

**Queen of the Flute**  
**Susan Milan and Her Recordings**

**Philharmonic Magazine, Beijing, 2006**

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 a first-rate club. Among the solo-flautists of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 specially fond of flutes ever since the childhood. I can hardly imagine how could have I, in my years as an emotional and sentimental youth, survived the years of anxiety and boredom without the flute music. I had a friend in the university who shared my passion for 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 Rampart. We had a small collection of 7 or 8 CDs, which was our treasure. From time to time, we would get together and went through a ceremony to stage a private concert of our recordings. Those were the happiest moments of those prosaic years.

I lost contact with my friend for a long time, until we met again this year. He has retained his passion for flute. He asked me if I had gotten over my addiction. I contradicted him, and told him that I am more deeply than ever fascinated by the sound of flute. I listened not only to Rampal, I found also 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 record of Mozart's flute and harp concerto and Saliere's flute and oboe concerto. I was curious at the time about Salierie, but I was immediately enchanted 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 ultimate, I said to myself: this is the perfection in the sound of a woman flautist. This is the music of the age of Mozart, the age of Mozart and Salieri. Milan wrote the cadenza for both concertos, and all the skilful extravaganzas are hidden 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, playing with the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Raymond Leppard. Recognizing for the first time of her standing in the profession, I checked the Grover's Dictionary and was greatly impressed by the glorious achievement of Susan Milan.

Milan was a prodigy when she was 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 xxx Gilbert, she was invited to become the Principal Flute of the Bourmourth Orchestra. Four years later, Milan made music history as the first woman principal musician of a major orchestra, when she joined the Royal Philharmonic. She was active on the British stage as a soloist and chamber musician. Fans rushed to the performance of the "maiden beauty and her magic flute. Conductors and orchestras sought her out. Milan mastered a varied repertoire of classic and modern, concertos and chamber music. Milan premiered more than a dozen compositions dedicated to her by modern composers, including, among others., Assissi Sonatino by Anton Dorati. In addition, Milan wrote scale books for instructions of students, and a handbook of program notes for the convenience of performers. In recognition of her achievement, she was elected the President of the British Society in 1990.

Milan started recording with British ASV Co. in 1979, and her second recording was brought by the well known Hyperion. Later she had a long-term contract with Chandos and produce more than a dozen recordings, covering a broad field and including in addition to the previously mentioned concertos, three collections of French repetoires, romantic and modern music, etc. Of those La Flute Enchante, accompanied by the London Symphonietta conducted by Richard, has an extraordinary enchantment, and reaches, in my view, absolutely the zenith of recorded flute music. Fascinating is her most recent production of the flute music by Sir Eugene Goosens. Solo flute accompanied by a variety of other instruments expressed beautifully the pleasurable pastoral fragrance, the leisurely Edwardian poignancy.

The one recording which has greatly affected me was Milan's rendition of Schubert's "Withered Flowers." One needs courage to listen to this performance. The changes of her breathing, the disturbances of her emotion, her tears of a tragedy, her narrative of a fairy tale, all contribute to compel one to immerse into an over-powering sadness. When one listens to her dark deep murmuring tunes, he cannot help but falls into the saddest despair. Schubert was born a narrator of

tragic stories. Why should he choose among the many of the songs of the *Beautiful Miller Daughter* this particularly one to make a variation for 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 indulging in exaggeration. The real royalty has been revealed by the flautist with her noble bearing. When she plays the flute, she is not performing; she speaks for the composer. At the same time, she expresses her own idealism and her affection for her flute. I could understand her, because of my lifelong feelings for the flute music. Her love of 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 recorded for Upbeat and for Master Classics collections of the French impressionists. There was St. Sains *Romance*, Debussy's xxxxx, Lily XXXX Noctune, Ilbert's *Play*, Ditiya's *sonata*, as well as Planck and Feld's *sonata*. The last was dedicated to Rampal, but was premiered by Milan. Milan's rendition of the French composition is characterized by her color, her warmth, her tenderness. The expression seems at times prosaic and open, and at other times mysterious and foggy. She modulates with lightness and ease: there is no hesitation nor uncertainty. Her longtime friend pianist Ian Brown is an extraordinary accompanist, who has worked with Scherring, Rostropovich, Galway, and other famous musicians. He maintained a proper distance in his accompaniment, and the color and power of his piano harmonized perfectly with Milan's sound of flute. Their cooperation in the French music is exceptionally fitting.

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 when he proposed 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, to be followed by a concert by Susan Milan. She and the Badke Quartet 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.

