

Interviewee(s): Sherry Cheng, Wei Jiang

Interviewer: Ann Shi

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Transcribed by: Ann Shi

Edited by: Natalie Saenz

Audio Track Time: 34:21

Background: Sherry Cheng and Wei Jiang, who were previously interviewed by HAAA in April, was invited back to speak about their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how as musicians they were impacted; and how they have contributed to the city by volunteering in aid of others— either through the Houston Food Bank, Asia Society, or the Houston Symphony Orchestra Committee, and others who are impacted by the pandemic.

Setting: The interview was taken in each person's homes via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key:

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

**AS**: Today is May 23rd 2020 and here with us, we invited back our Sherry Cheng and Wei Jiang on Houston Asian American Archive's Special COVID-19 Collection of oral history, um, collections. Thank you both so much for spending time out of your busy evenings.

**SC**: Of course.

**AS**: So to start, would you like to tell us how COVID-19 pandemic has your changed your lives?

**SC**: Well, in some ways, I mean, I always see the positive first. That's just my personality. I see the silver lining, which is that we've gotten to spend a lot of time— a lot more time, as a family together. So we've—we've pretty much cooked every single meal at home. And the weather this spring has been really nice. It's getting hot now, but it was very nice. We were able to eat outdoors a lot. Just spend a lot of time together the four of us as a small nuclear family. And that's, that's the best thing. And we've been able to practice some music with my daughter, Alice; and been able to even played a concert or two together. So all of that is a blessing.

**AS**: Yeah. [**SC**: Yeah.]

**WJ**: Yeah, for sure. Because, you know, our work, my work is all canceled for... [**SC**: the symphony.] two or three months, or maybe even more. So I'm kind of forced to stay at home and do a lot of other things. So actually, I start learning a lot of other things, like learning how to, like for example, fixing the dishwasher, [**SC**: He fixed the microwave and the dishwasher!] the microwave, or start to experiment with audio equipment...

**SC:** Right! He's now our sound engineer. It actually came in very handy because, you know, I teach at a preschool. And we were able to teach by Zoom. But it's not easy to teach little three to six-year-olds by Zoom. But we've been doing that. All the teachers have worked twice as hard to still make school happen, through online learning. So I've been working, but you know, on a screen, which is not very satisfying. But we were able to have an in-person drive-by graduation for all the children at the preschool. And he was able to figure out a sound system, you know, with speakers and microphones to make it a really festive occasion. So that was really great. And all the children enjoyed that drive-by parade to celebrate their graduation.

**WJ:** Yeah, and also get a chance to start practicing my solo repertoire more than before, because before I was mostly playing, symphonic music, chamber music. But now I can't play with anybody else. So I started looking at my solo repertoire, solo repertoire I haven't played for a while. So, it's kind of nice, in a way.

**AS:** Great to hear that you guys are picking up new skills and doing something that you wouldn't be able to do before. So, what have you— what have been on your mind most during the pandemic? Like if you?

**SC:** Well, of course, there's the financial worry. I mean, I'm still getting paid. But you know, is our school actually going to have summer camp and able to keep going? I was worried about when we'd be able to start work again. And, of course, the symphony, it's going to be a long time really before they can go back safely. And Wei is actually— Wei can tell you about it, he's on a couple of committees.

**WJ:** I'm on two committees for the orchestra musicians, Orchestra committee and Negotiating committee. So we're having a lot of Zoom meetings with the management, and among ourselves, this committee. A lot of talks and discussion about our future plan, how we're going to try to make changes to survive; you know, right through this pandemic, and be able to get over it.

**SC:** Yeah, a lot of organizations are in the same boat. Because, I mean, that's probably the last thing that's going to come back--people going to concert halls to hear a concert or to the theater to see a play or the opera or ballet. It's tough for artists. Because, I mean, not only is that their living, you know, they're financially dependent on it. But when you don't have an audience to perform to, you lose quite a big chunk of inspiration. I mean, the whole reason— being live, there's nothing that can replace live music, and to not have that anymore. It's really hard.

**AS:** With the kind of technology booms, especially replacing many of the life experiences during the pandemic, do you ever see actually having the virtual experiences being the new normal?

**SC:** No, please NOT the new normal. I mean, there are virtual experiences. They can't replace the real thing!

**WJ:** Because last night, I went to one of the symphony's Living Room concert series, [**SC:** That was nice! Yeah.] even though it was really nice to still present ourselves to perform, and to let people see our family life and all that stuff; but the one thing I—I know, because I know all my colleagues how they play, when they play through the internet, and through the audio, microphone and go through the internet on YouTube, it's not the same. The sound is not the same and the feeling is not the same. And it is not—it can't replace the live.

**SC:** Right, it is a way to stay connected with the audience because we have no other choice. But it would— there's nothing that replaces the live experience of having people share the music in the moment. That's irreplaceable. And, and also just making music with your colleagues, having your fellow

musicians, making music together, that communal sense, you know. It's transformative. When you're by yourself, there's—you can't, you're not feeding off of any energy.

**WJ:** Right. That's— that's what we can do now because we can't really produce any live concerts for real audiences [**SC:** Right.] in music hall.

**SC:** I mean, I think in the future, the streaming is going to stay, you know. All the organizations that will have to stream to survive, [**WJ:** but it can't replace...] but it cannot replace. [**WJ:** live experience.] They will have to do it in tandem with that.

**AS:** Well, we're also seeing like, on all these social media, everyone is expressing their creativity, their artistic talents; and you guys also perform online as well.

**SC:** Yeah, well, so we've actually, we've enjoyed making a few recordings of our own. You know, just practices at home and sharing it on Facebook or something. And I know a lot of my friends have done much more advanced things like, putting six different— sixteen different tracks of themselves playing different parts of the song. And, you know, if you're living by yourself, you can make sixteen of yourself. But I mean, after a while, all of that starts becoming too much. Almost I feel like there is a saturation point that people will reach with these videos. I mean, as creative as some of them are, and I've enjoyed quite a lot of them. But it's just— there's just too much out there. You know? I don't, I don't know how you feel about that.

**WJ:** Yeah, again I think the experience is, is different.

**SC:** Yeah. It's about connecting.

**WJ:** I see— I see— I see this as an addition. [**SC:** Yeah.] It's an addition to the live experience. It's like icing on top of cake; but that cannot replace the cake. [**SC:** Right.] It just adds more flavor, more variety to our whole entire musical experience with online content and streaming. But, you know, people— I don't, I don't see people can just be satisfied with that, and stop going to live events.

**SC:** That would be very sad if people got used to just staying home and listening to... [**WJ:** No, I can't see that happen because that's not the same.] Yeah.

**AS:** How about the standards of like, the barrier, for example, to have an online performance? [**SC:** The what?] The barrier of the online experience to...

**SC:** Oh the barrier. Well, I feel like you're not getting the immediacy of being able to communicate with your audience. You know, through eye contact or because they feel your emotion through, just being there in that same room; the energy, you know. They don't— the computer screen just takes that all out and takes the energy away.

**WJ:** Yeah, the reaction too you know. After you finish this performance [**SC:** Yeah, the feedback!], normally... feel the silence, [**SC:** Yeah.] because you don't, you don't hear the applause and cheer, [**SC:** right] people's reaction [**SC:** right]. You don't see that. It's kind of like, strange.

**SC:** Yeah. So we did this Gala. For the— what is it— The River Oaks Clay Court Championship, [**WJ:** tennis, tennis tournament] tennis Gala. And they had us represent the Houston Symphony. And we did like a short 15 minute program and Alice was involved too. And he got to meet some of his idols that... [**WJ:** Well, I didn't actually meet them.] He didn't meet them. He met them on Zoom. [laughs] [**WJ:** On the screen, I see them. I see them.] Yes right, right. But we were playing to no one, you know. We were

playing to this... [WJ: But we know that...] But we know that people are watching, but you're not getting a response. So it's very strange. You know? I mean, it was fine.

WJ: I think it's the same for a lot of Zoom meeting. Yeah. Like, when you say something, and then—there's like silence. You don't know. Do they hear me? Or did I? Was I muted? Or something like, something you kind of like? Well, [SC: you're not sure, you're not sure whether they're hearing.] what I often hear is somebody says something, you know? And then, they start, they said, [SC: right] "Am I muted?" [SC: Right. And you really have no control over the sound. Well, I mean, we have our mics and...] Yeah, but I don't know how people are hearing it. I don't.

SC: Yeah, I don't know how it's translating to the other side. So.

AS: How do you think we could come out of this pandemic stronger?

SC: How can we come up with stronger? It's difficult. How can we come out of it stronger?

WJ: Or do we actually think we're going to come out stronger?

SC: Yes. No, like, yeah, or both, I guess. Yeah. I, [sighs] there's, it's so divided now. I have to say that it's, it's different than other kind of disasters where people unite, [WJ: like Harvey] like, like Harvey or something. I feel like now it's, this pandemic has become more divisive. You know, just— just the fact of wearing a mask or not wearing a mask, is like, you know, some people are making that into a political statement. You know, that's very sad, because it should not be political at all. But it is what it is. I mean, that part of it I'm, I'm not optimistic about. Because this country is as divisive as it ever was, and if they can be divisive on this, it's... That's kind of hopeless. As far as arts organizations, I think this is an opportunity for arts organizations to take a lead in, when they choose to come back, how they're going to come back and how to come back stronger. And I think with good leadership that can happen. So if everybody put their heads together and try to find solutions, you know, that's how things can happen. And that's what he's doing.

WJ: I am involved with Houston Symphony's planning for, what we can do during this time, and what, how we can go back. So I think Houston Symphony is— at this point— is leading the industry, because I know a lot of other major orchestras in other cities are kind of like, giving up. They see no hope. They just like oh, [SC: at least giving up for this season, this coming season.] Oh, there's nothing we can do. We can just give up. Just stop paying musicians, we're going to close the door until this thing's over. Maybe a year or two years. [SC: Right, until we find the vaccine. Yeah.] But Houston Symphony right now is actually not giving up. We, you know, the management, at least, and us, are still trying to figure out a way to make it work. To go back [SC: Right.] without taking too much risk, you know, still, you know, we have safety protocols, all those measurements, how we're going to go back safely...

SC: Right, like how the art museum opened, it's... I found the art museum a very safe place when I went the other day. So.

WJ: So in a way, some organization will come out of this stronger, [SC: right] some might not, you know, depends on the attitude.

AS: So, do you mind sharing what are some of the steps that Houston Symphony might be taken to open up?

WJ: We have like 20 pages long— I haven't seen that, I heard— it's a 20 page long of safety protocols, like how the musicians can arrive to work, [SC: ...sta- staggered arrival time.] staggered arrival time, so

not too many people arrive at the same time. First of all, we are not going to have a large group. So we're going to divide it all into small groups. So maybe eight people, or twelve people depends on the repertoire. So we're not going to have too many people on stage. And the arrival time is staggered. And the backstage areas all spaced out. People unpack their instruments at different locations. And they're going to set up the washing station and then mark the floor, like you know, where you're going to go to do this, and where are you going to go do that. And it's like, in and out is one way. It's when you go in, and you have to go out in a different place. So there's no— this is very mini- minimize the interaction between people. So we minimize the risk. And also, when we go back in the first couple of months, we're going to perform concerts without audience in the hall. So just musicians on stage. Maybe we will live stream or, you know, TV broadcasting; or videotape and put on YouTube or something like that. We'll have to figure out how we're going to do that. And, yeah, they, they're very careful about, you know, if we go back, they don't want to put anybody at any risk.

**SC:** Because there are high risk people in the orchestra, you know, cancer survivors and people who are older, you know, older than 60, 65. [**WJ:** Yeah.] So you have to have— I mean, there's people who are ready to go back to work, and there's people who, you know, they need to stay at home if they can. So.

**AS:** And for Sherry, how has the online classes been for you? What are the...

**SC:** [Laughs] Um, it's hard because there's a sound delay and I teach music, right? So over Zoom to teach little kids songs, you basically teach them one line at a time and have them repeat it back to you. So singing in a group is impossible, because everybody has a different lag and sound. So... but we've made it work. We played games. Like name that tune, where you unmute two people, so they're competing to see who can name that tune first. I just try to make it creative, so they're still having some fun. And I made music videos while I'm dancing to some classical music and just send out those videos to the parents and the kids can dance to it. And at the end of the year, each class, the first year classes made a video each child sing one line of a song, like "Twinkle, twinkle little star" or something. And I put them all together, each child having a line. So the whole class is on one video like 12, 13 kids on this one video singing "twinkle". And the parents love that. I've had a learning curve too, with technology, just trying to do iMovies and things like that. But it's good. It's good to have these skills. You know, like, it's funny because the teachers at school think I'm the technology expert, but I really know nothing. [laughs] I feel like I'm such a novice. You know, he always laughs at me because I really know nothing. But somehow at my school, I'm considered like, a tech expert or something.

But yeah, it's been, it's been fine. It's a lot of work. Great new content. Basically, it's not the same as teaching live where you can just improvise in the minute, you know, and respond to what works with the kids and keep them engaged. It's harder to engage online with that age group, especially, they can't sit still.

**AS:** Yeah, we missed that spontaneity.

**SC:** Yes. The spontaneity. Exactly. Yeah.

**AS:** So how do you think this epidemic has revealed about the social inequalities?

**SC:** Social inequalities? Well, I mean, I know it's disproportionately affected the poor segments of our population for... We've been volunteering at the Food Bank, and definitely see the need. I took Luke and Alice, our whole family went to volunteer at the Food Bank a few times, and also at the Distribution Center in Spring Branch. This Spring Branch Family Center where people actually drive through and pick up the food. So I wanted to, I wanted the kids to see the whole process, you know how the Food Bank works their whole system, which I mean, I have to say kudos to the Food Bank, the Houston Food Bank,

they do a great job, you know; but the need is really great out there, just from the line of cars that are picking up food. Just basics, you know, so we feel very lucky that we still are getting a paycheck. So many people have lost jobs. So it makes you really think about having to balance the need for safety and public health, but also the economy. It is, is not one or the other. You have to keep that in balance because more and more people are suffering from not having just the basics to survive.

**WJ:** Yeah, especially the low, low income family. You know, if they lose their job, you know, they have no other ways to support a family. And they have to rely on the, you know, the charity, the food bank, or other charity or a government stimulus check, for that. That can't last forever, you know. They need the jobs. But right now people just have to stay at home. I understand that because, you know, you have to make sure this thing's not going to go out of control, spreading it all over the place. Yeah. But at the same time, you have to face the other challenge. Are we going to destroy the whole economy? Or we're going to make everybody sick. It's like this two tough choices, which one you're going to pick. You can't really pick one over the other. You just have to find a balance somewhere.

**SC:** Yeah, [**WJ:** It's difficult.] It is an ethical dilemma as well, but you know, somebody has to be a leader and lead, you know, and make these decisions. So, that's the same for every workplace. You know, our school chose to open for the summer starting June 3. That's a hard decision to make. But we're going to do it and I think we're going to do it safely.

**WJ:** Yeah. [**SC:** I trust that.] Even the symphony's, we're going to go back to work in July, but without audiences, just ourselves. But we have some colleagues that really worry about it. They feel like you know, that's not safe. You know, I don't feel comfortable to go back to work. But some other, other colleagues, like I can't wait to go back to work. I don't care because, you know, this is going to be risk anyway. [**SC:** Right.] Every day we drive on the highway. This is a risk. [**SC:** Yeah.] You know, this is always danger out there.

**SC:** Can't live in a bubble. Life has to go on. [laughs]

**AS:** Yeah, definitely. And I— yeah, I follow you guys that you've been participating in the Houston Food Bank, so good job on that and thank you so much! And what else have you been participating in like the effort to help other people? Can you share that?

**SC:** Well, this I guess besides the volunteering, just his— I think his work with the committees, that's really trying to help get the orchestra back to work. That's his contribution and it's very important because they're the ones who are considering so many things. Things people don't even think about, you know, deal— dealing with media agreements on what you can stream, and just a lot of nitty gritty things dealing with legal language, [**WJ:** ...a lot of legal] dealing with the union, laws... [**WJ:** there's a lot of regulations and what we can do to survive.] Right. [**WJ:** The same time we're facing the regulation.] Yeah. I mean, he's meeting, you know, like three, four meetings a week, you know, like, non-stop meetings, basically. And it's almost like a full-time job to be on these committees. And it's all volunteer work. It's, you know, the orchestra elected the committee. They trust him, and, you know, these seven other people [**WJ:** There are seven people on the committee.] to come up with a plan that works for everybody that... I mean, you can't please everybody, but they're trying to take everybody's opinions and worries and considerations into consideration. And they're trying to not leave anybody behind in this.

So, yeah, that's, I think, that's his contribution. And I mean, I don't know why really, we've been busy. You know, just everyday making sure the kids are doing their work. It's hard to get them motivated. [**WJ:** Just cooking...] Cooking, just you know...

**WJ:** Cooking itself is a lot of work and kids, you know, [**SC:** Yeah.] they have no school, but they're in school, supposedly. Yeah. But it's hard to imagine that you don't have to go anywhere. Right? It's hard for them to actually have that motivation [**SC:** Motivation. Yeah.] to get up and do a thing.

**SC:** Yeah. So I guess being a parent is, it's a contribution. [Laughs] You know, I mean, I don't get this chance to be like, home this much. And it's just been really great. That part of it has been really great to spend more time with, with the kids. Yeah.

**AS:** And so you guys participated in the "1,000 Cranes for Hope"?

**SC:** Oh yeah. Yeah. So I'm on social media. Whenever I see something that I feel like is a good cause. I mean, I've been folding cranes since I was a little girl. I love origami. I've shown Alice a few things here and there. But when I saw that Asia Society was doing that project, I thought it was just a great activity for the day, for us to make cranes together. So I showed Alice how to do it and we spent a couple of hours folding cranes. And it's a good—you know, it symbolizes this, yearning for, for peace and good health, and good wishes for everyone. So, it's good luck. You can't go wrong with that.

Yeah, I think they're putting together some kind of montage of photos and videos of people who have done it. I know Stephanie reached out to me to ask me for the photos I took. So that is good. It's always good to participate in something that builds community. And I feel like all these organizations that are still doing that, they're doing a good job. The Asia Society has always also been doing these videos, like I think it was just last night or two nights ago. They had the tsar that Mayor Turner appointed for recovery. I forgot his name, and, and then some other doctor and the Harris County Public Health person. So they've been having these public talks, the kind of discussions that help people know more information and have really healthy balanced discussions. And they were talking about this exact thing about balancing the economy and, you know, public health concerns. So I've been paying a lot of attention to just what's going on, and I don't want this to become a political thing; and I know it has and, but there's always voices of reason. I feel, I feel like most people still are very responsible and we can still trust people to do the best, for their neighbors, We don't need to necessarily legislate so much. I think people generally are still good, and they want to do the right thing.

**AS:** Definitely. On the other end, we've also been seeing some of the kind of hate crimes targeted towards Asian Americans, although I'm not sure if you experience any type of experiences like that.

**SC:** No. [**WJ:** We haven't experienced that.] We've never experienced that.

**WJ:** But sometimes the news pops up here and there, people make those racist comments towards Asian community. I think in general, I think those are kind of isolated incidents. I don't, I don't feel that's become a trend... [**SC:** Yeah, I don't see...] becomes a problem. [**SC:** Right.] There's always people who are really kind of ridiculous, and we can't eliminate those; there's always going to be people who are kind of hideous.

**SC:** Yeah. No, I, yeah, I don't like to focus necessarily on things like that. Because I think it is, it's a self fulfilling prophecy almost like, if you focus on it and bring more attention to it, and you see more that way. It's how you— this is the attitude you, yourself have. I mean, even if something like that happened to me, I think I would, because I am a think-on-the-bright side person, I would, I would grant that, that person that said that, was just ignorant. And I would not be, you know, outraged. [**WJ:** Yeah.] I would try to educate them [**WJ:** He doesn't know. He's an idiot.] He's an idiot. [**WJ:** I'm gonna walk away.] Yeah, I would rather just ignore it. [**WJ:** But most people are nice. It's like a few— there's always a few bad eggs.]

**SC:** Yeah. And then some people say something really because they don't know better, they really don't know better. They just say things that maybe are kind of, in the old days, it might have been okay, but now it's not okay. Because we live in this politically correct environment. And those older generation of people might think asking you about, you know, like a Fu Manchu or something is like, you know, like making some joke, they might think that's okay. And now it's not okay. You know, those kind of things don't really bother me, you know; but I mean, if they're physically assaulting and hurting someone. Of course, that's, that's totally wrong. And it's wrong, no matter what, no matter it's racist or not.

**WJ:** I still haven't, I still haven't experienced that direct, that kind of experience. But I've seen it on social media, [**SC:** Yea I've seen it.] on news, but I haven't actually experienced that in my life yet. But I'm sure it's out there but I think is very few.

**AS:** So, since we've all been staying at home and how this kind of stay-at-home experience change the experience in the relationship between your loved ones in the family?

**WJ:** We definitely get, you know, closer. [**SC:** We are closer. I mean, I guess some couples can fight more but I think this has been a really good time for us.] ... closer because you get to, you know, nobody has to go to work, there is no stress over like, you know, lack of sleep, stress of work, schedule and driving around for kids activities. So you're more relaxed. So I wake up whenever I want. I can wake up early, I can wake up late. [**SC:** He's still waking up pretty early.] So you are in general more relaxed. While you're more relaxed, you are kind of generally in a better mood.

**SC:** If we weren't getting our paychecks, it would be a different story. [**WJ:** Yeah, if we have no income, that'd be different.] But we are both still getting a paycheck, so that makes all the difference in the world. So we are the lucky ones.

**WJ:** So we can spend more time together and plan, plan our meals. Like when we're going to eat for lunch... [**SC:** Yeah, we're actually just enjoying life.] what are we gonna eat for dinner, you know, just when we're gonna go grocery shopping. We don't want to go every day. [**SC:** Right.] So we have to plan like to go once a week. [**SC:** Yeah.] You have to plan it. And then it's gonna last for a week. And then you kind of get on top of the kids— kids are here all the time. [**SC:** Right.] Before it's like they go to school, we have a whole day, you don't see them until they come back at four. [**SC:**... and then we're taking them to tennis lessons.] And it's always like busy busy busy. [**SC:** ...activities.] But now it's like, "Okay, what are we doing now?" [**SC:** Nothing's going on today! Nothing on the schedule.] So we watch a lot of TV. I mean, [**SC:** Yeah, we're watching our shows together.] Netflix... Amazon.... [**SC:** we never get to do that.] So we watch a lot of shows together, [**SC:** Yeah.] and sometimes we play board games with kids. [**SC:** Yeah.] Practice, you know, I played duet with my daughter. [**SC:** Yeah.] So it's kind of like, you kind of get closer, you know, because you spend a lot more time together. [**SC:** Yeah.] And then you have to make it work because there's no other option. [**SC:** ...there's no other choice. Yeah.]

**SC:** They both— all of my family are pretty much, I want to say introverts except for me. I do miss going out. Like, as soon as art museum opened, I went, because I missed that kind of thing. And whoever is going to open their organization first I'm going. You know, whatever precautions I need to take, I'll take it; but I'm going. But they— they like spending time at home. All of them. [**WJ:** Me and my kids are homebodies.] They're perfectly happy just being at home. [**WJ:** Like I'm so happy to stay home.] So this is very, very good for them. Yeah.

**AS:** So, just before I close, what is the first thing you guys are gonna do when it's safe to do so?

**WJ:** What's the first thing? [**SC:** What's the first thing we're gonna do?] I'm saying maybe go to a really nice restaurant. [**SC:** Yeah!] Nice one. I haven't... [**SC:** I like to go to our favorite little restaurant.] We



haven't been out for like over two months. [SC: Yeah, we have not eaten out in, yeah, nine weeks. At least nine weeks. Yeah when this started, so a nice, nice restaurant.

AS: Yeah. Great. Thank you so much for your time.

SC: Sure. Okay.

[Interview ends.]