

# Wei Yu, Principal Cellist of the DSO

From Shanghai To Detroit

By Susan Kehoe, Ph.D.

“When I’m playing in Detroit, I feel a chemistry between the orchestra and the audience.”



HART HOLLMAN

I spoke with Wei Yu (pronounced Way You) exactly one year from the time he joined the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) as the new principal cellist to get his views on his experience in Detroit.

When Maestro Leonard Slatkin appointed him, this 34-year-old had already been playing for the New York Philharmonic orchestra for more than seven years. Of course, he has played the cello since he was 4, so there’s no question he is prepared for this leadership position.

Yu grew up in Shanghai, where his great uncle was a cellist with the Shanghai Symphony. After attending a concert by Yo-Yo Ma, he fell in love with the soulful sound of the cello and his uncle became his first teacher. He made his debut at age 11 playing Elgar’s *Cello Concerto* with that same symphony. He came full circle when he played on stage with Yo-Yo Ma and the New York Philharmonic orchestra in 2007.

On the road to the DSO he studied at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Canada, and in Chicago with Hans Jensen at North Park University before getting a full scholarship to Juilliard for his master’s work. He’s

dedicated to his music, spending extensive time practicing the repertoire for the DSO programs weeks ahead of schedule, even listening to recordings of the music by various artists on his CD player.

One of Yu’s fondest musical memories was collaborating with cellist David Soyer, member of the Guarneri String Quartet, at the Marlboro Music Festival. When he died in 2010, Soyer’s wife told Yu to “take care of the cello for us.”

The beautiful sounds of the “Ex-Soyer” Gagliano cello, built in Naples in 1778, can be heard when Yu plays with the DSO. Since Ms. Soyer’s death, the Marlboro Music Festival has generously loaned this timeless instrument to Yu.

When asked about moving from New York City to Detroit, Woo was enthusiastic. “It’s great timing to come to the city during the Renaissance,” he said. “Some people have outdated impressions about Detroit, but during my auditions and visits I experienced the energy and saw the neighborhoods changing. Midtown is iconic, and now there is the mix of new places, like the Red Wings arena being built.”

Yu’s wife, Keuna Lee, a collabora-

tive pianist and vocal coach who works with various opera houses around the world, also enjoys living in Detroit. “Keuna is as excited about the restaurant scene as I am,” Woo said. “We start our day with a visit to Great Lakes Coffee, and Whole Foods is a nice walk from my apartment. We like the convenience and fun of city living.”

Yu enjoys trying out new places around the neighborhood like HopCat, a brewpub with pub food and craft beer, one of the many breweries springing up that attract young Detroiters. Selden Standard rates as one of his favorite restaurants.

The couple likes to travel to China and Korea to visit family and stay in touch with the memorable places where they grew up. For relaxation, Yu enjoys cooking, often while listening to jazz and chamber music. Currently, *Married to the Amadeus* (Muriel Nissel, Giles de la Mare Publishers, July 18, 2012) is on his nightstand. He’s also a plastic hobbyist who builds model ships.

“What I like best about being here is the enthusiasm and support of the DSO and the people working hard to make the city come back,” Yu said. “I’m touched by the motivation and passion that people feel here.” **NS**

For a DSO Schedule, visit [dso.org](http://dso.org).



Wei and wife, Keuna, at Santa Fe Opera House last summer.