



Susan Wadsworth, Founder/Director

Isler's Insights

March 19, 2018 at 5:20pm ·

<https://www.facebook.com/islersinsights/posts/1430570097047110>

Interview With Susan Wadsworth

Try to imagine if you, and an organization you founded, had had a significant part in promoting the early careers of musicians like Richard Goode, Ursula Oppens, and Murray Perahia. And imagine that you were still at it today, helping to launch people like the brilliant teenage pianist, Nathan Lee.

Susan Wadsworth, who created Young Concert Artists in 1961, and still directs it, doesn't need to imagine this. It's her story. In a telephone interview over the weekend she told me about it.

Born and raised in New York, she began to study the piano at four, and the violin at seven. Her violin teacher, whom she liked very much, was Arlie Furman. Ms. Furman had a beautiful antique desk on which rested her Stradivarius violin, which Susan was occasionally allowed to play.

Her important piano teacher, from the age of twelve on, was Mieczyslaw Munz who taught at Juilliard, Peabody, and Curtis. How did he come to be her teacher? "One day my mother was at the hairdresser sitting under the dryer, telling the lady next to her about me. The other lady said "If your daughter is so talented she must play for my colleague, Mr. Munz!" The other lady was the pianist, Maryla Jonas." Although she says she didn't practice much, Susan said she was happy that Munz kept her as a student, and adds that he became almost a member of her family, dining with them often.

She later attended Vassar College, where her major was English, and her minor was drama. While there, she studied piano with Elizabeth Katzenellenbogen, played violin in the orchestra, sang in the chorus, and was involved in the ballet club. Other studies included time spent at Fontainebleau, in France, where she worked with pianist Jean Casadesus, whom she described as a wonderful teacher. She also took a course there with Nadia Boulanger, who was "the most amazing, charismatic, inspirational woman."

After graduating from Vassar, Susan Wadsworth studied piano at Mannes College with Frank Sheridan. She enjoyed her work with him and made lots of progress because now she was practicing seriously. Sheridan one day signed her up to play the Mozart A Major Concerto, K. 488, with the Mannes Orchestra. The day after that "I found myself out shopping instead of practicing. I asked myself why this was, and realized I didn't really want to have a performing career. So I quit."

She went to work for awhile at the United Nations where she was assigned to the Department of Economic Development. "I was mostly a 'gofer' but occasionally I was asked to translate French documents into English." She gradually came to the conclusion that the UN was "toothless" and "couldn't make things happen" so she left.

Next, she went into publishing, working for a children's book editor at Rand McNally, where she learned a lot of skills that were useful later, such as working with writers and artists, and preparing copy. While she was part of this two person children's book department she was interested to observe that the company created a one person non-fiction department. Why? Because Fred McNally, the owner, wanted to help his friend, Thor Heyerdahl, publish his book "Kon-Tiki" after many rejections from other publishers. "Kon-Tiki" became a huge success after Rand McNally published it. Ultimately, Susan left the company when she was turned down for a \$5 per week raise.

Meanwhile, she stayed in touch with her friends at Mannes, and sometimes asked when she could hear them play. Often they said that they didn't know, as opportunities to perform were limited.

Susan started Young Concert Artists when her father, a lawyer, created a non-profit for her, and got the family's friends to contribute to it. The largest contributions they received were \$150, and about \$5000 was

raised. The highest ticket price on the first concerts was \$2, or \$2.50.

She found a restaurant in Greenwich Village which she thought would make a good concert hall. It was a ground floor loft with Corinthian columns on one side. The restaurant, which served Armenian food, was actually a hobby of the owner, whose real profession was as an architect. It was closed on Mondays, and once a month they had concerts there, after building a stage and putting curtains and lighting in place. The tables were moved to the cellar, and Susan bought 200 second hand chairs.

And that's how the first series of Young Concert Artists began. The New York Times did a picture story on the transformation of the restaurant, and covered one of the first concerts, which was by flutist Paula Robison. The series also garnered two reviews by the Herald Tribune, and one from the Village Voice.

The following year the series moved to the concert hall at Mannes, and the year after that to Judson Hall. Later moves were to Carnegie Recital Hall (now known as Weill Hall), Hunter College and the 92nd Street YMHA, where the concerts took place for about 20 years. Still later they moved to Zankel Hall. Nowadays the opening concert of the season is called the Peter Marino Concert, and takes place there, but the other concerts are at Merkin Hall.

While in its 57th season in New York, Young Concert Artists is also in its 39th year of presenting concerts at the Kennedy Center in Washington. Does she attend all the concerts? "YES!" said Susan Wadsworth. "I check on the lighting, the balance between the instruments, and the placement of the instruments onstage. All of that matters!"

Also, for many of the past 25 years, YCA has held auditions in Europe (in Leipzig or Paris). The winners of the European auditions come to New York and enter the auditions here in the semi-final round.

One of the interesting features about the YCA auditions is that there is no First Prize, Second Prize, Third Prize, etc. Winners are winners, period. "If you compared Lang Lang and Jeremy Denk, and what makes each one great ---- well, you couldn't!" she said.

There may be one or several winners in any particular year, and occasionally there are none. I asked about the "politics" of selecting winners.

"I am the chairman of the jury" she told me "and I have one vote, as does each of the other judges. We discuss the situation until we all agree. In the end it's a unanimous, and not a majority decision."

"We look for an extraordinary spark of talent. Obviously they all have to play with virtuosity and fine musicianship. But they have to have that indefinable 'something' that communicates in such a way that you just can't stop listening to them!"

I asked a few questions about the music "business" nowadays, and if she had any more stories about her experiences to share.

Regarding the former, she said "We used to book 600 concerts a year. I did the booking myself, originally. I'd call a series, tell them about somebody and they'd say 'Ok.' Then I'd send a contract, and that would be that. Nowadays there's so much competition! It's almost impossible to get anyone on the phone. And there's hardly any press coverage of concerts."

As for the latter "Around 1962 my friend, violinist Michael Rabin, said 'If you want to hear some really talented people I'll take you up to Meadowmount.' (The summer school where Ivan Galamian and his then assistant, Dorothy Delay, taught.) There, he introduced me to a violinist who, in turn, introduced me to 14 year old Pinchas Zukerman, who played the Devil's Trill Sonata of Tartini for me. I was blown away! I asked his mentor, Isaac Stern, if I could present him in some concerts, but Stern said 'Not yet.'"

"When Zukerman was between 16 and 18 I did engage him for various concerts, though not in New York. Then he won the Leventritt Award (sharing First Prize with violinist Kyung-Wha Chung). That was a very big deal, and it was the end of my managing him. But he still says 'You started my career! I can never forget that!'"

One suspects there are quite a few people who feel that way about Susan Wadsworth!

Donald Isler