

Music as the Core of Everything

Klara Min's New York Concert Artists & Associates (NYCA)

by Carsten Dürer

Klara Min is Korean by birth but studies with James Tocco in Lübeck amongst others. She has lived in New York for 20 years and had to experience again and again how especially young pianists rarely get a chance to develop their own ideas for their programmes, their own ideas or to work independently altogether. In 2008, she singlehandedly founded the 'New York Concert Artists & Associates' (NYCA). This institution – which Klara Min expanded next to her existing profession as a pianist – has since developed into an interesting organization. By now, Klara Min moved to Berlin, and she has created new ideas for NYCA. We met the bustling pianist for a conversation about her organization.

The basic idea

From 2004 Klara Min had already established her own concert series in New York City's Yamaha Artist Center. This series ran until 2008. *"I realized that so many things were down to me, there was so much organization involved, that I decided to found my own thing, to get something off the ground myself."* says the pianist. She founded NYCA and explains: *"I'm a big fan of Robert Schumann – I read everything and visited the places where he worked. He wasn't just a composer, he was a presenter and a critic as well – actually he was everything in one person. I believe that today's pianists should also produce something which furthers their career. The career is only a small part of everything. It shouldn't be the goal but one needs to comprehend that no one can do everything on their own but that we are all parts of a larger whole. We are all connected in one community."* Klara Min's basic idea for NYCA was therefore to found a community similar to Schumann's 'Davidsbund', an association of different artists. But wasn't Schumann's 'Davidsbund' mainly against the philistines, a certain form of establishment? *"Yes, they were against arrogance and ignorance",* says Klara. *"I find that most decisions today are not made by artists. They are made by 'money', so ultimately by the ones with money, owners of something. I think that one should be aware of that and in the long run it should be the artists who make their own decisions. At least those who are really interested in music just because they love it. And not because they have their own motivations to achieve something with music. That was my idea."*

She finds that today labels and agencies have become massive business structures that have to make money to keep existing and act that way, too. *"But the one who loses the sense for what it is really about, will also lose money in the end. We have to follow our own beliefs and integrity and it might be hard at the beginning and one might go around in circles for a while but it will turn out for the best in the long run. I firmly believe in that."* But doesn't the realities of the music industry show that there is another way: many young artists are simply replaced as soon as they cannot

be placed on the market anymore. And don't the audiences follow the artists which are prescribed by the industry? *"That is the problem. But why do they actually want to make money with these artists? And why do the artists want to make money? What is it all about? I think that the dominant figures on the market, the ones who want to make big money, are not the artists themselves. I want to return to us, to the artists, having the power. We can't just be puppets who would really like to do a recording with a certain label and then end up recording repertoire we don't really want to play. Is that really good for the artist? This is just an example but one has stay true to oneself. And if that works, it's good. And if not, that's ok, too, because the question is – why does everything have to work out all the time?"* She comes to the reason for her thoughts: *"How can we find happiness if we are not ourselves and follow our own ideas?"*

So NYCA is looking to act against all the external influences, which form young artists, possibly against their nature. *"That's exactly it. And it's the same situation when you're interpreting music – it makes a big difference if you approach the piece from inside the music itself or from outside. The revolution will always come from inside, ever from outside."* And that's why artists always need time to develop.

The organization NYCA

"I want exactly that – for NYCA to be a platform for the ones who don't know what to do after their graduations. I want NYCA to be the base where everyone can find something new about themselves," says Klara Min. *"They have to discover it themselves, they have to discover themselves."* But what does NYCA do exactly and how is it structured? How do the musicians become part of NYCA and what can NYCA do for them? *"The biggest event that we currently organize is the 'Carnegie Hall Debut Recital Audition'. We accept applications from all over the world and organize live auditions across the world in Asia, several countries in Europe and in New York. We then choose a winner who gets a recital at Carnegie Hall in New York including all publicity and media work. In the same year, they also get a recording with Steinway & Sons record label. We just expanded our operations to China and six of our auditions take place in China."* That's not everything though. It seems that Klara Min is about to expand on the debut idea. *"Since I moved to Berlin, I obviously want to integrate other venues to present the winners."* She is currently speaking to Wigmore Hall in London and Berlin Philharmonie. Is it supposed to be only one winner who is presented everywhere or are there several? *"We are still finding out about that",* she says *"Up until now we mostly only had one winner but occasionally there are two."* This sounds like a competition. Where is the help, that 'other thing' for the winners? *"We don't charge an audition fee,"* she explains baldly. But is that really a great help? *"Well, we might be able to pay for Carnegie Hall from the income from audition fees but that's about it. If we do expand, this concept won't work anymore. At the end of the day, we are now fully financed by our Board Members."* Eventually, explains Klara Min, these 'Debut Recital Auditions' are supposed make NYCA and her ideas known around the world.

But this is only one of the things organized by NYCA. *"We invite pianists to become a member of NYCA. So far we have been very careful, who we invite. What does it mean to be a member? It's not a clearly defined membership so far. There should be*

a lot of time invested into finding out who should be a member. Just like the Gilmore Award does it: professionals travel around the world and observe musicians without announcing themselves and at some point they decide who receives the award.” Up to now there are seven members, including Klara Min. What does it mean to be a member at this moment? *“Now it means that the members are part of our piano concert series in New York. We are currently developing a new concert series, which will also take place in New York. But we are also hoping to expand with that and take it to Europe. If we are going to do that, we will have to decide how to go about it. And that’s the members’ job. The members would have a meeting and discuss all the options. We talk about, who to invite into the jury for our auditions. The jury members shouldn’t have the biggest names but they should know about the music they are passionate about.”* The membership however only runs for a duration of two years after which it is decided whether the membership will be extended. Next to the members and board members, NYCA also has an Advisory Board.

The piano concert series used to take place in spring, every week a concert. But Klara Min had a different idea which she pursues to offer smaller recitals: *“I am now thinking about house recitals. There are so many fantastic and very spacious apartments, especially in New York, and I think that’s where we should start to cultivate those spaces.”* The concert activities are likely to be extended in general, Klara Min lets that shine through. At the end of the day, the artist will also retain the right to choose their own repertoire that he or she wants to play.

But wouldn’t it be important to let younger artists become acquainted to new ideas? To show them how to arrange a concert programme and how to position themselves on the market? Klara Min smiles; this is something she already thought about as well: *“One should do that. At the moment I’m thinking about starting a festival. But not just one with concerts and masterclasses. I would want to invite piano technicians who can teach the pianists what is essential when speaking to technicians. Industry members would be invited including journalists, managers, agents etc. They would just be there to talk and to answer questions from the pianists. And that’s where the musicians will get their experience on how to speak to these people. Someone has to build that bridge between the industry and the artists.”* But we shouldn’t forget the music amongst all of that, she emphasizes in the end. *“One can’t forget why and for what we do all of this: for the music.”*

NYCA is a very dedicated idea growing slowly but pursuing the right goals.

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