

FAMILY AFFAIR

WIFE AND HUSBAND BETH GUTERMAN CHU AND JONATHAN CHU ARE AT LAST TOGETHER IN THE SAME VIOLA SECTION IN ST. LOUIS.

BY TERRY PERKINS



Beth Guterman Chu and Jonathan Chu

At noon on a beautiful late September day, Beth Guterman Chu and Jonathan Chu shared the stage at the Saint Louis Art Museum's Farrell Auditorium in a Symphony in the City-Landmarks Series concert; one of the many free community performances presented by the St. Louis Symphony throughout the year.

In their performance of Dmitry Sitkovetsky's string trio arrangement of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*—accompanied by cellist Davin Rubicz—Beth and Jonathan Chu showcased outstanding technique on viola and violin respectively, as well as a deep, intuitive musical rapport.

That rapport is not surprising, given that Beth and Jonathan are married and have two young children. And the musical side of the Chu's relationship should certainly develop and strengthen now that they are finally in the same orchestra—and the same city—for the first time since their marriage.

Beth Chu was named Principal Viola for the Symphony in 2012, and she began appearing with the orchestra in January 2013. Jonathan Chu began his second tenure at the Symphony for the 2014 season as Assistant Principal Viola—after playing



The Chus

second violin with the Symphony during the 2006-07 season.

Beth and Jonathan didn't start their relationship and marry until after Jonathan returned to the East Coast from his first tenure with the Symphony. But the couple first met during their high school years, when they were both chosen to be part of an All-Eastern Festival Orchestra. However, that initial encounter proved to be the opposite of love at first sight.

"I remember that the Festival happened in Manhattan around the December holidays," recalls Beth during a recent interview with Jonathan before a rehearsal at Powell Hall. "I came down from Boston, and had a friend who knew Jonathan. And my friend was trying to get us all together to play chamber music.

"But the conductor of the Festival Orchestra already knew me and asked me to play first chair viola, even though I had gotten into the orchestra on violin. All the other kids were a little surprised."

"When you're in high school, seating means a lot," adds Jonathan, who had come down from his home in Albany for the event. "So everyone else in the orchestra, including me, was thinking, 'Oh look, he promoted his favorite!'"

"Over the years, we continued to meet at music festivals during the summer," says Beth. "But we didn't seem to get along at all."

Things finally turned around in their relationship when both attended the prestigious Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont.

"I auditioned for Marlboro on viola instead of violin, and got in," recalls Jonathan. "I had just moved back to New York from St. Louis and was living with this great violist who was a good friend of Beth's as well. All three of us were at Marlboro that summer, and we were all in a group reading the Mozart viola quintets. That made it less awkward and that broke the ice."

"It's impossible when you're playing chamber music not to notice that someone is a sensitive, wonderful musician," says Beth. "I recognized immediately how beautifully Jonathan played, and how much fun it was to play with him. And I trusted my friends—who were friends with him as well. So I thought, maybe I'm wrong about this guy!"

Family Affair

Once Beth and Jonathan were together, they made their home in Philadelphia, where Jonathan had won a position with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 2008. Beth commuted to New York for performances with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, to Tennessee with the IRIS Orchestra, and around the country as well.

But with a second child on the way, Beth and Jonathan decided to look for a more stable performance schedule for both of them.

“I had already won a job with the Boston Symphony for the 2012 season,” says Jonathan. “So we started looking at orchestra openings for her as well.”

“Jonathan was the one who pushed me to apply in St. Louis because of his experience here,” adds Beth. “So I came for an audition when I was four months pregnant, and I won the position.”

“I was supposed to start in Boston that September,” says Jonathan. “But Beth had the second baby September 3, right before she was supposed to start here. So I stayed in Philadelphia one more year.

“I flew back and forth from Philadelphia to here as much as I could, then I started my job in Boston for the 2013-2014 season,” Jonathan continues. “I had the kids from September through December last year. Then Beth had the kids January through June this year. And whoever didn’t have the kids was flying a lot!”

So when an opening in the St. Louis Symphony viola section was announced, Jonathan focused on trying to win the audition in March 2014—and bring the family together.

“Preparing for the audition was a lot of work,” says Jonathan. “But

Beth had the kids, so I could practice a lot. On the other hand, there was a lot riding on this audition. It was a lot of pressure!”

The Symphony has a “blind audition” process in which candidates play behind a screen. As Principal Viola, Beth was a judge for the openings in that section, and was as nervous as Jonathan during the process.

“I remember Jonathan telling me he was never more nervous,” she recalls. “But I was nervous too on the other side of the screen!”

“If I advanced to the finals and the screen came down, it was agreed that Beth wouldn’t be involved in the vetting and discussion,” says Jonathan. It was strange hearing her voice saying ‘Please repeat that extra piece.’ Thankfully, I ended up winning the audition!”

The Chus are finally settling in St. Louis for life together as a family, looking forward to playing together in the Symphony—and also in chamber music performances, such as the September performance at the Art Museum.

“We both love playing chamber music, so having the chance to do that is wonderful,” says Beth.

But one question remained for Jonathan. What about the dynamic of playing in the same section as your spouse—especially when she is Principal Viola and you are Assistant Principal?

“She’s my boss, and I’m her assistant,” he says with a laugh. “So I have to watch everything I say!”

Terry Perkins is a St. Louis-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and in magazines such as DownBeat, the Oxford American, and other publications.