

A Chan for all seasons

Charlie Chan isn't an Oriental detective from a '40s film, but, reports **LYNDEN BARBER**, she could be just about anything else.

MUSIC comes as easily to Charlie Chan as fixing cars comes to mechanics. She can do that without too much bother as well.

"I've got that kind of brain," says this daughter of a Malaysian Chinese father and Scottish-Australian mother in her flat — a warehouse on a pier overlooking Sydney Harbour. "I can take the head off a car, examine the car, detect what the fault is — I've got that kind of mind. It's odd, really — it's sort of the way I am."

The "way she is" means that when most girls were playing with dolls, she was playing the ukelele. At four she began learning the guitar, closely followed by the piano.

By 16, when she ran away from her home city of Melbourne to Sydney to work with drama and dance groups, she could play about 16 instruments, conduct, write original music and orchestrate.

"I was too young," says Chan, now 28. "That's pretty exceptional behaviour for a 16-year-old. Two weeks before a young people's theatre production I wrote 34 charts, conducted and rehearsed the band, got it together. I myself acknowledged that was a pretty amazing thing to have done."

Last year Sony's classical label, Masterworks, released Chan's startlingly eclectic debut album, *The Adventures of . . .* a CD ranging from a soaring, Monteverdi-inspired quasi-hymn to infectious African drumming . . . and that just in the first track.

Sony's New York office was sufficiently impressed to include her on a compilation tape sent to a festival of independent filmmakers. Her music covers so many bases that classifying it is impossible. Jazz, though, is an obvious influence — the locally based African musician Eddie Quansah, ex-Osibisa, added plaintive trumpet to the album. The opera singer Heather Lee supplied the striking vocals on the opening track, *A Grave of a Dolphin*, commissioned by the producer Hal McElroy for a film project that never saw the light of day.

"Charlie" is, of course, not her real name (she's only prepared to reveal her Christian name off-the-record, though it's nothing to be embarrassed about). She thinks the nickname derives from a famous piano-playing movie character, but insists this is not the Oriental film detective of the 1930s and '40s. (Does she mean the Charles Aznavour character in Truffaut's *Shoot The*



"Give me a blank piece of paper and pencils and I'll work something out" . . . Charlie Chan. Photograph by MICHELE MOSSOP

Pianist? She doesn't remember.)

Her parents — her father was a Melbourne photographer and her mother a nurse — encouraged her musically right from the beginning, although they didn't have to push very hard. She always knew music was what she wanted to do.

"I'm a bit 'Give me a blank piece of paper and some pencils and I'll work something out'. It comes — it's a natural thing, because that's all I've ever done. I do music and I started when I was three and here I am now and I'm 28 and I'm still doing it. Sometimes I'm poor but I'm still here."

Chan plays just about any instrument except woodwinds. She once developed a perverse yen to play the E flat euphonium "because

it was so obscure". She just went ahead and did it. The double bass she finds hard work, but only physically. It's about twice her size.

She claims not to have spent most of her life studying music. "I actually spent most of my days drinking and talking to people because it's the minutest amount of time — to write a piece of music — for me. I could think of something and it could take me an hour or two. Last weekend I wrote a piece of music; it was two o'clock in the morning, I couldn't sleep."

On paper, Chan might sound mildly immodest. In person, she comes across as slightly bemused by her talent — she can't explain it herself.

Brimful of energy, her sen-

tences race, often with false starts.

Sometimes, like a lot of musicians, she gets a bit metaphysical — "oogie-boogie cosmic", as she puts it. Thankfully she does not err on the wrong side of space cadetship. "I never want to align myself with New Age sort of stuff," she says. "It pains me when people say, 'You're New Age' — it's like a stake through my heart. All my favourite music is film-score music — the soundtrack to *Blade Runner*, *The Mission*, *The Sound of Music* and musicals in general."

Having recently written the music for an SBS *Under The Skin* episode (already screened) and the current Sydney Theatre Company production, *Gift of the Gorgon*, by Peter Schaffer, Chan is now setting

her sights on India and America.

India is where she plans to work on a cherished project — a musical about an Indian child saint — while America is a place she simply wants to experience for a while. When she first came to Sydney she found the city "effervescent, a really exciting place to be", whereas Melbourne was "grey — a bit like Britain". Now she's been here long enough to want to go "where the rhythm of the place is different".

In the meantime, when not playing music, she'll be spending time under the bonnet of her 1954 Rover. Or doing painting and sculpture. Or applying her skills as a do-it-yourself electrician. It's her brain. It just works that way.