

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Wu Han, artistic director, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

Wu Han's background not only created a world-class musician, but a savvy businesswoman as well

Many years ago in Taiwan, pianist Wu Han's mother sent her father to the American GI market to buy a suit for a wedding. Instead, he came home with a turntable and a stack of recordings, saying that he couldn't pass up the opportunity. Each day, he would loudly play pieces like *The Magic Flute* or Beethoven's symphonies over and over, falling in love with the music.

'He proclaimed that all of us had to learn how to make that noise, that's the way he described it,' Wu Han, 50, recalls. 'So he came home with a piano. It was delivered to the house without him speaking to my mom, and we all had to learn how to play the instrument. There was no negotiation.'

Though she 'started late' at nine years old, Wu Han immediately fell in love with the piano. She says that despite the extra practice to catch up to her friends with many years of training, being older helped in that she was able to analyse and solve problems much quicker.

Since that time, she has worked steadily in both the performance and business sides of the industry, garnering acclaim with every step. In addition to performing more than 60 concerts per season in venues such as Carnegie Hall and Wigmore Hall, she has undertaken such varied roles as artistic director of SummerFest La Jolla in California; founding artistic director of Music@Menlo, a chamber music festival in Silicon Valley; and artistic director of the Chamber Music Society (CMS) of Lincoln Center; these last two roles are her current ones as well. Not one to sit still, Wu Han has also launched several independent recording labels, including ArtistLed, Music@Menlo LIVE and CMS Studio Recordings. She is also the force behind AudioNotes, a listener's guide CD inspired by her husband, David Finckel, a cellist in the Emerson String Quartet and her partner in many projects. She also established teaching residencies in Taiwan and Korea through CMS and LG, the Korean electronics company. Her business card, by the way, just says her name. 'No wonder I'm exhausted,' she laughs. 'I don't like to sleep; it's overrated.'

'I don't know if I really enjoy stress,' she continues, 'but my biggest problem is I hate missing opportunities, when there are so many important and great projects and it's so satisfying to do them, You hate to let the opportunity go by without making any difference. But yes, I'm really tired.'

When she was 21, Wu Han moved to America and quickly gained recognition as a performer. In the late 1990s, she was offered the position at SummerFest La Jolla and



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realised she did have many business ideas she would like to try out. After she had achieved all the goals the board had set in the two years she was there, Wu Han was burned out and decided to return to being a performer only. Then something happened to change her mind.

'Before September 11, I was one of those privileged musicians who made a very good living. I treated the admin side of business just as a hobby,' she says. 'But then when September 11 happened, I'll never forget the concerts I played at that time, that people were so connected by art and by world events, by what was in their communities and I was just thinking to myself, "How could I be such a lucky person and not give back to my community, not give back to the arts to keep music alive?" This coincided with an offer from the Hewlett Foundation to create a project for the arts; out of this came the summer festival Music@Menlo.'

Although Wu Han doesn't have a business degree, she says that she is constantly reading and learning about various practices while on her travels. She also attributes her savvy ways to her business-friendly family, whom she can ask for advice, and credits her musical training as well.

'I consider running a business no different from practising the piano,' she states. 'You have to identify problems quickly. You have to focus on how to fix a problem efficiently. You have to analyse a situation quickly, come out with the most efficient solution. I would say, for any parent, if you want your kid to be a good business person, have them practise the piano.'

'When I was a teenager, I spent a lot of time with music; it was my best friend,' she goes on. 'It's an art form that when you give, you

always get better. So I have to work at it really, really hard – you cannot be good at it without working. So that taught me all the discipline that is needed for business as well. Attention to detail is important, which counts the most if you want to be a first-class musician. I guess the musical training really gave me all the inspiration. It will centre you for a lot of decision-making. It centres me quite a bit for what's important for my life and also, music is very communicative, so I tend to do that in all my projects.'

Since she's involved with so many activities, Wu Han doesn't do it all alone. 'I have really the most fantastic team, that's the secret of it,' she confides. 'Yes, I direct a lot of things; yes, I put the team together. Mainly, it's how to delegate in a certain direction. Like all projects, you still have to be always on top of it, there's no other choice. So we do work really hard. But the projects we do mainly spin out of music and that's something I'm really comfortable with. That musical language and the knowledge, it never leaves you, so that's how it's possible.'

As for the man who inadvertently pushed her into this career, Wu Han says she took her father to a performance of *The Magic Flute* in New York. At intermission, he turned to his daughter and asked her to tell him the story of it. 'My mouth dropped and I said, "You don't know the story of *The Magic Flute*?" And he said no. "But," I said, "You loved this all your life." And he said, "Does it matter? I like the sound of it." So I tried to explain the complicated plot and halfway through, he said, "That's too complicated. I have my version, so let me just enjoy the music."'

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Artist's site

Wu Han
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