



SIOW LEE CHIN
DIRECTOR OF STRINGS &
PROFESSOR OF VIOLIN
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
SOUTH CAROLINA



PHOTOS: GAO JUN



The gift of music

US-based Singaporean violinist Siow Lee Chin will be working in China this Christmas instead of spending it with her family. But she's still counting her blessings

CHRISTMAS is a time for reflection and it's also got special religious significance because I'm a Christian. It's a time for reflection in the sense of being grateful for all the blessings we have, and to think about the less fortunate and to share with others.

That's why even though I'll be working on Christmas Day at the gruelling start of the Oberlin Orchestra's Asian tour, which will go through China before ending in Singapore on Jan 6 at the Esplanade, it's going to be incredibly meaningful.

I may complain about having to work on Christmas but ultimately, when I stand on stage and do what I do, and be able to bring that music to people – that's a gift for me too, not just a gift from me to others. So, the experience of performing on Christmas Day in Shanghai is something I'm going to carry with me.

This will also be my first concert tour of China, and it's something I've always

wanted to do. In September, I participated in the 20th anniversary of the relationship between Singapore and China, and now I get to do this tour and play to this huge population of music lovers.

Christmas is a season for rejoicing. It's nice to have good health. I was complaining about having to wake up early to travel and perform, and about the cold weather, especially compared to Singapore, but once the tour gets going I'll get into the spirit of things; I always do.

Even when I'm not performing music, it's a big part of Christmas celebrations. One of my favourite Christmas CDs is *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, with the Peanuts singing carols, because it's happy and fun. I also love *Silent Night*, because I'm very traditional. I go for the classics.

I'm a fan of Michael Buble and he released a Christmas CD a while back that was very well done. I like the way he brings a modern twist to all the classics and I think he's very talented. I'd love to do a Christmas duet with him one day.

I am unabashedly Singaporean, so comfort food to me is Singaporean or Asian

food. Sometimes Singaporean food is what gets featured in my Christmas meals even when I'm in the US. I've done beef *rendang* and I tell my American friends that that's what we eat in Singapore during Christmas. It's comfort food for me.

I crave Asian food so much because I live in Charleston in the US and don't get to spend much time back home in Singapore. My time here during this Asian tour will be very short so I won't really get to taste my mum's cooking. But I'll do my best to make up for spending Christmas working by catching up with friends and family as much as I can after my concert before flying back to the US.

Log fires and apple cider

It's winter in Charleston, North Carolina, during Christmas time, so it's cold and the temperature can go down to almost zero degrees Celsius, but it's not as cold as, say, Chicago. There aren't many days that are cold but what I like to do during that period is to put a log on the fire and enjoy its warmth. There's something mesmerising about snuggling in front of a fire and listening to music when it's cold outside.

I also like spiced apple cider, but I've never been much of a fan of eggnog, which is really thick. I've also got to watch my waistline. But I do like cakes like Italian panettone, and chocolate because it's festive. I have a sweet tooth, so anything sweet makes me happy.

Even though I'll be performing this Christmas, it's usually a quiet time for me that I don't spend around crowds but rather with friends at home, or at close friends' houses. Things usually slow down at that time of the year and it's all about family and friends, and that's the way it should be, I think. When celebrations get too commercial, you lose a bit of the spirit of the occasion.

Christmas is a time to reconnect with friends. It's a chance to take the time to write Christmas cards. I still really enjoy getting an actual physical card instead of an electronic card, although I haven't had time to send out many cards this year because of the tour, so I'll just have to make up for it next year. To all my friends: sorry!

I hope next Christmas is especially quiet to make up for how busy this one will be. I deserve a break after this tour. It's going to be crazy – after I finish my Jan 6 Singapore concert and arrive in the US on Jan 10, I start work the very next morning. I'll be completely jet-lagged but term will have started.

Even though my schedule is tight, I have to admit I like it that way because if things get too quiet, I find myself saying, "Wait a minute, I need to rustle up some activity!"

Interview by Christopher Lim
limchris@sph.com.sg

'It's all about family and friends, and that's the way it should be. When celebrations get too commercial, you lose a bit of the spirit of the occasion.'

Siow Lee Chin