

# Cynthia Lee Wong, SF Symphony get 'Carnival Fever'

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New York composer Cynthia Lee Wong will be at the San Francisco Symphony this week for the West Coast premiere of her commissioned orchestral piece “Carnival Fever.”

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**Michael Tilson Thomas** was rehearsing **Cynthia Lee Wong**’s new “**Carnival Fever**” last spring with Miami’s **New World Symphony** when he suggested adding the sound of the flexatone — the glissando-making metal percussion instrument used for comic and spooky effect in classic cartoons, as well as by composers like **Dmitri Shostakovich** and **György Ligeti** — to a violin passage played entirely in harmonics. The young composer agreed and loved the result.

“It was really funny. It made it more colorful and humorous,” says Wong, who’ll be at Davies Symphony Hall this week when Thomas and the **San Francisco Symphony** perform the West Coast premiere of “Carnival Fever.” It’s an energetic eight-minute work, partially inspired by the post-beheading, wine-fueled Roman carnival scene in

**Alexandre Dumas'** classic novel "**The Count of Monte Cristo**" — that also employs a slide whistle. That was Wong's idea, but she credits Thomas with making other suggestions that enriched the orchestration.

"He's very creative and adventurous," says the composer, 32, on the phone from New York, where she teaches at the City University of New York's Baruch College and is finishing her doctoral dissertation at CUNY's Graduate Center on the influence of fractal geometry, chaos theory and the mathematical Fibonacci series on Ligeti's music.

She had to put the dissertation on hold while working on "Carnival Fever," which was commissioned by **New Voices**, a joint project of the San Francisco Symphony, New World Symphony and the music publisher **Boosey & Hawkes**. She heard Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony live for the first time in 2013, at Carnegie Hall, and began composing this piece with the orchestra's "gorgeous" sound and the conductor's sense of joy in mind.

"I wanted to write something highly energetic and extroverted, something whimsical and playful that would have a lot of color in its instrumentation," Wong says. She composed the "opening gesture" of the piece before looking for a literary source to fuel the vitality and drama she was after.

Wong had always liked "The Count of Monte Cristo" and was taken by the "Carnival at Rome" chapter's "inherent tension between appearance and reality. There's this exuberant atmosphere, bright colors and fun. But you also have this sense of things going wildly out of control, an undercurrent of danger and revenge."

The feelings of vertigo and intoxication experienced by the young gentleman Albert — the son of a man who betrayed the count long ago and an unwitting tool in the count's plan for revenge — are summoned with whirls of notes that increase in speed and intensity. After the piece's premiere in Miami in April, the composer did some editing, tweaking some of the score's tempo and dynamic markings to create greater contrast.

"I exaggerated the differences in tempos. It's much more dramatic when you have those extremes," says Wong, who draws music-themed cartoons as a reprieve from writing her dissertation. Some of them are on sale in the bookstore at **Juilliard**, where she studied composition with **Milton Babbitt**, **David Del Tredici** and others.

It was Babbitt who translated the glowing review she received in 2005 from the Munich

newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for her “**Three Portraits**,” commissioned and premiered by the **Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra**. Among other things, it said her music was “shamelessly beautiful.”

So we had to ask: Is “Carnival Fever” shamelessly beautiful?

“That’s a good question,” Wong says, laughing. “I’ll leave that up to the audience.”

For more information, go to [www.sfsymphony.org](http://www.sfsymphony.org).

Whitfield & Greensill

If you’d rather savor the music of **Harry Warren** , the invaluable duo of singer **Wesla Whitfield** and her piano-playing spouse **Mike Greensill** will be at Society Cabaret in San Francisco’s Hotel Rex on Friday and Saturday, Jan. 23 and 24, doing their show “**At Last** .” It’s packed with music by the hit-making composer and lyricist, whose classics include “ **I Only Have Eyes for You** ,” “ **The More I See You** ” and, of course, “ **At Last** ,” which Warren wrote with **Mack Gordon** in 1941 and two decades later became the signature song of the immortal **Etta James** .

For more information, go to [www.societycabaret.com](http://www.societycabaret.com).

A jazz musical

Songwriter **Martine Tabilio** , whose tunes have been recorded by jazz singer **Tierney Sutton** and others, is staging a concert version of her jazz musical in progress, “ **Club Nocturne: A Life From Six Angles** ,” which she calls a kind of “ **Breakfast Club** ” for Boomers, on Friday and Saturday, Jan. 23 and 24, at the Sound Room in Oakland. The cast includes **Nicolas Bearde** , an original member of **Bobby McFerrin** ’s **Voicestra** ; **Kellye Gray** ; **Emily Day** ; and other reliable Bay Area singers. It’s set in a piano bar, with music provided by pianist **Kelly Park** , bassist **Dan Feiszli** and guitarist **Seth Greenberg** .

For more information, go to [www.soundroom.org](http://www.soundroom.org).

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