

# A Wonderful Struggle

## Yang Tianwa's life as a musician

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A brief Prelude. Originally, the idea was to conduct a long-distance interview with Yang Tianwa by phone from the HKPO office, but after the lengthy process of finding a convenient time, a problem with the hotel phone line prevented the interview from taking place. Email correspondence followed and it was then that I noticed a "sent from my iPhone" suffix. Hold on a minute; "Do you have Skype?" 24 hours later the interview was finished from the comfort of home.

Yet don't let this lead you into thinking that she is a typical "post-80's generation" young woman with over a thousand "friends" on Facebook and spending all her spare time chatting away on msn. I quickly realised that this doesn't happen in a musician's life.

So, what is a musician's life like?

According to 23-years-old Yang Tianwa; "It's really wonderful, but it's really tough!"

### My Dad

I started playing the violin when I was four. My father was very strict, and made sure I practised every day. He was right to do that, otherwise I would not have achieved what I have.

I was not an especially diligent child. Many of my exercises I just played a couple of times and stopped as soon as I could play them. Already by that time I realised I had some gifts; some people needed to try things 10 times, while I often succeeded after three. Other children managed to sit in front of the piano all day, I couldn't. I wanted to do other things. When I was little, I had to watch other children going to play after school, while my dad would pick me up from school to practise. I often wanted to read books, to play with friends, but I had to give these all up because of the violin. Looking back, it was quite a tough time.

It is generally tough to be a musician, although I am really happy right now. If I hadn't been a musician, I guess I might be working in an office, and I don't think would be as happy, but at the end of the day, every one determines their own life choices.

If I was to have children I would not make the demands on them my dad made on me. But if they wanted to be musicians, I might insist on helping them until they are in their mid-teens

and then leave them to choose. Talent does not dictate everything; personality is more important.

### My Holidays

A musician's life is tough but really wonderful. You have to manage a great deal of stress and lead a disciplined life. Travelling from country to country means constant adjustment of time zones. You can only sleep until you "need to get up". When holidays come, you can finally sleep until you "want to get up". The best thing about holidays is not having to think about time.

When I don't need to perform, I tend to stay home. On holidays, the first day I would lie in bed all day, reading and drinking tea; to me that tells my brain that I am finally on holiday. I love reading. I remember when I was little, I would put a novel on the music stand and read while I played, as I was able to commit music to memory fairly quickly. Later my dad discovered me doing this and locked all my books away!

I like reading all sorts of books: novels, classics, crime fiction, ancient, modern... I love them all. At the moment, I'm reading *The Half Brother* by Norwegian novelist Lars Saabye Christensen. The male protagonist grew up after the Second World War. His family seemed ordinary on the surface, but his older brother was born as a result of his mother having been raped during the war. It's a story full of turmoil.

I listen to music four, five hours a day because of my work. When I have some free time, I prefer to enjoy a quiet moment. If I do listen to music, it would be part of work, probably one that I have been asked to perform. I do often listen to audio books.

I guess music shares with painting, film and writing, the same common goals; to communicate to others. For me, a performing musician is like a movie director; the difference is that my story has no words or visual images.

### My encore

If there were no Ysaÿe or Bach in this world I really wouldn't know what to play for encores. I disagree with playing another showpiece such as Paganini or Wieniawski after performing an entire concerto. The concerto has offered plenty of opportunities to express yourself, you don't need another chance to show off your skills. I would like to take the encore as an opportunity to give the audience something different, something to feel rather than something merely flashy.

As for recitals, I love playing Ma Sicong's *Nostalgia* as the encore. I am really attracted to its simple, folk elements. In fact, most great music comes from the people. Brahms and Mozart also used elements from folk music. These are the essence of music, drawn from real life.

In Dvořák's Violin Concerto, I am most impressed by the slow movement because of its rich folk elements. Its melancholic style is just like a folk song, while the final movement is like a folk dance. These elements really bring the work closer to people. In my opinion, this Concerto is more folk-like than his Cello Concerto and also more elegant and delicate.

It's played quite often in Europe, but audiences in Asia and North America seem to favour the Cello Concerto and symphonies; as if the Violin Concerto lives under its shadow. Perhaps it was written at the wrong time – there were too many great violin works written in the same period.

### My resolution

"Today in London, tomorrow in Paris, work starts at 8pm..." The lifestyle seems free and glamorous, but that is not the case in reality. Behind the limelight is a full itinerary, dictated not by personal choice but by one's responsibilities as a performer. The difference in performing in different countries is just the name of the place, you rarely get a chance to see the rest of it."

I do use Facebook under a pseudonym, but I only have 24 friends there, all of them are friends I already know. I used to use msn in the evenings, but not much anymore. I rarely contact my friends, the place I live in is quiet with few people living around. I don't go out much, email is my main communication method. It is true that I keep meeting new friends from work, but often after a wonderful collaboration we lose touch – it's a pity that I often have to leave as soon as I meet new friends. Sometimes I go to a place to perform having called my friends there, but work doesn't always allow time for us to meet. When you are launching a career, inevitably things will be tough.

**To be a musician, you need to have much determination.**

### Yang Tianwa's favourite violinists

I love Adolf Busch and his string quartet, and also Joseph Szigeti. My favourite is Busch's Beethoven – his version is unsurpassable. Szigeti on the other hand has the best version of the Brahms.

To play Mendelssohn's Concerto, I listened to the recording of Jascha Heifetz. I was surprised... his slow movement was the most beautiful interpretation I've heard! But his first and final movements were not especially close to my heart.

### Yang Tianwa's most memorable performance

It was a frightening experience! I once performed in Germany and remember clearly the date; 26th March 2007. That was the day I almost missed the performance!

The concert was to begin at 11 in the morning, so I got up at 8. Around 9:45 my manager phoned me to ask me where I was; the concert was about to begin. And then I remembered! Daylight saving had already started so it was actually 10:45am when my manager called. Without eating breakfast or getting changed, I ran out the door with my violin and performance gown. I nearly fainted when I stood on stage!

