

FLUTIST WITH LOCAL ROOTS NAMED A MACARTHUR GENIUS

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Leucadia-bred musician is co-founder of innovative ensemble in New York City

MIKE LEE • U-T

By the time Claire Chase was 13, it was clear she possessed unusual talent and unrelenting passion.

In between homework assignments, she performed in a children's chorus for the San Diego Opera's rendition of "Carmen" and then perched herself near the orchestra pit to soak up each note of a particular flute solo.

Fast forward to Monday when Chase, now 34, was named one of 23 winners of the so-called "genius grants" handed out by the MacArthur Foundation for 2012. The Leucadia-bred flute prodigy was recognized for being an "arts entrepreneur ... (who engages) audiences in the



Claire Chase. JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR FOUNDATION/AP

appreciation of contemporary classical music and opening new avenues of artistic expression."

Oceanside native Chris Thile, a New
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GENIUS • Chase founded International Contemporary Ensemble with \$500

FROM A1

York-based magician with the mandolin, also was named a MacArthur Fellow. Each recipient won \$500,000 over the next five years. The fellowships come without stipulations or reporting requirements, offering what the foundation calls “unprecedented freedom and opportunity to reflect, create, and explore.”

While the lucrative MacArthur grant surprised Chase’s supporters, it wasn’t necessarily a shock to anyone who followed her over the past two decades.

“She’s the most unassuming talent I’ve come across in all my years of teaching,” Chase’s theater teacher told *The San Diego Union-Tribune* in 1992. “You first look at her and you think she’s just another surfer girl with blond hair. And then you see her on stage acting a scene from *Yeats* and she just blows your socks off.”

Chase lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., where she is the co-founder, chief executive and artistic director of the International Contemporary Ensemble, a contingent of leading instrumentalists bent on innovation. A spokesman for the group said Tuesday that Chase

Claire Chase

- Received bachelor of music in 2001 from the Oberlin Conservatory.
- Served as executive (now artistic) director of the International Contemporary Ensemble since cofounding it in 2001.
- As a soloist and with the ensemble, she has performed at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Guangzhou (China) Opera House, and the Pinacoteca Museum in Brazil.
- Recordings include “Terrestre” (2012), “Complete Crumb Edition, Volume 12” (2008), “Undersong” (2011), and “Bright and Hollow Sky” (2011).

was unavailable because she had just returned from a concert in China and had gone to bed.

On her website, Chase describes herself as a soloist, collaborative artist and activist for experimental music and performance. Over the last decade, she has performed the world premieres of more than 100 works for flute, many of them made for her.

She founded the ensemble a decade ago with about \$500 and “this crazy idea that we could eventually create an organization as important, as relevant and as inseparable in the cultural life of great cities as institutions that preserve history — museums, symphony orchestras, opera

companies,” Chase said in a video interview on the MacArthur Foundation website.

The ensemble’s eclectic programming combines well-known works alongside contemporary compositions played in settings that range from traditional orchestra venues to warehouses.

“Chase and (the ensemble) convey a passion for and knowledge of contemporary music that prompts audience members to expand their aesthetic boundaries beyond the familiar canon to include works by young and emerging composers,” the foundation said in a statement.

Chase performed locally during her days at San Die-

guito High School and more recently at a concert in San Marcos. She injected a bit of humor into that 2005 event by recalling a time when she was practicing a 13-minute piece and Chicago police were twice called to her apartment “because of complaints of a domestic dispute.”

Chase received more complimentary attention in the wake of the MacArthur announcement. The *Chicago Tribune*’s classical music critic feted her for “stimulating audience members to engage with the sounds of today,” and a public radio station in New York held an on-air “listening party” in her honor.

Chase said her pivotal moment was during a symphony orchestra concert she attended as a youngster. “I remember looking at the sea of black, these penguin suits,” she said in the video. “I saw this golden flute and I pointed to it and I said, ‘That one. That is the one I want.’”

Though Chase’s parents are quick to credit their daughter’s hard work, the flutist’s musical aptitude came naturally. Her mother, Ann Chase, is a noted soprano in local music circles and her father, David Chase, is choral director for the La

Jolla Symphony & Chorus and an emeritus professor of music at Palomar College.

Despite their familial and musical connections, the elder Chases hadn’t heard from Claire as of 3 p.m. Tuesday.

“We are essentially sitting at home in our pajamas, answering millions of emails and waiting for our daughter to call,” David Chase said. “We are so excited about talking to her, but she’s probably sound asleep.”

Ann Chase said her daughter’s determination became evident during her teen years.

“She just always wanted to practice,” Ann Chase said. “We actually had to ask her at times to lay off a little bit. From junior high on, it was just all flute. She stopped doing sports. She stopped doing theater. ... It was just flute.”

David, who has watched a parade of young musicians across several decades, said his daughter was “extraordinary from the get-go.”

“I have a certain kind of objectivity now that she has been out in the world for a decade or more doing this stuff and I just know that she and Steven Schick are the two geniuses I know.”

Schick is the music director for the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus and the one who broke the news about the MacArthur grant to David Chase Monday night.

“I just about lost it in the front seat of the car,” David Chase said.

He said he didn’t push Claire into music — she did that herself. “We always said basically, ‘You do what you need to do — but if you do it, do it well,’” David Chase said.

“We have always been worried about Claire running herself into the ground and burning out,” he continued. “She hasn’t yet.”

So, might her most recent award provide Claire Chase with some breathing room?

“If she ever calls us, we will ask her that question,” David Chase said. “I don’t know. My suspicion is that she will probably use it to start a new project.”

Whatever comes, the Chases will enjoy the attention showered on their unusually gifted daughter. “We are very, very proud,” Ann Chase said. “We are somewhat in awe as well.”

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