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‘I’m going to create my own doors’: In Chicago, Asian women arts heads lead by example

By HANNAH EDGAR

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Last year, University of Chicago Presents executive director Amy Iwano made an all-too-familiar phone call: hashing out the COVID-instigated cancellation of yet another live concert. This one particularly smarted — Jennifer Koh, violinist and uncompromising advocate for underrepresented musicians, had been slated to give a concert on campus that November.

Iwano and Koh talked shop, then the conversation roved. Koh voiced frustrations about the dearth of Asian executives in classical music — so few, in fact, that a [2016 report](#) spearheaded by the League of American Orchestras did not even include Asian and Pacific Islander respondent data in their demographic breakdown of orchestra CEOs. (The same report placed AAPI music directors at 7% and staff members at about 3% of reporting orchestras.)

But Iwano could call to mind nearly half a dozen colleagues in Chicago alone: Picoso and Ear Taxi Festival 2021 executive/artistic director Jennie Oh Brown; Chicago Sinfonietta music director Mei-Ann Chen; People’s Music School president and artistic director Jennifer Kim-Matsuzawa; Fifth House Ensemble founder and newly named American Composers Orchestra CEO Melissa Ngan; and herself.

That list grows outside classical music spheres, in the realms of choral education (Josephine Lee, president and artistic director of Chicago Children’s Choir), jazz and third stream music (Birdie Soti, until last year the longtime executive director of the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic), dance (Julie Nakagawa, DanceWorks co-founder and artistic director), and Chinese traditional arts (Julie Tiao Ma, board president of the Chinese Fine Arts Society).

“I doubt any other city has this many Asian women in leadership positions of significant music organizations,” Iwano said.

On May 29, seven of these leaders — Brown, Chen, Iwano, Kim-Matsuzawa, Ma, Nakagawa, and Ngan — met with the Chicago Tribune to talk about their paths to leadership, the past year, and Asian representation in the arts. They also talked about the work of their respective organizations — whether that means running a tuition-free music school (People’s Music School), creating an essential incubator for young dancers (DanceWorks), performing soundtracks to stories by incarcerated youth (Fifth House Ensemble), or convening an orchestra and audiences that actually look like Chicago (Chicago Sinfonietta). Koh, who was born in Glen

Ellyn, also joined between workshops of “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” her and bass-baritone Davóne Tines’s ruminations on race and heritage. Below are excerpts of that conversation.



Chicago-based arts administrators meet for a Zoom panel on May 29. Top (from left): Jennifer Koh, violinist and founder of ARCO Collaborative; Hannah Edgar, Tribune journalist and moderator; Jennie Oh Brown, flutist and artistic/executive director of Picoso Ensemble and Ear Taxi 2021. Middle: Julie Nakagawa, founder and artistic director of DanceWorks Chicago; Mei-Ann Chen, music director of Chicago Sinfonietta; Melissa Ngan, founder of Fifth House Ensemble and CEO of American Composers Orchestra. Bottom: Julie Tiao Ma, board president of the Chinese Fine Arts Society; Jennifer Kim-Matsuzawa, president and artistic director of People’s Music School; and Amy Iwano, executive director of UChicago Presents. (Chicago Tribune)

Mei-Ann Chen (Chicago Sinfonietta): I was raised in Taiwan and grew up watching Henry Mazer, a (former CSO) associate conductor under Georg Solti who made his home in Taiwan. He gave me my first conductor’s score. My parents didn’t think it was possible for me to be a conductor — it’s hard for women to be conductors, yet alone Asian women. But I knew deep down, since age 10, that I wanted to be a conductor. Later on, when I was offered a scholarship to study in America, I tricked my parents into giving me a ticket.

Melissa Ngan (American Composers Orchestra and Fifth House Ensemble; flutist): I’m curious: How many of us had to trick our parents in order to have a career in the arts? (All laugh.) My dad was Cambodia’s deputy director of secondary education before the war. He was like, “You’re going into science or international finance.” Instead, I went to music school.

Jennifer Kim-Matsuzawa (People’s Music School): Growing up (in the Chicago suburbs), I was a pianist — actually, I grew up under Jennifer Koh’s shadow! Most of my friends went to conservatory, but my family didn’t have the resources for me to pursue that kind of career. I found People’s as an intern, and it was the perfect communist solution to my very liberal-minded college self: It’s tuition-free and over 90% of color. The founder, Rita Simó, was a pioneer in social justice and equity.

I worked at Bain & Company for about 15 years, then moved back to Chicago in 2015 because my mother was ill; she passed the day of our move. I realized I didn't want my corporate job anymore and thought it was time to reconnect with People's, this place I loved so much. It's always provided a pathway to character development through excellent music.

Julie Tiao Ma (Chinese Fine Arts Society): While I was away from Chicago, my mom (Barbara Tiao) created a music festival that turned into what is now the Chinese Fine Arts Society. I'd imagined her and her friends having a few concerts in her living room and drinking tea. But the year I moved back, she was finishing her first international composition competition and had (violinist) Rachel Barton Pine, (pipa player) Yang Wei, and Chicago Symphony musicians playing in the premiere concert at the MCA. The only part of my assumption that was correct is that it *was* all cute little ladies, but they were doing this incredibly ambitious thing. That concert ended up being named one of the Trib's top 10 classical music concerts that year, the year of the new millennium.

I was so amazed by what my mom was doing that I also decided to volunteer for the Chinese Fine Arts Society. That was 2000; she passed in 2008. I basically took over at that point. On the fifth anniversary of her passing, we had a whole concert series called "Forces of Nature," because that was my mom.



Julie Nakagawa (from left; DanceWorks artistic director), Julie Tiao Ma (Chinese Fine Arts Society board director), Amy Iwano (UChicago Presents executive director), Mei-Ann Chen (Chicago Sinfonietta music director), and Jennie Oh Brown (Picoso and 2021 Ear Taxi Festival director) on the North Side of Chicago on June 1. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

Julie Nakagawa (DanceWorks): I was born and raised in Evanston, but my dance career took me to different parts of the country. (After coming back to Chicago) I had what I thought was a social lunch with Lou Conte, the founder of Hubbard Street Dance; he ended up inviting me to be a studio manager. Thirteen years later, my husband and I founded Hubbard Street 2 with Lou.

When we decided to embark on our own, we talked to our former dancers about the community's needs. They felt that Chicago still needed a kind of incubator for young dancers, so we founded DanceWorks.

One of the challenging things about dance is that, unlike music, there's an emphasis on youth. The leadership pipeline is affected by that. I also think we were decimated by AIDS; a lot of people who should be ascending to leadership roles are no longer on the planet.

On representation in the arts

Jennifer Koh (soloist and founder of [ARCO Collaborative](#)): I would say, especially, that there's a dearth of Asian leadership in classical music. But it's important to acknowledge that (according to the 2016 League [report](#)) only 9.1% of classical musicians in the U.S. are Asian. This question of whether we're "overrepresented" is really a question of who is "invading" classical music. People would never say that about African American or Latinx musicians, who (together) are holding around 3% to 4% of symphony orchestra membership. So, when people say that there are a lot of Asian Americans in classical music, we have to assume that the "proper" percentage for any minority presence would fall between 4% and 9%.

The model minority myth uses us in a wedge race against Black and brown people. By claiming that we're ethnically meant for success, it also believes in the inherent deficit of Black and brown people. We're an invisible minority, and — unfortunately, unhappily — it's only because those six Asian women were killed in Atlanta that it's finally being realized that there's racism against us. That's despite the fact that the largest mass lynching in United States history was of Chinese people (in 1871 in Los Angeles).

I can't help but think of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. When people asked her how many female justices are enough on the Supreme Court, she said all of them — because for centuries, it's only been men. So, when people talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, I don't think people are really talking about equity and inclusion at all.

Jennie Oh Brown (Picoso and Ear Taxi Festival 2021; flutist): To build off what Jennifer is saying, if you look at flute sections in orchestras across the country, it's not a diverse picture at all. A friend once described it as Asian redlining: There's certain parts of music where you see a lot of Asian people, and certain parts where you don't see any.

I had one experience where I was offered five different gigs over the course of several months, then they were all taken from me. I thought, "What is it about me that makes it OK for these contractors to offer me a position, then not give it to me?"

It gave me this focus moving forward. Number one, I'm responsible for my own career; if doors aren't going to open for me, I'm going to create my own doors. And number two, I have to open doors for other people.

Ma: I hear that. It's something that's so inherently Asian, especially Asian women: Be humble and work hard, and the recognition will come later. When I mentor young Asians, I say, "Filial piety has a place in your life, but if you want to survive in America, you have to flip that. You have to advocate for yourself, because nobody's going to do it for you."

Ngan: Mentorship is so huge. In the last conversation I had with Debbie Sobol (the late founder of Rush Hour Concerts), she asked me to be on a panel of women in arts leadership. At that period of my life, I didn't want to be seen as a woman leader. I sometimes feel out of place even in a conversation like this one, because I'm half Asian; I'm also half Brazilian. Which side of myself do I get to be in any particular moment?

What flipped it for me was seeing younger people who didn't have answers to these questions. They would ask me, "How do you get people to pay attention to you? How do you get eye contact in a boardroom?" That's when I realized: It's about helping someone else.

On the past year

Chen: I started exploring works central to the Sinfonietta's repertoire early in my career, when I served as assistant conductor for the Atlanta and Baltimore Symphonies, both in cities with big African American populations. There, I programmed African American composers' works, which I continued with engagements in Cincinnati and Chicago.

Last year, all of a sudden, everybody was looking to the Sinfonietta, wondering how they can include more composers of color and especially African American composers. It's sad and happy at the same time, because what we have been championing for 34 years is *finally* hitting people over the head. I can't tell you how many orchestras have approached us to tap into our talent pool. I'm proud to say that our [Project Inclusion fellowship](#) has launched the careers of about 10 to 12 conductors of color.

Ngan: In March, I said to everyone at Fifth House, "Those people who only know how to do one thing, which is playing music on a stage, are going to be in a really tough place for a long time." But we've been building much more than that for 15 years. The past year has been the most strategically and artistically invigorating time of the organization's history.

From that day forward, we started deep listening sessions on our Facebook page every day at 10 a.m. It saved my life. I would have never guessed that making weird sounds for 30 minutes with total strangers would be my lifeline during the pandemic.

Amy Iwano (UChicago Presents): That really shows how you can build community with technology. To us, it was important to stay connected to the university. I'm proud that we've engaged a higher percentage of students than ever before, and people from 29 different countries have watched our digital concerts.

When COVID first hit, I have to say, I was totally paralyzed. I'm most invigorated by working with artists, but of course, artists were so impacted. I thought I should be supporting the artists rather than relying on their energy. Through [our new Sound/Sites series](#), we engaged local musicians who teach in the music department and had them perform in spaces across campus — I figured if we're not allowed to have live audiences, we're not limited to the concert hall. I also thought that might be a way of gathering support: We could show that the university is supporting artists.

Nakagawa: Melissa, your comments about your team being “built for this” also resonate with me. Similarly, DanceWorks was built for this in that we're not performance-centric but people-centric. Pandemic or not, we can stay centered around people and their issues, their opportunities, their challenges, their dreams.

There's been a lot of talk about mentorship, too — how you honor the past by living in the present. I hope we remain thoughtful about the lessons we learned this past year, the uncomfortable things we sat with. I hope we use those moments to create momentum for change and avoid the trap of having a short memory. Because otherwise, they'll just be moments.

Ngan: I second that. I hope we never go back to normal. One way leaders can prevent organizations from sliding backward when the headlines change is by funding initiatives multiple years into the future. If we hold that space with our money, we're going to hold it with our actions.

Chen: I think this is a time when it seems like a lot of opportunities are shrinking. But I also think back to when I was a stubborn girl, when people told me, “No, you can't do this.” When I look at all of you, I think that, in a couple years, we will see the industry bloom and really welcome artists of color. It may take time to get there, but I think we're seeing the ripple effect.

Brown: We're talking about what allows Chicago to have all these wonderful Asian women in arts leadership, and really, what makes it possible *is these people*. Melissa and Amy are two of the most important people to me, and they probably will be for the rest of my life.

Iwano: We *are* so lucky to be here in Chicago, because it's such a thriving arts community. And we're a closer community now for having spent this hour and a half together. I know that this doesn't exist in other cities. That's part of why we've all been able to accomplish what we have: because of our community, because of each other, because we know each other, and because we support each other, either actively or behind the scenes.

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