

In her DREAMS

A classically trained musician with an ear for a good tune is rewriting the book on do-it-yourself recording. **Vivienne Chow** steps into the savvy world of Jenny Tong



Simon Song

WITH HER WITTY use of language and rapid-fire patter, Jenny Tong seems more like an insurance broker than an independent musician. But this is no ordinary talent. Instead of assuming the artistic temperament (read: introvert) expected of her classical music background, the outgoing 32-year-old has become a big fan of Canto-pop.

Not for her the tiresome, experimental doodlings of the serious musician. Tong creates melodic instrumental pieces, shot through with catchy pop hooks. But what sets her apart from struggling independent artists is her razor-sharp marketing mind.

"Because of my day-time job as an investment consultant, I know about market analysis. I can see the market and there is no locally produced music like mine available at record stores," says Tong.

She has been quietly making a big noise with her recently released solo debut, *In The Mood Of... Dreams*, which has sold steadily since its release in November. Tong's sound is piano-driven

easy-listening. It is music to relax to. She says what the market needs is more music of high quality that people can digest easily. "There is no local music suitable for those aged 28 years or older, who like to buy music but don't want to spend money on pirated CDs. The choice is very limited because the market is full of idol-driven teenage pop. Perhaps [Taiwanese singer-songwriter] Jay Chou may suit them. But other than that, there's nothing.

"Unlike Taiwan, there has been very little locally produced instrumental music in Hong Kong," Tong says. "With the improvement in educational levels and the increase in demand for quality music, I want to break through this area of the market."

Born in Macau and raised in Hong Kong, she has been practising piano since the age of five. Having studied classical music and communication during her arts degree in the United States, she returned to Macau in 1994, and moved to Hong Kong in 1998 as "it's more like a place I like to live". She then started play-

ing live concerts in Hong Kong and Macau in her spare time.

Before releasing *In The Mood Of... Dreams*, Tong has written music for promotional purposes, such as pieces for a Standard Chartered Bank marketing campaign, a launch party for car-maker Bentley and a promotional album for cigarette brand Kent. Tong's experience in commercial enterprise tells her marketing is the most important element in gaining publicity.

The success of British-raised, Singaporean-born violinist Vanessa-Mae appeals to Tong because she proves marketing is more than just packaging. It is also about producing something that fits the market. "I know a lot of friends who are much better musicians than she is, but she has found her way out. She has produced good work by blending classical music with pop elements, and the record company sells her as a sexy music prodigy," says Tong.

Tong stresses she doesn't want to be the next Vanessa-Mae, and that at her age

no major record companies would be willing to invest in her as an idol. But she is determined to get her music heard and continues to dream.

"Some people suggest I release an instrumental CD until I'm famous like [Canto-pop song composer] Chan Fai-yeung. But who knows what will happen tomorrow? I would rather do it now if I can," she says.

Tong joined the Eyez Production team last year, a label formed by her friends, and *In The Mood Of... Dreams* is their first major project. With her grounding in classical and jazz, Tong says composing and playing the music was the easy part.

The real challenge came with promoting the work. Without any contacts in show business or the media, she has had to create her own buzz. She writes her own press releases, sends out the CDs and answers all mail personally.

Tong is happy with what she has achieved so far. She hears that her CD has been selling quite well (though she refuses

to disclose the figures). But she still has bitter moments.

"It's all about connections," she says. "If I had a famous radio DJ friend who played my tunes every day, don't you think I would be popular? If I had a good relationship with Albert Yeung Sau-sing [head of Emperor Entertainment Group] and he let me play at the Twins and Eason Chan Yik-shun's concerts, I'm sure I would be famous. But still, quality is the most important [thing]."

Shortly after this outburst, Tong's smile returns. At the end of the day, she never intended to be a celebrity, dodging the paparazzi. "I'm really happy with my achievement as an investment consultant. It improves my interpersonal skills and prevents me from being isolated, like many full-time musicians are. Plus, you can only survive making music if you are famous or from a rich family," says Tong.

In The Mood Of... Dreams is available at all HMV stores.

"I can see the market and there is no locally produced music like mine available at record stores"