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Let Music Work Its Way and Flourish

by Pamela Tsai

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NEW YORK—From her quiet office in the Rose Building tucked behind the Juilliard School to onstage at Alice Tully Hall at the Lincoln Center, Wu Han switches between her roles as adroitly as her fingers on the piano keyboard—as a concert performer, recording artist, arts educator, administrator, and cultural entrepreneur. Amid a non-stop schedule of meetings, rehearsals, concerts, dinners with arts donors, Wu Han took a breath and shared her passion with The Epoch Times on a Sunday afternoon, just before a concert was to begin.

Outside of Alice Tully Hall, home of Lincoln Center’s Chamber Music Society, people held signs which said, “Need Tickets.” The concert, “Manifest Legacy: Beethoven/ Brahms” was sold out and Wu Han smiled. Nothing makes her happier than seeing that classical music is in high demand, despite the challenges facing the industry.

“You’re going to love this concert,” Wu Han said. She exuded the enthusiasm you would expect from someone who has been indefatigably living and breathing the works and legacies of Beethoven and Brahms her entire life.

It is a centerpiece program featuring the trio of Jeffery Kahane at piano, Cho-Liang Lin on the violin, and David Finckel on the cello. “They are the best,” Wu Han said, proud of the line-up of the top musicians that she presented.

The program is part of what Wu Han and husband David Finckel have put together for the 2011 Winter Festival. The couple are co-artistic directors of Lincoln Center’s Chamber Music Society.

“Once you fall in love with chamber music, it’s very hard to get out of it. If I didn’t do chamber music, I would not be the way I am now,” she said.

Wu Han is passionate about chamber music. Currently she is in charge of two top cultural institutions on the East and West Coasts—Lincoln Center’s Chamber Music Society in New York City and Music@ Menlo in San Francisco.

The Taiwan-born American musician said she didn’t get to discover the beauty and wonder of chamber music until 1981, the year she first came to the United States. “It changed me and my life.”

The legendary Isaac Stern, a prominent violinist who was awarded 6 Grammy Awards, a Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Medal of Arts, and Kennedy Center Honors, was a great influence on her. Teaching alongside Mr. Stern had a lasting impact on her approach to music.

It started with an unexpected phone call in 1996. Wu Han recalled: “I got a phone call from Mr. Stern. ‘I heard you are good; why don’t you teach with me?’ Then I taught with him at Carnegie Hall and Jerusalem Music Center for a good five years.”



She was on a fast-track music career that quickly placed her in close association with some of the most prominent classical musicians of 20th century.

“I remember watching and observing Mr. Stern devoting his time to chamber music education for young people. He really believed chamber music is crucial to developing full musicianship and to taking the understanding of the music, as well as music-making, to another level.”

Wu Han believes chamber music is an art form that develops the craftsmanship that brings out the best in people: “In chamber music, you have to be inspiring and inspired at the same time. You have to be very interactive and communicative—open your ears to hear another’s voice, taking a musical idea from your colleagues and turning back with them. You have to be able to

inspire colleagues: you have to play in a way that brings out the best out of everybody—your colleagues and your audiences. Once you learn how to do that, you will give beautiful cues so the musical intention will never be mistaken.”

Wu Han has a musical intention that is not to be mistaken. She doesn’t intend the concerts that she performs or presents to be a casual occasion for fun, a place to have a glass of wine or do text messaging.

“I don’t think music in our art form—especially for chamber music—is for entertainment. I don’t think it is for a pastime. I take it very seriously, and I really think it does something to your spiritual life, to your soul, which is something we all need in this crazy world. It gives you beauty and hope—it is so important to our humanity and making a civilized society.”

When asked about her approach to the challenges faced by the classical music in today’s competitive market, Wu Han is unequivocal about her resistance to the attempts to achieve commercial gain at the expense of artistic integrity. “We try very, very hard not to be swayed in any way.”

In her blog, she states, “Anything that is not a direct effort to present classical music at the highest artistic standard is not a strategy, it is an obstacle.”

To Wu Han, the challenges presented by the cutthroat commercial market in the arts is a test of one’s faith in the art form, in this case classical music, and faith in the audience’s capacity to seek an extraordinary experience.

“When people put down their computer and daily chores, and come listen to music, [we want them] to reflect, to enjoy; the music does its work. It is like a repairing job—repairing ... your soul. I think if you present music at that level, and you give the music the best opportunity, the audience knows something extraordinary is happening.”

As an Administrator

Faith and dedication have not only placed Wu Han among today’s most esteemed and influential classical musicians but have also enabled her to deliver spectacular results as an arts administrator and cultural entrepreneur. At Lincoln Center, she presents about 200 concerts, lectures, and master classes each season. On the West Coast, she infused her idealism about artistic freedom and integrity into the business model at Music@Menlo. The result? Success took care of itself.

“I went to Menlo and founded this festival. We started from scratch. The business plan was to reach capacity in five years. In the first year, we already have a recording label, education, radio program, fully-fledged lectures, 15 concerts in a row, plus all the free concerts, events. It is a festival that is really idealistic—with total artistic freedom. We told donors that in five years, we will hit the capacity; you have to wait a little bit for people to discover the festival. But guess what, in the first year, we hit 98 percent.”

The secret of Wu Han’s success, she says is “As a musician, if you really believe in the power of this music form—which in my opinion is the treasure of human creation—and if you really play this music in its highest standard, its most idealistic realm, people will get it.

“I don’t underestimate people’s intelligence and capacity for the quest of a fine musical experience. And I work really, really hard to give them the best.”

She credited her mettle and stamina to the belief in her “mission-driven principle” and strong work ethics that she learned when she was very young. “I learned it when I was very young: If I work really hard at it, something incredible will come out of it. I know the

harder I work, the deeper I dive, the more rewarding it becomes. That's my personal experience and I trust that should happen to everybody who has the curiosity, intelligence, and capacity to learn, to grow, and to expand."

As an Educator

Eager to transfer her own learning experience to the younger generation, Wu Han is known as an avid arts educator. On top of her busy performing schedules as recitalist, concerto soloist, and chamber musician, Wu Han teaches every summer at the internationally renowned classical music festival at Aspen.

She also does master classes in Music@Menlo, has expanded Lincoln Center's CMS Two, a rigorous program that draws top young musicians from around the world, and has taken Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society's teaching residences out to the Far East.

"I love teaching because I want to give back," Wu Han said. She has been very fortunate to have gotten many people's help every step of her way to success. Now she wants to do that for young people and create opportunities for them to learn from accomplished musicians.

"From working with Mr. Stern and from my own experiences, I know how important it is [for young talent] to spend time with senior musicians.

"I remember playing with Mr. Stern in Japan, playing with Rudolf Serkin in Marlboro. I remember the sheer sound production coming out of these great musicians—the energy, the timing, the music phrasing. It was like waves of incredible artistic ideas coming toward you.

You are right next to it. You are like 'Oh my god, that's what I want to do. Let me try that.' I learned so much from those experiences from these great musicians, and I was so lucky to have so many kinds of opportunities in my life. Now I want the young people to have this experience, too."

When asked about the emerging market for classical music, especially chamber music in Asia, Wu Han said it still needs a lot of development. There are many young people who are sophisticated technicians with impressive skills as instrumentalists but who lack deep thoughts and profound understanding of music.

"I found some kids who have great fingers, but when you look for something deep, thoughtful, an artistic statement, it is not there or it is thin," she said.

Wu Han is pleased with the progress in South Korea. The teaching residence program that she implanted in Seoul four years ago is now blossoming. "We started out with 20 kids. Now we are adding to 40 kids ... And we are seeing incredible progress. Kids were so excited about playing chamber music. It's so wonderful to watch them grow."

Wu Han's teaching principle is also driven by faith. "I always have that belief in kids: If you have a high expectation, they will try to be there. If you think they have a potential, they will demonstrate that. If you say I don't know if they can make it, they will stay back. With that belief in mind, the Korea teaching residency is going very well. I am going there in June again."

Wu Han said she would bring some of the nation's top musicians with her to inspire and educate the young talent of classical music in South Korea—two members of The Emerson Quartet, a group that has earned two Grammys for Best Classical Album, Arnold-Steinhardt from the Guarneri Quartet, and Steven Tenenbom from the Orion Quartet.

Wu Han is upbeat and enthusiastic about her new ventures and adventures both at home and abroad. "Stay tuned. We are unfolding more chamber music residencies in more cities and countries," she shared.

When asked which she enjoys better, the role of performing artist or arts administrator, Wu Han said she gets different satisfaction from each. "I enjoy playing on stage. It is gratifying for me to communicate and connect with the audience. With work in arts administration, I [can] organize concerts, create an environment to let music flourish and give back to the society in a bigger way."