

Queen of Flute

Susan Milan and Her Recordings

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In the artistic imagery and the music world of fancy, as poignantly portrayed by Chen Yi-fei's famous painting "*The Girl Flautist*," woman and flute, are irrevocably a reflection of romance and beauty. Yet women playing flute, sitting or standing, tend more commonly to display their mannerism, without achieving an exquisite musicality. While more and more girl students now choose to learn flute in conservatories, yet few managed to find their way into the professional world. Even fewer could find a seat in a philharmonic orchestra, and only the most exceptional could break the barrier of entry to the "first-rate club". Among the solo-flautists of the 20th Century, one could not count more than a dozen women. The most famous of those during the last 100 years are, of course, the late Elaine Shaffer and Susan Milan.

I have been especially fond of the flute ever since childhood. I can hardly imagine how, in my years as an emotional and sentimental youth, I could have survived the years of anxiety and boredom without the sound of the flute. I had a friend in university who shared my passion for the flute. We were poor students. He spent his last penny to buy recordings of a German flautist Bettina Steinberg who played "cross-over" music, while I chased after the French master Pierre Rampal. We had a small collection of 7 or 8 CDs, which was our treasure. From time to time, we would get together and go through a ceremony of staging a private concert of our recordings. The noble and melancholy sound of the flute was a stimulating drug which transported us away from the boredom and monotony of student life.

I lost contact with my friend for a long time, until we met again this year. He has retained his passion for the flute and he asked me if I was still addicted. I told him that I was more deeply than ever fascinated by the sound of flute. I listened not only to Rampal, I had also discovered Larrieu, Nicolet, Bennett, Galway, and Pahud. Yet the more I

listened to their recordings, the more I became disillusioned, until, as I told my friend, I finally found someone, my idol of inter-weaving imagination and reality: she is the Queen of Flute in today's World of Music – Susan Milan.

I first came across the name when I purchased a Chandos recording of Mozart's flute and harp concerto and Salieri's flute and oboe concerto. I was curious at the time about Salieri, but I was immediately mesmerized by Milan's magic flute. Her harmonious proportioning of passion and indifference reminds me of the graceful beauty of a young gentlewoman, and that special combination of the sensual charm and tender refrain of femininity is never to be found in the playing of any male flautists. This is the ultimate, I said to myself: this is the perfection of a sound made by a woman flautist; made by a woman of culture. This is the music of the age of Mozart, the age of Mozart and Salieri. Milan wrote the cadenzas for both concertos, and all the skilful extravaganzas are subtly embedded in the tasteful expressions of affection and happiness. Immediately, I sought in the Chandos catalogue for Milan's recording of Mozart's flute concertos, and I found her CD, performing with the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Raymond Leppard. Recognizing for the first time her standing in the profession, I checked the Grove's Dictionary of Music and was greatly impressed by the glorious achievement of Susan Milan.

Milan was a prodigy when she was a student of John Francis at the Royal College of Music. She was not yet 20, when she was greeted by Queen Elisabeth at the Albert Hall; she received prestigious prizes from the Queen Mother and from the famous conductor Malcolm Sargent. Shortly after her year of graduate study under Geoffrey Gilbert, she was invited to become the Principal Flute of the Bournemouth Sinfonietta. Four years later, Milan made musical history when she became the first woman principal of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and such a young Principal. She was active on the British stage as a soloist and chamber musician. Fans rushed to performances given by the "beautiful maiden" and her magic flute. Conductors and orchestras sought her out. Milan mastered a varied repertoire of classical and modern repertoire, concertos and chamber music. Milan premiered more than a dozen compositions dedicated to her by modern composers, including, among others., *Sonata per Assisi* by Anton Dorati. In

addition, Milan has written scale books for the instruction of students, and a handbook of program notes for the convenience of performers. These books pass on her rich experience and theoretic understanding of the instrument and its repertoire. In recognition of her achievement, she was elected the President of the British Flute Society in 1990.

Milan started recording with British Recording Company, ASV in 1979, and her second recording was issued by the well known independent company, Hyperion. Later she had a long-term contract with Chandos and produced more than a dozen recordings, covering a broad field and including, in addition to the previously mentioned concertos, three collections of French repertoire, romantic and modern music, etc. Of these, *La Flute Enchante*, accompanied by the London Sinfonietta conducted by Richard Hickox, has an extraordinary enchantment, and reaches, in my view, absolutely the zenith of recorded flute music. Her most recent Chandos recording of the flute music by the conductor/composer Eugene Goossen is also fascinating. Solo flute accompanied by a variety of other instruments expresses beautifully the pleasurable pastoral fragrance and the leisurely poignancy of Edwardian England .

The one recording which has greatly affected me was Milan's rendition of Schubert's variations on the theme "Trockne Blumen". One needs courage to listen to this performance. The changes of her breathing, the disturbances of her emotion, her tears of tragedy, her narrative of a fairy tale, all contribute to compel one to immerse oneself in an over-powering sadness. When one listens to her dark deep murmuring tone, one cannot help but fall into the saddest despair. Schubert was born a narrator of tragic stories. Why should he choose among the many of the songs of the *Schone Mullerin* this particular one to make a set of variations for the flute? Susan Milan succeeded to penetrate to the very depth of this song, in her pursuit of truth. Milan was not overly sentimental. There are no mannerisms. She was not agitated, nor did she indulge in exaggeration. Genuine nobility royalty is revealed by this flautist with her queenly bearing. When she plays the flute, she is not performing; she is speaking for the composer. At the same time, she expresses her own idealism and her love of the flute. I can understand her, because of my lifelong feelings for flute music. Her love of the flute is no different from that of mine. With my ability to discriminate, I can discern the

difference between her sound and that of other famous flautists. Aside from the technical precision which she shares with the others, Milan alone was able to portray the true emotion.

Milan has also made recital recordings, mainly of French Impressionist composers, for Upbeat Records and Master Classics labels. There was Saint-Saens *Romance*, Debussy *Syrinx*, Lily Boulanger *Nocturne*, Ibert *Jeux*, Dutilleux *Sonatine*, as well as Poulenc and Feld *sonatas*. Milan's rendition of the French compositions is characterized by her colour, her warmth and her tenderness. The expression seems at times free and open, and at other times mysterious and intimate. She modulates with lightness and ease: there is no hesitation or uncertainty. Her long time friend, pianist Ian Brown, is an extraordinary accompanist, who has worked with Schering, Rostropovich, Galway, and other famous musicians. He maintained a proper distance in his accompaniment, and the colour and power of his piano blend perfectly with Milan's flute sound. Their interaction in French music is exceptionally harmonious.

I believe in destiny. It has been a coincidence that my path should cross Susan Milan's through my friend Kenneth Hsu. And it has been fate that he and she should find themselves.

I became acquainted with Mr. Hsu when we published his *book Amadeus and Magdalena, Life and Music of Mozart's Last Years*. I knew that his wife was a musician. I thought that she might be a singer, because he was so very familiar with Mozart's operas. Not until he suggested a concert to commemorate the 215 anniversary of Mozart's death, was I told that his wife was the flautist Susan Milan. This is true. We shall be able to attend Hsu's lecture on Mozart's Love and Death on December 5, 2006, and this will be followed by a concert given by Susan Milan and the Badke String Quartet. They will perform Mozart Flute Quartets, his Dissonant Quartet, and Beethoven's Serenade. After having heard so many of her recordings, so many times during the so many years, I am looking very much forward to see her performing in person.