



Orchestrating Connection

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Taiwanese American conductor Mei-Ann Chen joins The Active Share podcast with as much energy and enthusiasm as she brings to the orchestra. As the music director for the Chicago Sinfonietta and chief conductor of recreation of the Grosses Orchester Graz at Styriarte in Austria, Mei-Ann has broken barriers as the first female Asian conductor in this role. Tune in as she shares her journey, her unique approach to conducting, and the power of music in connecting humanity.

Comments are edited excerpts from our podcast, which you can listen to in full below.

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Why do you think you developed a passion for music and conducting?

Mei-Ann Chen: I grew up with parents who loved music, so they bestowed upon my older sister and me their dreams of wanting to have free concerts at home. My sister ended up playing the violin and would rather create in her own space and share when she's ready.

The first time I played in an orchestra, I ran home. I told my parents, “I want to play the largest instrument in the room.” They didn’t know where to find teachers [for conducting], and it wasn’t something you can learn. I was one stubborn girl who didn’t take no for an answer. I would show up to rehearsal, having my violin part completely memorized, and fix my eyes on the conductor to try to learn from observation.

Did you ever think, “Music is something I love, but it might not be what I want to do for rest of my life”?

Mei-Ann: At age 10, I knew being a conductor was my calling. I thought I could communicate through body language, and it was just something that I was so fascinated with.

There was a youth orchestra from America that came to Taiwan, and the conductor, Benjamin Zander, heard me play. He told my parents, “If you’d like your daughter to study violin in Boston, I will find her a scholarship.” And so, I tricked my parents into giving me a ticket to finally learn conducting.

What makes for a good conductor?

Mei-Ann: What drew me to conducting was the physical aspect. I heard music, and my body wanted to move. That was an instinctive reaction, but I realized later that being a good conductor requires much more. Instruments are living beings that come with different moods and different feelings, and when you put 80 to 100 people in a room trying to create a unified interpretation, it’s also a lesson of psychology. How do you manage this team of creative individuals and mold it into one voice?

Being a guest conductor is like speed dating—there’s a lot at play, and you need to manage all that talent and morph it into something meaningful at the performance.

Are you trained in the people side of conducting, or did you learn on the job?

Mei-Ann: I had to learn from the opportunities I was given. And when you’re given such a limited time with so many notes, what’s the pacing of the rehearsals? How do you read the room?

I benefited so much from a mentor of mine, Marin Alsop. She taught me that I must be efficient in rehearsals, especially in British and American orchestras. But in German and Austrian orchestras, they have more rehearsals, so if you talk fast, they’re like, “Wait, there’s a lot more time.” And so, I’ve tried to come up with a formula to train our young conductors.

The formula is easy, but it’s hard to achieve. And once you have it, you must practice it. There are four elements within a limit of 10 words: the starting point, the people involved, musical intent or imagination, and technical help (which refers to how to play the piece of music: louder, softer, more legato, etc.).

It’s interesting how you must pace yourself in different countries, even though the art form is almost the same. They still respond to your gestures on the podium, but the human side is a lot more complex.

Do you feel how an audience is receiving a piece of music? Does that inform your interpretation?

Mei-Ann: Yes. The person who inspired me to think about the audience is my older sister. She’s exposed me to all kinds of folk, pop, and rock music, and she is my compass when I’m interpreting something in Beethoven or

Dvorak or Tchaikovsky.

I think most of our audience is like my sister, who is not trained in analyzing music. Sometimes I'll tell the orchestra, "I know you know this music really well, but imagine someone hearing it for the first time. What will this passage mean to them?" And that pushes them to go the extra mile.

When you think about the most talented musicians you've worked with, what are the characteristics they all share?

Mei-Ann: Two of my most enduring colleagues are Yo-Yo Ma and Paul Freeman, the founder of the Chicago Sinfonietta. Paul gave Yo-Yo Ma his first professional engagement when Yo-Yo was just a teenager. And Yo-Yo, the world's greatest cellist—I always try to learn from him.

There are two circles. A small circle is what we want to be, what gets us out of bed every day. But there is a bigger circle, which is what I call "artistic vision." And Yo-Yo's big circle has impacted the world, using music to connect humanity.

I try to learn what my personal mission is by using conducting to connect with people. But the bigger mission is how to use that to impact even more people. Music is a gift to the community we serve. It's more than just notes. My violin teacher would say, "Mei-Ann, you have all the notes down, but what are you trying to say?" There's always a bigger mission to what we do.

My sense is there are many more male conductors than there are female conductors. How much has that changed?

Mei-Ann: Conducting is still a male-dominated field, especially at the top. Women conductors occupy less than 12% of the field. The number of women composers is even worse at less than 2% of the entire repertoire.

Marin Alsop has broken many glass ceilings and launched many of our young women conductors' careers. It's impactful in terms of helping young women find their own voice in a field that is still dominated by male conductors.

I think some of us are turning that around. The Freeman Fellowship program that the Chicago Sinfonietta founded has launched many conductors working in the world right now.

In addition, my orchestra recorded *Project W: Works by Diverse Women Composers* in 2019. The first track, "Dances in the Canebrakes," is by Florence Price, who is the first African American woman whose work was premiered by a major orchestra when the Chicago Symphony premiered her symphony in 1933. It has over 1.1 million plays, which is high for a classical track.

I am encouraged that all major orchestras have tried to raise the percentage of women conductors, and I hope that by recording them and programming it, other orchestras will follow suit and embrace them. Collectively, I hope we can all push this forward because there are so many hidden gems.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of classical music?

Mei-Ann: I'm optimistic because the same conversation has repeated itself for a long period of time.

I started my career at a youth orchestra, working with people who make music firsthand. People who have experience making music themselves become the future consumer, so we must do a better job of continuing the tradition of cultivating music's role in our young people early on.

I like to compare music with food. We don't question people's need for food. But music is the same in terms of need.

Take this example: The Israel Philharmonic was performing during the time when the new state of Israel was forming, and Leonard Bernstein was conducting. "An air raid siren went off in the middle of the Beethoven concerto that I was conducting from the piano," he said when he returned. "We got to the end of the first movement and this thing was wailing and I got up to say, 'Whoever has to leave, leave now.' And no one left. And I sat down and played what I thought would be my swan song." People held onto each other through music because they needed that more than anything.

Music has great power. I have hope that if we cultivate music for all generations, this art form will thrive. It's just a matter of how we present it.

If you could go back in time and give advice to your 10-year-old self, what would you tell her?

Mei-Ann: I am an example of living an impossible dream. Nobody thought I could come this far.

So, the advice I would give myself, and those of you out there who are either in music or not in music, is: be yourself; don't let anyone tell you that your dream is impossible; create your own path; be brave and find your true voice, even when the whole world seems to be against you; believe in yourself and find angels who also believe in you; persevere with passion; and love what you do and what you can share with the world.

If you had to go a month without classical music, what would you listen to?

Mei-Ann: I keep a very open mind. I listen to what my sister listens to and the pop songs coming out of Asia; that's where I get a feel of what's trendy. I also look for Spotify suggestions of things that I don't know but could be interesting.

For example, I wasn't really exposed to the klezmer music genre until I had to collaborate with Mucca Pazza in Chicago. It was so fun connecting with Jewish history, but klezmer music is also rooted in classical music. Gustav Mahler used it in his symphonies.

Gospel music is also something that was new to me. At the Chicago Sinfonietta, we work with the Apostolic Church of God Sanctuary Choir. I wasn't exposed to gospel when I was in Taiwan, so I'm constantly discovering new things. The model at Chicago Sinfonietta is to always dream of the impossible. I'm open to anything.

On the BBC, there is a radio program called "Desert Island Discs" that asks guests what eight music tracks you would take to a desert island. What would be the pieces of music you would bring?

Mei-Ann: I would take *Project W* because I could listen to Florence Price anytime. Same with Jessie Montgomery,

who is the composer-in-residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She grew up in New York with a melting pot of music.

Reena Esmail, who was the composer-in-residence with the Seattle Symphony, combines her musical heritage from India with Western instruments. And Clarice Assad, a Brazilian-American composer who's always combining things with her musical heritage.

I don't think I'll ever get tired of hearing these women alongside Beethoven's "Symphony No. 5" and Tchaikovsky's "Symphony No. 5," just because those pieces were with me through the ups and downs. Those pieces will never be just notes for me. Those pieces meant life and death for me. I treasure them.

I'll also say Dvorak, who is a composer that uses the spirituals he heard in America and from the New World. He was able to find his own country's voice, making something beautiful out of something he's familiar with. Yet, he created something new.

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