

Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

A gateway to recognition for young musicians
Looking at Young Concert Artists in today's music world



Susan Wadsworth

若手演奏家の登竜門
ヤング・コンサート・アーティストの現在



Young Concert Artists (YCA)
<http://www.yca.org/>

The fate of aspiring young musicians has long been one to endure some 20 years of difficult and competitive training to graduate from a music conservatory, with no assurance that they will be able to pursue their dream, a career as a professional musician. The American non-profit organization Young Concert Artists (YCA) was established in 1961 with the purpose of providing many career opportunities for young musicians who are chosen through auditions each year. The criteria do not depend on credentials or experience, but only those with exceptional talent and accomplishment. YCA has won a strong reputation among discerning audiences and professionals of the international classical music world for selecting superb young musicians and launching them on important careers. Among the “graduates” of the YCA program are many well-known artists today, giving validity to the YCA approach. Among the YCA “Alumni” are numerous Japanese musicians whose careers were aided by the YCA program in their early years in the 1960s and '70s such as the violist Nobuko Imai, the cellist Ko Iwasaki the violinists Yayoi Toda and Anne Akiko Meyers, and the Tokyo String Quartet, while the younger YCA generation includes International Tchaikovsky Violin Competition winner, Mayuko Kamio. Although the presence of YCA is just as important today for young artists who have been through their formal training and are about to enter “the real world”, the conditions of the music world are changing rapidly. On the occasion of their stay in Japan for the YCA Tokyo Festival held in June at the CHANEL tower in Ginza, we spoke to YCA Founder Susan Wadsworth and Associate Director Mark Hayman about the current conditions for young musicians and the unique role the organization has played.

(Interview: Kazumi Minoguchi)

Ms. Wadsworth, we are told that you founded YCA because you knew wonderfully talented musicians who just had no opportunities to perform and that prompted you to try to create opportunities for such musicians to play before an audience, with the conviction that it would surely lead to new career opportunities and success. Young Concert Artists will celebrate its 50th anniversary soon in 2011. Could you please tell us how its role has been changing over the years?

Susan Wadsworth: The way the music world has changed is very, very violent. For example, during the first ten years, if an artist was exceptional, like Richard Goode, I could go to major managements, and say, “This is someone that you should take on.

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Here is the review, here is the way he plays, this is a great artist you should add to your management,” and they would. I could invite managements to hear someone, and if they liked them, they signed them on. I could call conductors, and say that I would like them to listen to an artist, and they would come. Today that is completely impossible.

When Mayuko Kamio was on our roster and was getting rave reviews in the New York Times and the Washington Post, I called the administration at the New York Philharmonic. Amazingly, they arrange for their conductor, Lorin Maazel, to hear her. I do not even try to do this very often, because it is so difficult. Mayuko played for him, and he listened to the entire concerto, and when she finished, he said, “She is a phenomenon. I have never heard that music played so wonderfully. Please give me her schedule!” So I did. And I followed up. But there was no response.

I realized when I looked at the schedule of the New York Philharmonic the next season, a young Asian girl violinist I hadn't heard of was playing with the orchestra. There are now so many young Asian girl violinists!

Just mention any category, and there are many outstanding young artists on the same instrument, and the major orchestras can choose from all the famous people, and only rarely engage someone who is absolutely new. They can't be adventurous; they have to be sure they are selling tickets.

Managers also just don't really want to add artists to their rosters, because they have to get concerts for the artists they are already committed to. They have superstars, and have people not so well known, whom they believe in, and a few young people, but they have to work extra hard to promote them. Some managers in the old days believed in artists and created stories to publicize them, and the press was interested. Now everyone is saturated with information and newspapers rarely do “human interest” stories, which were a marvelous way of letting the public know about an artist – famous or new.

Mark Hayman: Everyone still tries to create this kind of publicity and, like everything in the world today, what the publicity people generate is just a thousand times more than it used to be. People are overwhelmed by the millions of bits of information around them. And although they still try to make big stories out of people, it is hard for anyone to stand out in the pack with so much information around today.

Even in such a stagnant situation, competitions and auditions continue providing the world of music with new, young musicians.

W: There are now in the United States alone, hundreds of competitions for young musicians. I encourage our artists to take part in these competitions, not necessarily because it can launch a career—because it doesn't really help that way at all—but because winning a prize brings them a few thousand dollars, which is nice, and gives them experience. Moving their career forward is what we have to do. We use all the information to create publicity materials—their prizes, their reviews—to help them be engaged in performances. The work we do for our young artists is the same as what the commercial managements do, but we do it for free, and we raise the money to support our administrative costs and can spend the time without worrying about supporting our work from artists' commissions. Something that is changing now is that

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people stay with us longer, because it is harder to get their careers started. When they do leave us, if they still don't have management, they have established themselves in some way. They are in demand because people know how good they are. Sometimes they are better off working with their own contacts that they have built up through the engagements they got through Young Concert Artists. Musicians are more entrepreneurial, often starting their own music festivals.

So, YCA encourages them to be independent, self-managing artists.

W: I think one of the things we do for artists is when they are chosen by us, they know we feel they are exceptional, which gives them a sense of confidence. We are do nurture them, showing them how they can improve their way of dealing with concert travel, or appreciating the people presenting their concerts, how to make interesting and appealing programs. They have to be ready to play when an opportunity comes up unexpectedly. We also have an educational program through which the artists learn how to talk to students or to talk to audiences. We were the first to create short educational "outreach" activities.

So, what would you say is the mission and the present role of YCA?

W: Our first goal, the very first thing, is to maintain the extraordinary caliber of our artists. We often do better than Competitions because ours is not a competition; we don't choose one pianist compared to another pianist. For example in our 2009 Auditions we had four violin winners. Each one is completely different. YCA is telling them: you are special, you have something to say. In a way, I think that is the most important thing we do. Then we give them at least three years of career management and of course the all-important New York and Washington debut concerts.

H: Yes, let's say we are not as powerful as we used to be outside of the music world. But we still do just as much in terms of giving them training, support and help. Because it is rare for a young musician to know how to manage themselves, and their own career. Even when artists go on to commercial management, they still have to be responsible for taking care of their own affairs. Even if you are very successful, few managements will actually take care of everything for you. They will book lots of concerts, but you need to be able to manage your own time, to know how to say "yes," how to say "no." So, we try to give the artists all those skills and that is what we keep doing, teaching them how to become a professional.

I think even the great teachers at the important music conservatories don't always have that ability. They are not managers; they don't have experience teaching young artists how to deal with a contract, visas, taxes, the law and different kinds of agreements. That if you are called, you have to return the call right away, and respond if someone asks you about your program repertoire or something in your biography. That is the business part, but not all artists are good at doing these things naturally, so they learn with us.

Recently YCA has held auditions abroad. Why does a US organization extend its activities in that direction?

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W: One of our alumni, the pianist Joel Shapiro, became a professor in Leipzig, at the Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdi Hochschule for Musik. At that time, West and East Germany had only been re-unified for a couple of years, and the activities and prestige of the historic, legendary conservatory in Leipzig – which Mendelssohn had been the Director of, and where Grieg had studied, and Schumann had taught, needed to be revitalized. He was also chosen to be the Pro-Rektor – the artistic director of Hochschule. He decided that the Hochschule would host International Young Concert Artists auditions there, because Leipzig was quite accessible for European and Eastern European countries. It gave poor young artists the chance to be heard live, rather than by sending a CD to New York. This also brought many young people to Leipzig, and made people aware that interesting things were happening there.

Then another YCA alumnus, a French pianist, Marc Laforet, decided to do the same thing in Paris, so for a while we alternated between auditions in Leipzig and auditions in Paris. This was all initiated by our wonderful alumni, who wanted to help the organization, to enrich it with musicians from Europe, Russia and the Eastern countries, and to spread the word about it.

For four years there has also been a YCA Festival held every year at the Chanel Tower's Nexus Hall in Tokyo. Was this also initiated by another alumni?

W: Our Tokyo Festival came about in a different way: the chairman of our Board of Directors, Peter Marino, is the architect of the Chanel Tower. The President of Chanel is Japan, Richard Collasse, is also a music lover. So they decided that this was the chance for Young Concert Artists to do something special in this beautiful building here in Japan. Chanel decided most generously to sponsor the Festival! It is quite unusual for a major international fashion house to sponsor a classical music festival, especially with artists who are not yet famous! But they created the possibility for this Festival and it has been such a success! Now we have begun to receive support from the international and the Japanese community.

We were very fortunate from the first year to be awarded grants from the US Embassy in Japan. They appreciate that a US organization is doing something special in Japan in which Japanese and American artists and others from all over the world perform together and doing something together, and that a French company in Japan is working with an American organization to create an international festival.

H: It has been a sort of organic outgrowth, these international activities by people involved with Young Concert Artists wanting to bring YCA to another part of the world. All of these initiatives were originally the efforts of people outside of the YCA office. We can't start something unless there is someone locally based who says, "I have an idea for a great project, and that is ..." Then we can say, "It sounds great! If you want to start it, we'll help you!" So, that's how it happened. That's the way the international auditions happened, how the Festival in Tokyo happened. I wonder who will be next to help... (laughs).

Let me ask one different question. How do you manage in raising funds for the activities of YCA?

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W: Good question! I think the key to success in fundraising is the interest of individuals. Individuals can contribute 50 dollars a year, or many hundreds or thousands, if they love music and love the idea of supporting an exciting young artist. Those are our most loyal supporters. They will come every year to the auditions see who wins and come to hear their debuts in the Young Concert Artists Series in New York and Washington. Our Board of Directors in Washington as well as in New York, bring their friends to us, and that's really the biggest means of support. There are the foundations, of course. However, the funds of foundations in these times are decreasing. Some established sources of support are even planning to "spend down and to close."

In the States all the arts organizations are cutting costs every way they can. We are very small to begin with, so we don't want to cut staff, because if we do, we just won't be able to do what we are doing now. But we are trying to cut our expenses, and trying to find new supporters. What the arts and music give people is as needed as ever, even more so, because it's such an enjoyment. If you can hear extraordinary music-making, it is so wonderful for the soul. So the need is there, for the musicians and for music-lovers to be able to hear them. We are always trying to find more people who feel that way and who will help us make that happen.

H: From the beginning YCA has been a charity to help young artists. Every year individuals support our organization. They give money to have things happen here. It takes a lot of work, and you have to do what you consider best to help artists. Fundraising is just to make helping the artists possible. We don't want to spend all of our time raising money, because there would be no time to do our work for the artists.

It seems that YCA has a strong sense of mission and a philosophy for supporting young, emerging musicians.

W: As I said, the most important thing for us is to choose people who have something extraordinary about them. They have to have virtuoso technique, they have to be inspired musicians, and they have to have charisma that they communicate through their music. Our philosophy is that if we help the right artists, what we do for them blossoms, and they will move forward. Because the more they are heard, the more will happen for them, and the more they will be able to do.

Because of the way YCA started and the way we have developed, many competitions in US now don't just give prize money as they used to. Many competitions now are giving the winners two years of concert engagements. There are also many young artists programs that didn't exist before. People are much more aware of what young musicians need to help them get started. I think this is because of what Young Concert Artists has done.

H: We were among the very first organization to do these things for young artists – you might say that many other organizations copied us. And we have existed only to help young artists, long before other much older institutions, such as the Metropolitan Opera and Carnegie Hall, which are over one hundred years old, created programs to help young musicians.

Another thing we did that was new, was to create a program for young composers, beginning fifteen years ago. This is an area where there basically no support or op-

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portunities for young composers, especially to receive management assistance and help in more extensive ways. Some places may give them commissions or organize competitions, but that is all. So the sensational composers we have chosen have been greatly helped and are considered the best of the young generation, and tend to stay with us for quite a while – even up to ten years!

We create a special panel every two years, to listen to the music and see the scores of young composers. The new composer chosen is then commissioned by YCA to write two pieces for artists on the YCA roster. And just bringing the two together often leads to commissions for more pieces and opportunities to perform them. It is great when an artist and a composer of the same age can work together.

W: This is what YCA always does, and makes things happen. Yes, “YCA makes things happen!”

So you are going to celebrate YCA's 50th anniversary in the 2010-11 season. Do you have any plans for that?

W: Actually right now we are just beginning to think about the anniversary. Things are starting to happen, organic things as Mark said. For example, the Tokyo String Quartet made their debut in our 10th season. So YCA's 50th anniversary is the Quartet's 40th anniversary. Kazuhide Isomura, the violist, called me and said that to celebrate their anniversary they were going to play the program they played in their debut with in the Young Concert Artists Series! So when they play in NY, we will connect their concert with our anniversary. We are thinking of having many events, not only in New York, but hopefully in other places also, because our artists are everywhere.