



Conference Artists

Artistic Collaborations

By Jennifer Snow

One of the most inspiring aspects of the MTNA National Conference is the evening concerts. After two years of innovative online conferences, the 2022 MTNA National Conference will be a rewarding and emotional one as we gather together after a challenging, isolated time apart. This year's conference planning committee, MTNA leadership and staff have created an outstanding program.

I had the great opportunity to interview the two duos that are featured on the Collaborative Concert that will be held Sunday, March 27, 2022, at 8:00 P.M. It will be an engaging evening of music making. Each duo is enhanced by close relationships that deeply influence their artistic collaborations. The amazing Cann Sisters Duo, Kimberly and Michelle Cann, grew up together and have literally been a piano duo since they were children. The Formosan Violin-Piano Duo, Yu-Jane Yang, NCTM, and Shi-Hwa Wang, are a dynamic wife and husband team in music and in life. In addition to their performing careers, each artist is a celebrated and passionate teacher. Experiencing live music with these creative partnerships will be a highlight of the whole conference.

Formosan Violin-Piano Duo

Founded in 1986, the Formosan Violin-Piano Duo formed by Shi-Hwa Wang and Yu-Jane Yang has performed in Austria, Poland, Norway, Spain, Italy, Germany, Singapore, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Canada and in the U. S. in renowned concert venues such as the Schloss Esterházy in Eisenstadt, Austria, and the National Concert Hall in Taipei, Taiwan. The Duo plays rich duet repertoire for violin and piano ranging from composers such as J. S. Bach to George Gershwin, William Bolcom and John Williams. The Formosan Duo's Romantic Album CD has received critical acclaim.

Jennifer Snow (JS): Hello Yu-Jane and Shi-Hwa. Thank you for taking time to speak about your wonderful duo and upcoming MTNA performance. How did this musical partnership come to be?

Yu-Jane Yang (YJY): We actually met in high school through a mutual friend. At that time, we were both preparing for the very competitive national entrance exam in Taiwan. At the beginning, we were just talking and communicating by letters about the entrance exam and how to prepare. It's not really until we both were admitted into college, in the music department in Taipei, that we started to play

together. Because it was fun, it's just fun to make music.

Shi-Hwa Wang (SHW):

We spent a lot of time together outside of our colleges, which was a good thing because we talked about our studies. And then, because I play the violin and she is a pianist, it was very natural that we try to work and perform together. I still remember she taught me how to play the piano, and I got just enough skill to get into the music school. When we came to the States, we went to the same university, the University of Illinois. It was there that we decided to form the Formosan Duo.

YJY: The name Formosa came from Taiwan. Several hundred years ago, Portuguese sailors called Taiwan *Formosa*. It's another name nickname for Taiwan so that's why we called ourselves the Formosan Duo.

JS: How inspiring that that you formed this collaboration in college and that you have been playing together ever since. You both are professors and leaders at Weber State University with nationally recognized teaching careers. How do you manage your teaching and performance schedules?

YJY: I love everything about teaching and working with students and colleagues as well as making music. I tell my students, "You know what? It's so hard because we only have 24 hours a day. I need 48!" We try our best and I don't want to be away from the stage because I'm teaching my students how to be onstage. If we only talked about what we do, rather than doing what we do, then we are too far away. I hope that I'm serving as a model for my students.



JS: You certainly are an inspiring model for all of us. How do you manage your performing together?

SHW: When we are both teaching, we schedule a recital every semester. We always want to put new pieces in each concert, so we accumulate quite a bit of the duo repertoire. I think that helps us to practice. We regularly perform and have gone to Europe every summer since 1994. I was the concertmaster of the Classical Music Festival in Eisenstadt, Austria, and we have performed many concerts there. The summer allows us to present different repertoire.

JS: What is your focus when rehearsing together?

YJY: It is the ensemble aspects that take the most time, and other times it is the mood we are trying to create. Sometimes we both feel

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that we have such high expectations of what it should feel like, and maybe it was just never going to be achieved. But we try.

SHW: I have to say classical-era music is the hardest for ensemble. Because it's so exposed and rhythm is everything, there's no room for mistakes. For those kinds of pieces we spend most of our time on the ensemble. In order to create the right sound, we have to compromise with each other, and we have to do different things. Because we do it this way, it forms a special ensemble sound between the two of us.

JS: What are some of the pieces that you are going to perform at the conference?

SHW: We decided to do a representation of things that we do well. We will present a wider span of music rather than just one long work. We want to open with select movements from the Gershwin and Heifetz transcription of *Porgy and Bess*. We also will include a few Chinese transcriptions that we love, such as *Fishing Boat*, traditional Chinese music. We are also including movements from the *Much Ado About Nothing* suite, a beautiful work by Erich Korngold. If time allows, I would love

to play *Fiddler on the Roof*, the John William's transcription.

YJY: We try to find pieces that have equal parts for violin and piano so it's balanced and challenging for both parts. I think those are the fun things. We also consider what the audience would enjoy.

JS: It sounds like a lovely program. What are the greatest rewards from your collaboration?

YJY: For me, personally, it is that impeccable ensemble that you can play as one. That's the idea that I'm always striving for, and you feel like that's the best thing in the world. That's the biggest inspiration.

SHW: Playing together and equal partnership is one of the most rewarding things to do. That's why we all love chamber music so much.

JS: You certainly project that as a couple as well as a musical duo. You are two very strong, accomplished individuals who have a life together in which you shine individually. What inspires you especially during these challenging times?

YJY: I think that this COVID time really was eye opening. This past year taught us about how valuable, inspiring and necessary it is to make music with another person, creating music with another human being is most important.

SHW: I agree and want to add that we now can include the audience in the performance, which cannot be replaced.

YJY: Yes, the other aspect about this is how important and crucial it is to have the audience together with musicians. We talked before about the power of music, and we believe in it, but this past year, we lived through it. Now having the chance of getting it back, we make every effort to treasure it.

JS: Thank you both for sharing your insights and personal story. We look forward to being together and hearing your artistry at the conference.



Cann Sisters Piano Duo

Sisters Kimberly and Michelle Cann, “darlings of duo pianists,” are consummate musicians passionate about performing a wide range of multi-cultural repertoire throughout the U.S. and to fostering increased appreciation for the arts in their local communities. Kimberly and Michelle began performing professionally as The Cann Duo in 2010 and since then, they have toured extensively throughout the U.S. Their electrifying performances and engaging outreach programs and presentations are all the more meaningful due to the unmistakable sound of their lifelong hereditary connection.

Jennifer Snow: Thank you for giving your time today to highlight your upcoming MTNA Conference performance. Being sisters, how did you both get started in music?

Kimberly Cann: Michelle and I are actually six and a quarter years apart. Her musical journey, like mine, started in the womb. Our parents are both musicians, our dad is a professional musician and educator with his main area of expertise in brass and percussion. It should come as no surprise that not only did we both have a predilection toward percussion and brass instruments, but also music at large. I started piano lessons around age 5 and Michelle started her lessons when she was 5. Within a couple of years, we were performing together. Paramount to our artistic expression is that we didn’t just study piano. We studied a wide variety of instruments including brass, woodwinds,

strings and percussion, and we both did organ and world instruments, including steel drums and gamelan. Having that wealth of experience growing up influenced our sense of orchestral sound and the imagination we bring to our piano playing.

Michelle Cann: As a child, I knew that it was an expectation that we were all involved in music. There was that level of “this is what the family does.” It was inspiring for me to hear pieces that Kim would be practicing that were above my level and then I couldn’t wait to learn those pieces. Being involved in all the



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ensembles that my dad conducted had a huge influence on the way that we hear and relate to music on a grand scale, as opposed to just as a solo pianist.

JS: As you grew older, how did your playing develop together?

MC: From a very young age, we were involved in playing for church services. I think in our early stages, the most collaborating that we did would have been Kim on organ and myself on the piano at church. We were on two different sides of the sanctuary, and we had to play by communicating just with our eyes and ears. We would have to listen and be convincing with our intentions so that we would be together. Kim and I played together a lot when we were younger and

MTNA comes into this. We

were very active in MTNA in our state, and we would do the competitions. When we would perform a concerto, we played for each other.

KC: There was a ton of change in our university years. When I went on to Eastman, Michelle was at the Cleveland Institute of Music. It wasn't just that we were geographically apart, it was the first time that we were musically apart. We were working with two very different teachers in two rather unique environments far apart. In those years, there was more sporadic collaborations. What came

out of that period of our collaboration is that it's not just about working together as one. Sometimes it's about sitting back and listening to the other person, and we found that technique worked really well.

MC: When I was 18, Kim was already in her 20s, and I was trying to figure out what my voice was. At that stage we were struggling to communicate. I remember even thinking, I don't know if I can play with my sister. I remember feeling badly because I wanted for us to continue to collaborate. What was really interesting for me was that I always admired Kim's playing, her musicianship and her technique, and I still do. That was always there. Kim also respected me as a pianist. We know how to listen to each other. As soon as we listen, we just click.

JS: When did the duo formally become an aspect of your career path?

KC: Between 2006 and 2010 some crucial changes happened that directly contribute to where we both are right now in our lives. I decided to take a slightly different path as I was coming out of my graduate work. I accepted a position as a professor of piano and artist-in-residence at a university in Jamaica. During my time there, I started to realize that I'm more of a "go local" girl. I had met the love of my life and started to think about what I wanted out of my adult life. There was a very crucial turning point where I made a conscious decision, that as much as I love performing, I did not want to do it full time. Michelle's the jetsetter in the family. I thought that was what I wanted when we were both younger, but I took a different path.

MC: When we finished college, we went in different directions, and that's normal because we're different people who want different things. Throughout, we always cared about the musical connection we had, we always enjoyed that, and it never went away. Connecting with management was a turning point for our duo. Sometimes what you need is something external motivating you to say, "Hey, do this, try this, let's push this." And that's what hap-



pened. We started to regularly do full concerts together as a duo and we enjoyed it.

JS: In addition to your extensive performing careers, you are both dedicated to education. Kimberly, you are the founding director of Piano Lab & Music Lab Studios and Keys for Kidz, and Michelle, you are the Inaugural Eleanor Sokoloff Chair in Piano Studies at the Curtis Institute of Music. What are your teaching philosophies?

KC: My educational philosophy would be that first and foremost our job as educators is to make sure all of our students know they can be an inspiration to others. In fact, they alone can drive resilience, energy, creativity and confidence, which is just so crucial.

MC: Both our parents are educators. It just came naturally for us to want to give back and connect with the next generation coming up. There are a lot of young, high school students, especially of color, that come to me and Kim and express that they want to go to conservatory. If they want to go to a conservatory or university and study music at a high level, they've got to be started from a young age and given the right opportunities. Also, something that I'm trying to bring to the students at Curtis is to show all musicians that having different skills serves to make you a better musician and a better person.

JS: Thank you for those inspiring insights. What are you going to be highlighting at the conference performance?

KC: We haven't finalized our entire program yet, but I do know that there will be a surprising variety of music by composers who speak to a level of passion, excellence and resilience in their compositions. One of the pieces that we'll be performing we actually commissioned for two pianos, it's called *Let My People Go*.

MC: It was written by a friend of mine in Philadelphia, Michael Leibowitz. He is a wonderful composer who I had worked with before. We asked him to compose a two-piano piece for us for a very special concert commemorating Black History Month. He did want

it to have some connection to black music, so he picked three spirituals. It includes *Let my people go*, *He's got the whole world*, and *Down by the riverside* composed in an innovative and fantastic way. We support new music as well as music from past composers that have not been appreciated or heard.

JS: We look forward to hearing the full program and this exciting new work. As we reflect on the challenges of this last year, what inspires and motivates each of you?

KC: I am inspired every day by my sister. In fact, coming together as a duo professionally kicked me in the right direction to keep my talent going. You start juggling enough balls as you get older, especially with kids, and your practice could just start to fall off. I credit Michelle in large part because otherwise, I definitely would not have performed nearly as much.

MC: A big part of what inspires me is collaborating. Playing with my sister is always a wonderful, inspiring experience. I leave our concerts or rehearsal sessions with a smile on my face. It's so interesting how connected we are musically, even if we haven't played together for a year, when we come together, we click, and there's so many levels to that. The human experience of sharing with others is so important. With music we have wonderful opportunities to do it.

JS: Thank you both for your generous sharing of insights and ideas. We look forward to an outstanding conference performance in March.

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