



Yuja Wang at Carnegie Hall in 2013
PHOTO: IAN DOUGLAS/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

“My Real Home”

FOR YUJA WANG (PIANO '08), EACH RETURN TO PHILADELPHIA SPARKS WARM MEMORIES OF CURTIS.

BY STUART ISACOFF

In a recent edition of the *New York Times's* Arts and Leisure section, a photo of Yuja Wang in a familiar pose stretches clear across the page. Though the instrument she is playing takes up nearly the entire width of the shot, its compositional focus—the point that beckons our eyes—is the diminutive pianist seated at the keyboard, arms outstretched as if taking flight, head extended to the sky, her graceful right leg, adorned in a high-heeled shoe, resting gently on the sustain pedal. The caption, announcing a forthcoming recital at Carnegie Hall, notes her “power and poetry.”

This 2008 Curtis graduate, born in Beijing in 1987, has unmistakably arrived. Consistently ecstatic reviews, like the description of her playing in the *San Francisco Examiner*, point to her combination of mastery and soulfulness: “A practically superhuman keyboard technique with artistic eloquence that is second to none.” Her success should surprise no one.

Ms. Wang has been headed for stardom all of her life—entering Beijing’s Central Conservatory of Music at age 7; accepted as the youngest student at the Morningside Music Bridge International Music Festival at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada, when only 11; and beginning study at Curtis with Gary Graffman at age 15. Her career took off in earnest after she replaced an ailing Martha Argerich in concert in 2007—while she was still a student.

She points to her Curtis experience as pivotal—and a departure from earlier studies. “In China,” she remembers, “they didn’t want me to play piano, because my fingers were so skinny. But I began studying with a teacher when I was 7, and continued until the age of 14. She was very strict—it was always *her* way, or else. We covered the standard repertoire before Brahms. The approach was different from the way things are done

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here. I had to work on a single piece until it was perfect in all the details. And I entered many competitions.

“I liked it at the time, even though it was like being in a straitjacket,” she recalls. “It gave me a good foundation so that later I could be free—there’s always a balance between the two.” It was at Curtis that she would eventually encounter the joys of discovering new solo repertoire and playing chamber music with fellow students.

Her move to Canada came about because of a relationship between the festival in Calgary and her mother country. Ms. Wang and her parents—her mother is a dancer, her father, a percussionist—had actually intended her trip abroad to last only half a year. But Curtis—an institution, she says, “with a huge reputation in China”—beckoned. When word came that she had been accepted, she felt relief at leaving the cold Canadian climate for the warm mentorship of Gary Graffman. “He became my anchor,” she relates. Even today, she confesses, every time she returns to Philadelphia, “as soon as I arrive at the train station, I feel that it is my real home.”

A WIDER WORLD

“There is something so positive and inspiring about him,” she says of Mr. Graffman. “Before meeting him I didn’t realize how many interesting things there are in the world.

“For example, he is a huge fan of Asian art. He brought me to Sotheby’s one day, and pointed out aspects of Chinese history: ‘This is Han Dynasty, this looks like Sung Dynasty.’ His influence opened it all up for me. He was the opposite of my teacher in China, who always played at my lessons. Gary would often come up with new pieces for me to explore, but he didn’t often demonstrate. Yet, when he did play, he made the piano sing. The sound was so golden.

“It was similar with Leon Fleisher,” with whom Ms. Wang took occasional studio classes during her Curtis years. “Each has an individual voice—you hear it the moment either sits down. This made a big impression on me. I saved the big Russian warhorses for Gary Graffman, and studied the German repertoire with Leon Fleisher. The thing



Yuja Wang PHOTO: FELIX BROEDE/DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

about Curtis is that you don't have to go to Europe to get the best training—Gary was able to talk to me about his lessons with Vladimir Horowitz, and Leon talked about his with Arthur Schnabel.”

The approach has stayed with her. Ms. Wang's performing and recording plans today encompass a wide scope of music, from Mozart and Brahms to de Falla, Ravel, Bartók, and Gershwin. “I have a love for works that are not played very often,” she admits.

Liang Wang (no relation), principal oboe of the New York Philharmonic, was a Curtis student when Ms. Wang arrived in Philadelphia, and has watched her grow into a mature artist. He admires her sense of adventure. “‘Originality’ comes to mind when I think about her,” he says. “She's intelligent and well read, very focused, and extremely devoted to her craft. And she's also a normal girl—she wants to feel beautiful.”

Thus the attention she has garnered from some critics for her sexy, fashionable stage attire. “People who go to a concert want the whole package,” she explains, “whether the musical atmosphere is energetic or contemplative. I wore those stylish dresses for performances of the Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto, which felt really passionate and edgy—almost like rock and roll. I'm just having fun.”

And so are her audiences. ♦

Stuart Isacoff's latest book is A Natural History of the Piano (Knopf/Vintage).



HEIRS TO A LEGACY

Curtis alumni and students benefit from an extraordinary lineage. Through her teacher at Curtis, Gary Graffman, Yuja Wang benefited from traditions extending back to Anton Rubinstein and other piano legends—even Beethoven.

