
Lynn Yen

Recruiting Youth to Classical Music

Lynn Yen is a founder of the Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture, an organization dedicated to inspiring youth with Classical music, in particular.

Hello, everybody. The afternoon introduction by Kesha [Rogers] is actually correct: The basis of our foundation is founded on Schiller's words that "It is through beauty that one proceeds to freedom." This is the whole concept of what our foundation is supposed to be.

Now, a little bit about me. First: I was born in the post-Cultural Revolutionary era of China. And I came to America with my mother in the '80s, when she became an exchange doctor with the World Health Organization. I started learning the piano, as well as Chinese calligraphy at the same time, when I was seven. But I think I was very much a product of my generation, in that by the time I went to college, I went to NYU [New York University] to study finance. I listened to all the "cool" music then, abandoned my Classical music, and for quite a while, I worked in finance. And most of my free time then was spent either in night clubs or in lounges.

What actually got me away from this was the financial crash of 2008, and coming to a realization that we

were actually in a completely devastated nation that has a lot of crises and a lot of problems. It was also at the same time that I went back to listening to Classical music again, and started with the Chopin "Nocturne in C-minor," the C-minor series, and it got me back to studying Bach and Beethoven, and the many great Classical composers.

Now, what I was also discovering then, was one of the people that I became friends with when I was much younger, Tian Jiang. A little bit about Tian: Tian grew up, actually during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). His father was a Western Classical musician, an opera singer, and so he was censored during the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was when all Classical arts, both Chinese and Western, were banned in China. All the intellectuals were persecuted ruthlessly.

So, Tian grew up learning to play the piano on one of the few state-owned pianos that was allowed to be used from time to time in private, and his father taught him in secret. He had to learn everything Classical in secret, with a ear out for the Red Guards, because if they were caught, into the jail they'd go!

Now, Tian was nine by the time the Cultural Revolution ended, and he was in his teens when Isaac Stern, the great American violinist, came to China in 1979, as a cultural ambassador. It was also at the same time that the famous Academy Award-winning documentary was made, "Isaac Stern in China: From Mao to Mozart." And it was then that Tian and four other young Classical musicians—two violinists and a cellist—became the first group of five young people to ever

be sponsored to study Western Classical music in America.

Classical Music for Young People

Now, actually, one of the things that really struck me about Tian in the post-2008 years was our discussion on truthful Classical musical performance. Especially, one particular discussion that we had about the Beethoven "Hammerklavier" [Piano Sonata No. 29 in B flat major, Op. 106]. And one evening we sat down, and as we were listening to the Andras Schiff performance, he lit-



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

Lynn Yen: "Everybody, in principle, who knows how to speak a language, can sing! And sing well."

erally left his dinner untouched, with tears streaking down his face. And at the end of it, he said, “I saw my life flashing before my eyes.”

Now, I’ll come back to the relevance of his story in a bit, because our foundation came about as a response to the growing concern by many people about the moral and intellectual decline of our society, especially our young. And a lot of people have made comments about it, and they said, “What do we do about it?” People seemed to think that it’s certainly this kind of violent culture that is expressed in music, expressed in media of all sorts. And so, this required an antidote. And we asked the question: Well, what kind of social and cultural practices might we have that would actually change and reverse such a trend?

So, as I was listening to the Classical music, and going back to practicing it, I realized that actually, it is true that the music of great geniuses, like Bach, and Beethoven, and Mozart, and many others, is a natural medium through which young minds can naturally grow. So in the past 16 months, we have had four major concerts, and we also began a choral program in two public schools as after-school programs.

What happened was, what got that started was, that Tian, in 2011, informed me that he would be performing an all-Mozart concert, and I used that as an opportunity to jump-start what we wanted to do, to put what I thought as something that needs to be done, into action. So, we got 150 tickets sponsored, and then we started cold-calling the public schools! In the beginning, a few of the principals said to me, “You want to give tickets to our students for an all-Mozart concert? Well, Jay-Z [a rap singer—ed.] maybe, but not Mozart! I don’t think anybody’s interested!” And I said, “Well, just ask, please!” And a few weeks later, he called back, and said, “Well, I think I have a few students.” And a week later, after that, he said, “I have a boatful of students!” And then he said, “Well, exactly how many tickets could I get? Could I get 50 tickets? I have a lot of kids coming.”

So this concert, in November of 2011, was attended by about 18 different schools, and it proved that, actually, today, young people *do* have an interest in Classical music, and it certainly disproved this presumption that most people have, that Classical music is not wanted by young people.

The next thing that we did was a month later, and it had a slightly different purpose: It was to test the idea whether, given a starting point of real student interest,

could Classical music without lecturing or preaching, could it be the medium for a natural and unforced improvement of the students’ concentration, attention span, at a first encounter, with a complex and even difficult Classical work?

Now, this concert, which was held at Bruno Walter Auditorium at Lincoln Center, was again performed by concert pianist Tian Jiang. Tian originally worried that the preferred Beethoven’s 7th Piano Sonata was too difficult for young, untrained students to understand, because it’s in four movements, and it’s generally considered already to be difficult even for typical Classical music lovers. And it’s actually true that when the concert started, a lot of people, teachers and the students, about 200 of them, were kind of fidgety.

But something really extraordinary happened, which was: Halfway into the second movement of the Beethoven piano sonata, the audience went pin-drop quiet! Literally, all the attention just became concentrated onto the performer, and by the end of the concert, you could feel this increase of attention and sharpness on the part of every single person in this audience!

And the students were asking him questions after the concert without us asking him to stay behind; they were just so thrilled and so interested. So, it certainly disproved this idea that, oh yes, you have to make people become better by telling them what to do. Actually, no. The best thing to do, is via the natural medium through which attention and concentration can be generated, which is Classical music and Classical composition and Classical performances.

The ‘Impossible Concert’

Now, what happened after this concert was something slightly different: We wanted to test whether we could organize a large audience, of largely or primarily non-Classical-music-goers, to what everybody called an “impossible concert.” It was a concert that happened last year, in May 2012, at the most prestigious Classical musical concert hall in America, at the Isaac Stern Auditorium at Carnegie Hall. Now, lots of people, including the Department of Education, including Carnegie Hall itself, had very strong reservations about us engaging and involving people to fill this 2,800-person hall on a Sunday, and especially on Mother’s Day, because Mother’s Day is typically when people don’t go to concerts! And besides that, there were no buses being provided for people, so they all had to come on their own, and completely voluntarily.



Lynn Yen's Facebook page

Young people from the Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture rehearse in Brooklyn, N.Y., Sept. 30, 2012.

However, we organized about 2,200 people, about 1,700 of whom were students, parents, and teachers, and they came from over 70 public schools throughout the New York City boroughs, every single borough. And they came in groups of five, and seven, and ten, from little two- and three-year-old toddlers, held by their mothers, to grandmothers in wheelchairs.

And it was actually a really rigorous program of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, which we didn't prepare anybody for, and these were young people and older people, who are not typical Classical music listeners, and they certainly had never been to Carnegie Hall and had not heard this music. And there was not a peep that came from the two- and three-year-old toddlers in the audience!

Afterwards I was told that there were a few teenage boys who said that they were going to leave originally, halfway through, who never left. And certainly, the audience completely understood and appreciated this music. There was sustained applause throughout the concert, and there was such great interest afterwards, people coming up to me, and saying "We understand what you're saying now about Classical music and its ability to inspire. We want to get involved, we want to do something about it."

Now, these concerts were organized to uplift and in-

spire citizens with beauty, but it was also to disprove assumptions, and each succeeded, and Tian was a really important, key part of this, because he performed the music of Bach, and Beethoven, and Mozart, and very importantly, he performed it truthfully, with beauty, and that's what made it actually work.

Now, in the course of these concerts, the students and teachers and some of the parents, inspired by the music, came up and asked, how can they participate? So out of this was the idea of, how about getting young people involved in the singing of the music. That's how our Handel Project, our

Handel choral program, came about: The idea was that everybody, in principle, who knows how to speak a language, can sing! And sing well. That would be a powerful and concrete, not only idea, but demonstration of causing the individual students to change by means of a social change, by creating a new chorus or choruses of young people. And if young people can prove to themselves that they can accomplish what they previously thought of as an "impossible task" of understanding through practice, the musical thoughts of all these great geniuses, then they free themselves to do what they previously thought was impossible, but knowing now, that it is completely possible!

Music and the Human Brain

This is not a new idea. This is not a new concept. One of the teachers that I met through the course of organizing these concerts was an assistant principal by the name of Richard Hyman at the Francis Lewis High School in Queens. Richard actually wrote a really powerful research paper, titled, "Music Training and Brain Development in 2011." He systematically reviewed more than 600 studies that were published over 30 years, which conclusively proved, quoting one neurologist, that "making music in a group is a tremendously demanding task for the human brain, that engages virtu-

ally all cognitive processes that we know about, including perception, action, cognition, social cognition, emotion, learning, and memory. This richness makes music an ideal tool to investigate the workings of the human brain."

Now, Richard stated in his paper: "When Plato wrote his vision of what education should be, only two subjects were recommended: gymnastics for the body and music for the mind." But in this country, music class has always been considered minor and extracurricular, and "special" or "enrichment," which is actually a euphemism for "expendable." And every time there is a budget cut, music is the first thing that gets cut! And that's what's happened in America, in this country, for the last 30 years!

And so, he wrote this paper. He took a sabbatical, in an attempt to show the Department of Education that music is not just important, but key, and to get it back into the curriculum! He said that he is convinced, "this cognitive, perceptual, effective, imaginative undertaking we call 'aesthetical education' can alter the atmosphere in schools. I'm convinced that it must become central if our schools are to become truly educative, stimulating, challenging, in the way most of us want them to be. I believe that opening windows and doors for persons, releasing them to use their imaginations and their minds and their perceptual capabilities, may save lives as well as change them."

Now, he was truly very concerned about this, because he told me, having spent more than 30 years in the Department of Education or being a teacher, that today, the young people test at 20% in both verbal and math skills of what people who graduated from high schools in the '50s tested! So they're like 80% dumber today. And the research of the past 30 years went on to prove that the music training significantly increases many parts of the brain that increase the efficiencies of the brain's work, as well as the ability of the mind to do many, many things! All of the many things that a person does in life.

And he went on to say, "Musicians understand how profoundly music training transforms one's life. Due to the sorry state of musical education in this country, most people are not aware of their own creative potential. They may be exposed to music, but they are taught to think of themselves as listeners, not active participants, and are convinced that only special, gifted people can perform or compose. The public's role has been reduced to that of a consumer, and much of what they buy

is bland and repetitive. The value of musical education is its ability to elevate on every level, a person's fundamental humanity, and to liberate the imagination so that the student is free to experience beauty in one of the most fulfilling and mature forms."

'The Unacknowledged Legislators'

So this is actually what our experience is. That is what we're attempting with the choral programs that we're starting, and with the music concerts that we want to inspire people with. And that's why our foundation's motto is, "Artists are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry." And it's true, right? Poetry actually is a practice; music actually is a practice; and it's a practice that can be extended to hundreds and thousands and millions of people, if we wish it to. And that's something that we all can practice, starting from this moment!

So just to touch on what we did at our last concert, and how we got more people involved: In the course of this, somebody introduced me to soprano Fang Tao Jiang, whom you all heard this afternoon, and in the course of the organizing, for example, the last concert was to do something about people affected by Storm Sandy; also, as it turned out, to do something about what happened recently in Connecticut with the shooting, because a lot of parents became truly distraught at the thought of what is a breakdown in society. So they want to not just be personally uplifted, and to know what to do. And with the help of these Classical musicians, like Fang Tao Jiang, we were able to uplift people, we were able to involve people in something that is innately beautiful!

And what does all this say? Well, I think it absolutely is possible for us to make a significant change and difference in people's lives, to inspire them to practice a different kind of consciousness. Classical musical practice can be infectious and effective in comprehensively developing our humanness and our truthfulness. I experienced this, so I know, coming from where I came from! And certainly today, with the embarrassment of Beyoncé's lip-synching at the recent Presidential inauguration, and the persistent lack of truthfulness practiced by so many of the American population today, I think the transformative power of Classical music is all the more needed and more powerful as something that we all take up, more so than ever.

Thank you.