

Tianwa Yang ( 楊天媧 ) is a young violinist with an age of talent, as Oliver Chou discovers.

## Music Ahead of Her Time

by Oliver Chou

Oliver Chou is a Hong Kong-based music critic and historian. He is a researcher at the University of Hong Kong, a music columnist with Yazhou Zhoukan, and an advisor to RTHK and LCSD.

When the Beijing-born prodigy Tianwa Yang performed Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64 with the Hong Kong Sinfonietta at age 13, her rock-solid technique and penchant for challenge left the impression of a more mature performer. A year later the wunderkind stunned a full-house City Hall audience with not one or several, but the complete set of Paganini's 24 Caprices. The work is considered the ultimate in virtuosity in the violin literature, and Yang chose it to debut her discography prior to the Hong Kong recital. Appropriately enough the CD title reads: "13 year-old plays Paganini 24 Caprices". Performing and recording the 24 Caprices aged 13 was, and still is, a world record.

### Yang's European Enlightenment

Eight years later, the former child prodigy returned to Hong Kong and captured audiences with her musicality and musicianship. In her hands Prokofiev's soul-searching Violin Concerto no. 2 in G minor, opus 63 sounded like a mature craft from a sophisticated master rather than the work of a mere 21 year old. Such phenomenal growth is owed largely to her study in Germany since 2005; a period which Yang said changed not only her musical temperament, but her life.

"Living in Europe has opened my horizons, exposing me to a great variety of styles," said Yang, backstage after the first concert with the Hong Kong Sinfonietta.

Recalling how she benefited from the concerts, rehearsals and European life in general, Yang spoke fondly of the master classes she attended and how she received private tuition from the Amsterdam-based Baroque expert Anner Bylisma.

"I also remember watching the legendary Maria Callas on video, in which she stood on stage, all by herself, and sang from her heart in that vast hall. From that, I came to appreciate: 'once you have it in your heart, everything around you becomes insignificant'. It is a revelation I hold dearly to this day."

Eight years ago the violinist Yang revered most was the Russian technically-supreme Leonid Kogan. Now it was the

German musically-genuine Adolf Busch. Asked which composer she had the most affinity with: "it differs every week" is her answer.

Performing with the European orchestras was further impetus for Yang's transformation.

"When I was small, I practised very hard at home and worked on page after page of scores and then tried to deliver the music on stage. It was a one-person endeavour, closed and lonely. But in Europe, it's all about sharing and music-making together, and not a show of how good you are on stage. Orchestra members and I have exchanges all the time over this passage or that phrasing. It's very





democratic and everything is open to discussion."

In Yang's view the European orchestras operate very differently from those in China and the U.S.

"The American orchestras are very professional and have very high technical standard. But they seem to deliver their work on the dot, no more and no less. In China, orchestra [members] play on their own, and expect you to play loud. If you can't be heard, it's your problem for not playing loud enough. There is also the seniority factor: I as a soloist always follow the conductor who is always my senior. But in Europe, everyone is equal and enjoys the same rights in the music-making process."

Asked if she was pleased with her performance of Prokofiev's Violin Concerto no. 2 with the Hong Kong Sinfonietta, Yang replied: "Well, that is a very difficult question, a dangerous one too. There is no perfection in the performing arts. I can't say I am totally satisfied with my performance as there is always room for improvement. I think whether a performance is satisfactory or not is best judged by the audience, and how much they enjoyed it. That is the most fundamental."

## Yang's Receptivity to Change

Now aged 21 and recording a seven-CD set of Sarasate violin works for Naxos, Yang is proving herself to be not only a serious artist but one who thinks as much as she plays. Immediately after her first performance of Prokofiev's Violin Concerto, she asked for a cursory review from this reviewer - who duly went through his notes and gave her a summary. At the second concert, two days later, she applied some of the comments. She performed a brisker first movement, a slower introduction to the second movement and added more colour to the finale - setting the tempo to great excitement. The ensuing enthusiastic applause inspired her to give a solo encore of an Ysaÿe work, something she didn't do in the first performance.

Yang's memorable performances might have been eclipsed by the *Peter and the Wolf* theme of the concert series but, the following week, her performance of Bruch's Violin Concerto no. 1 in G minor, Op. 26 stole the limelight from the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. The Orchestra was performing Brahms's Symphony no. 1 in C minor Op.68; conducted by the German maestro Günther Herbig. A Detroit music

critic focused instead on the Bruch concerto and announced Yang "the most important new violinist to come on the scene in many a year." He added: "What impressed me more than her impeccable technique or lustrous sound was the expressive, highly personal and intelligent way she applied those qualities." He called her a "supreme musician".

Lastly, the same applause should go to the Hong Kong Sinfonietta which, eight years ago, provided a performance platform for the teenage Yang, putting her name on the artistic map. Yang is not the only artist that this mid-sized orchestra has helped. Lang Lang, Chen Xi, and Colleen Lee Ka-ling owe their pre-stardom public performances to the Sinfonietta. All are evidence of the orchestra's foresight and commitment to fostering young talents, not just in words, but in action. The phenomenal success of these young artists is proof of money well-spent.

*Peter and the Wolf*  
 Hong Kong Sinfonietta  
 HK City Hall Concert Hall  
 1st - 2ndth October 2008  
 Shatin Town Hall Auditorium  
 3rd - 4th October 2008  
 Review Sessions:  
 2nd,4th October 2008

(Photos from Hong Kong HK Sinfonietta )

