My book means to speak the

inexpressible," she whispers as the nearly inaudible piano interrupts her speech.

What about the future? "A pianist from Taiwan and I will be playing Stravinsky to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the City Contemporary Dance Company. It's not just piano, it's also dance so together we are creating something. I love performing with a group of people rather than as a soloist."

Suddenly the house erupts into chaos; the children are home and her face changes from mellow introspection to delight. Her most difficult and rewarding part of the day has begun.

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