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Fifty Out Front Companies Issue, Diversity MBA 100
Issue, Diversity in Sports, Diversity in Entertainment,
Diversity in Travel & Culture.
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Innovation, imagination, passion and dynamism are the hallmarks of Taiwanese-American conductor Mei-Ann Chen. Music Director of the MacArthur Award-winning Chicago Sinfonietta since 2011, Ms. Chen has been named Principal Guest Conductor of Austria's Recreation Grosses Orchester Graz, and the first-ever Artistic Partner of Houston's River Oaks Chamber Orchestra (ROCO), both effective September 2019. Ms. Chen has served as Artistic Director & Conductor for the National Taiwan Symphony Orchestra Summer Festival since 2016. A sought-after guest conductor acclaimed for infusing orchestras with energy, enthusiasm, high-level music-making, and galvanizing audiences and communities alike, Ms. Chen's reputation as a compelling communicator has resulted in growing popularity with orchestras globally.

Diversity MBA's Digital Editor, TaVashané Brown, had the pleasure of doing an exclusive interview with Mei-Ann Chen where she shared her story in a way that she never has before!

Take a look at some of the highlights from the interview below.

TaVashané Brown: Where did your passion and love for music come from? At what point in your life did you know that this was a career you wanted to pursue?

Mei-Ann Chen: I have my parents to thank for their love for music. They started me early, around age seven, with the piano and violin.

But, the moment for me that was very clear of what I wanted to be in life came when I was a 10 year old, shy violinist playing in the orchestra for the first time. I saw this person on the podium helping to make the biggest sound in the room. I got so excited. I ran home and told my parents the piano and violin are fun, but I really wanted to be a conductor so I could play the largest instrument in the room, which is the orchestra. My parents looked worried and told me that they didn't know where to find me a conducting teacher. And, they were right

because conducting wasn't something you could pursue as a career. There wasn't a conducting major in school being offered. So, being a stubborn young girl, I didn't take no for an answer. I showed up in my orchestra rehearsals with my violin parts memorized, so I could fix my eyes on the conductor and he thought I was the best kid because I was the only one looking up at him out of the whole group... not knowing I was really trying to steal his craft at age 10!

I'm living a lifelong dream of being a conductor. And, it is a unique field. A lot of people don't understand what we do because, you know, we look like we're just waving our arms. But, a conductor does a lot of things. We are the spokesperson for the music. We are the spokesperson for the composer, dead or alive. We are leaders and our instruments are human beings. Being a conductor is like being an octopus. You are handling time management due to limited rehearsal time, you are in human resources because you are managing people. And, because they are your instruments when you allow them to be the best versions of themselves, you inspire them to create the best music that can be made.



“Music, better than any other communication form can break down barriers and bring the world together.”

— Mei-Ann Chen

TaVashané Brown: Wow! Thank you for that perspective. From my end, I didn't realize how much that you can juggle. It is so much that goes into being a conductor and it is a very unique field...that is male dominant. So switching gears just a bit, let's talk about the gender imbalances in international orchestras, especially for conductors.

Did you face any obstacles or challenges as a Taiwanese-American woman? Or, just being a woman in general. If so, how did you navigate that?

Mei-Ann Chen: I want to start answering this question by mentioning how many angels there have been in my musical journey. And, particularly for women

in the conductor's field, there's almost no one other than my mentor that has done so much for women conductors in the country and in the world. Her name is Marin Alsop, the Music Director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. She's really one of the first to shatter the glass ceiling. She founded a fellowship called Paki Fellowship <https://takiconcordia.org/about-tccf/>. It's for women conductors, to help launch

“Maestro Mei-Ann Chen is one of the most exciting and accomplished conductors in the world as her jam-packed schedule proves. In addition to her conducting accomplishments lies a true exemplar of, and champion for diversity, equity, and inclusion. As an Asian woman music director and conductor of a major market orchestra, Mei-Ann is a rarity in our field. But it’s her work helping early career, diverse conductors and musicians through our Project Inclusion Fellowship program that really sets her apart. I am honored to have been able to work side-by-side with this remarkable woman.”

—Jim Hirsch, *Chief Executive Officer,*
Chicago Sinfonietta

them into professional opportunities that had been very difficult to come by. The foundation helps young conductors to debut with major orchestras, which is really jumpstarting their career by many years. I did a workshop with her over 15, 20 years ago and tried to keep in touch with her. And, I finally won the fellowship from the Paki foundation, which is very competitive but this is what got me the opportunity to work with Marin. She is just such an awesome mentor in a sense that there are many issues and challenges we go through as women. You know, it seems so much easier for men to dress for concerts. For example, they can put on a tuxedo and can look good easily, but a woman can't. What do you wear? Do you wear pants? Do you wear a skirt? Do you try to be feminine or not? It's like the tiny little details we have to think about and it's because of our society's expectations of women. But the good news is if I can come this far, I think there are many more that are able to come even further.

Not only did Marin take a chance on me but so did my other two mentors, Robert Spano, Music Director, and Donald Runnicles, Principal Guest Conductor of Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, opened doors that I never saw possible. And, they saw me as a young conductor with talent. I don't think they did it just because I'm a woman conductor. I appreciate them for seeing the potential in me, purely judging my artistic merit. To be totally honest, I am in debt to countless names, too long for me to mention. The orchestra musicians in many orchestras, colleagues, classmates across the country... But lastly, the biggest champion that I need to mention is the founder of Chicago Sinfonietta, Maestro, Paul Freeman. He saw the incredible potential in me to lead the nation's most diverse orchestra. And, I think it took some guts to say if we really practice diversity, then who are we not to consider Mei-Ann based on her gender or color of her skin. So, I am forever in debt to Chicago Sinfonietta when they could have taken the safe and easy route.

TaVashané Brown: You touched on a lot, in

terms of the people before you that took a chance and helped paved the way for you, but now you get to do the same for other women aspiring to be conductors for generations to come. If you had any words of encouragement or advice for the women trying to break through in this industry, what would you say to them?

Mei-Ann Chen: I would say to them, hold on to your dream. Don't let anybody tell you that it is not possible. I think everything is possible with our passion, lots of hard work, and of course, a little bit of a luck. And, if the angels come your way, hold on to them and maximize all opportunities, big or small. Bottom-line, I think what our field is beginning to realize is, although women conductors are still a much smaller percentage than males, the talent pool that is coming up is very encouraging. Not to say that this journey isn't difficult or tough at times. When I finished my doctorate candidacy out of University of Michigan, I've basically gotten all the degrees there is to get for conducting. I think people don't realize how difficult, how competitive it is in the field of conducting. The amount of rejection letters I received were than the amount of notes I ever conducted. So, when you're thinking it isn't possible, I have to be reminded that at one point I was teaching 40 Suzuki beginners just to make ends meet. With the help of Benjamin Zander, Conductor of Boston Philharmonic, and the youth orchestra of New England Conservatory, I held on to my dream and stayed in America. It gave me the chance to fulfill my dream. You know, it is amazing to me what when the will is there, and you work hard enough, things will come. And just remember, it's not just about our own dream. It's about having a dream that is going to impact a bigger community other than ourselves.

TaVashané Brown: What's next for Mei-Ann? Any exciting things happening in the near future?

Mei-Ann Chen: I am so excited to be in a place to share with you and others that I'm making

my New York Philharmonic debut next year! So, dreams do come true. I never thought that this would come, and here it is! Also, in November 2020 I will be making my debut in one of the most well-known concert halls in Vienna, Austria. And, of course, continuing the work at Chicago Sinfonietta, which I am so excited about. I think we all stand on many of the paved ways that our predecessors have achieved. For me, it's to remind myself not to be satisfied with only that. How can I push forward even more? And, at Chicago Sinfonietta I believe that we are making a difference, even with limited resources. Chicago Sinfonietta is what I like to call one of the most powerful boutique orchestras in the country because we are small. We don't have a giant budget like the Chicago Symphony, yet I can tell you that we have produced more young musicians of color into the field. Over the years, we have launched more fellows than a lot of orchestras combined. So, the fact that they're all in incredible positions, creating their own careers, I'm hoping that this will only create a ripple effect. So, I think it's important to remember that we are not too small to make a difference. It starts with us all taking small steps and together we are going to take a giant step forward. 🌈

Chicago Sinfonietta History

The year was 1987. Orchestras across the country were doing well for the most part, though if you looked carefully enough you could already discern some of the challenges that would confront the field in the years to come. Most orchestras no longer reflected the communities in which they performed. While a few people recognized that this was problematic, most orchestra leaders were content to continue along the same path that these institutions had followed for one hundred years or more. Maestro Paul Freeman had a decidedly different vision of what an orchestra could, and should be.

Paul had earned an international reputation through years of guest conducting all over

the world and as Music Director of a number of orchestras in the US and Canada. He was the first African American on the podium of over 50 orchestras worldwide and had a huge catalog of recordings to his credit. By the mid-1980s he concluded that the time was right for a mid-sized orchestra dedicated to promoting diversity, inclusion, and innovative programming, and he decided that Chicago was the right place to do this.

In 2009, Paul Freeman announced that he would retire at the end of the 2010-2011 Season and the Sinfonietta began its first Music Director search. The Board of Directors conducted a two-year, international search that began with over 40 candidates and concluded with eight finalists performing podium auditions. This resulted in the unanimous selection of rising conducting star Mei-Ann Chen being appointed as Paul Freeman's successor. In May of 2011 Paul publicly conducted the orchestra for the final time in a nationally broadcast concert, and in a particularly emotional moment, passed his baton to Mei-Ann at the conclusion of the performance. A giant had left the stage, but his legacy lives on.

Learn more <http://www.chicagosinfonietta.org/>.



CS Project
Inclusion musician
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Photos © Chris Ocken



Audience from our Martin Luther King, Jr. concert



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Millennials: Know Thyself - Part 2

by Dr. Deborah Ashton



Dr. Deborah Ashton, Chief Psychologist & Head of Behavioral Practices DMBA

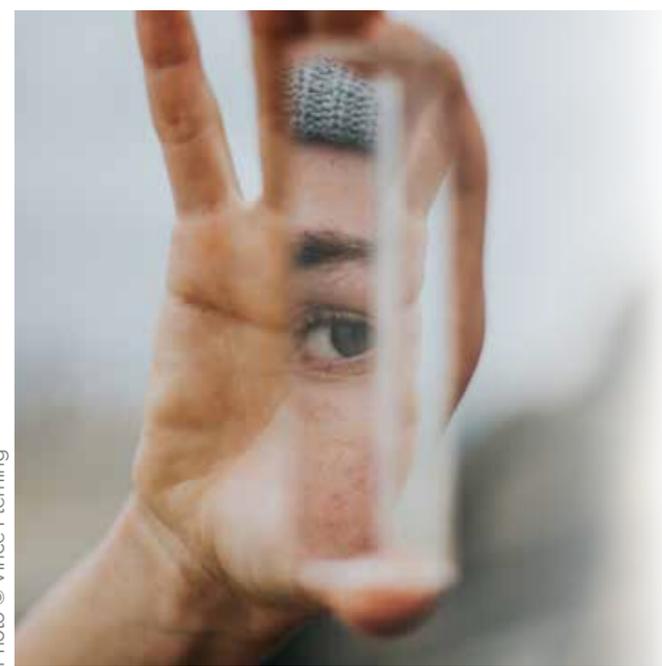


Photo © Vince Fleming

Millennials have been described as having a sense of entitlement, wanting to be heard and as having a high social conscious. While different generations may have specific characteristics, the particular characteristic may not apply to any given individual. That being stated, let's examine the various characteristics.

Entitlement: Please note that entitlement is a characteristic of narcissism. According to the

National Institutes of Health, Millennials are three times more likely to have a narcissistic personality than Baby Boomers; and, in comparison to college students in 1982, 2009 college students scored 58% higher on narcissism. Remember, according to the Greek myth, Narcissus catches a glimpse of his beauty in a pond; falls in love with himself and is held a prisoner by his own reflection. He perishes from hunger. How many selfies have you taken today? Do you take selfies at work? How can you counteract the entitlement label?

Part of the entitlement characteristic that plagues the Millennials was established by their Baby Boomer and Gen X parents. The parents rewarded Millennials for participation and cooperation. The good news is that Millennials tend to be great team players.

However, they expect to be rewarded because they are special. They are special because they were raised to see themselves as special for just being themselves. Many received unconditional love. They are disappointed if they feel people want them to 'pay their dues' because many Millennials do not believe wisdom, education,

experience and training comes with age. Like Rey, the female lead in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, they do not need a library or a Jedi Master. However, according to a study by Deloitte and according to Meister and Willyerd, the paradox is that Millennials want their leaders to be mentors and to give them continuous positive feedback. The continuous positive feedback is part of the reward system that they received throughout their developmental years. Reverse mentoring and group mentoring may be ways to provide continuous feedback, to leverage Millennials insights and to train Millennials to receive constructive criticism. That way mentoring is not an overwhelming task for the organizational leaders and it ensures that Millennials are valued. How are you making sure that mentoring is not simply a one-way street? Are you open to constructive criticism?

According to Heathfield, Millennials had the most 'child-centric' parents in history. Everything stopped, and the parents attentively listened when their child spoke. Remember many of these parents were/are Baby Boomers, who grew-up in the "Children should be seen and not heard" era. The Baby Boomers wanted to make sure that their children were heard! In order to retain Millennials in the workplace, it is important to listen to their suggestions and ideas. It is also important to train Millennials to listen.

Listening, just like mentoring, needs to be a multi-lane highway and not a one-way street. Listening is not waiting for your turn to get your point across, but actually hearing what the other person has to say, which means being open to new ideas. Open-minds lead to creativity. Are you listening?

Meister and Willyerd described Millennials as the most socially conscious generation since

the 1960s. But of course, they are! Many of them were raised by Baby Boomers who grew up through the 1960s. The Baby Boomers were told by JFK, "... ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country." Baby Boomers marched for Civil Rights. They were Freedom Riders, the Women's Movement... the Peace Corp...Green Peace...Stonewall, which transformed the gay rights to equal rights and acceptance. The *2017 Millennial Impact Report* listed the top causes Millennials care about are civil rights and racial discrimination (29%), and employment/job creation and healthcare reform tied for second at 26%.

How are you ensuring your organization is implementing a corporate social responsibility strategy? As an employer, how are you soliciting ideas and engaging employees in your corporate social responsibility strategy—Habitat for America, environmentally friendly workplace practices, Meals on Wheels, urban farms, Technology Underwriting Greater Good, Big Brothers Big Sisters, STEM mentoring, criminal justice system reform, etc.?

Finally, each Millennial is a unique multi-dimensional human being whether he, she, ze or they. Not all Millennials possess the characteristics that define their generation. As was demonstrated with the voting data, Millennials are not a monolith. They are a matrix of individuals, some are liberal, some are moderate, and some are conservative. They are influenced by their gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, etc. Whether you are a Millennial or another generation, it is important to know thyself –know your blemishes and your beauty marks. 🌈



Estella Brown

TIPS for Starting a Career in the Entertainment Industry

Are you interested in a career in entertainment, but you need a little motivation to get your career moving? Good news! I have a few tips for starting a career in the entertainment industry.

Meet the Right People

We've all heard the saying, "it's not always about what you know but who you know". This holds true in the entertainment industry. It is important to continuously build relationships with the right people in this field. Building solid relationships with people can lead you to the career of a lifetime. You never know where one conversation with the right person may take you. You can be an aspiring actor today and end up on the big screen tomorrow! But, you have to stand tall and put yourself out there.

Don't Give Up

Finding a career in entertainment is not easy, especially when you have little to no experience in the field. However, you have to stick with it and be persistent. Even without the desired experience, you can find a way to get your foot in the door. Also, keep in mind that having a career that you love is not always about the money. Sometimes you may have to start with an unpaid internship or spend time volunteering in order to kick start your career. As Oprah Winfrey once said, "You know you are on the road to success if you would do your job, and not be paid for it." So stay positive and know that rainy days always come to an end.

Know Yourself

Knowing who you are is the most important tip. Some people may not even realize they don't know who they are until they are faced with an obstacle. However, it is the first step in reaching your true

potential. A person that is self-aware, practices self-love and understand their value, won't waiver when faced with adversity. Imagine going after a career in screenwriting, and someone reads your first script and tells you that you'll never be as big as Quentin Tarantino or Jordan Peele. Remember, behind every successful person in this industry is someone who did not believe in them or told them they will never be as big as they are now. It is important to know your strengths and weaknesses so you know exactly what you bring to the table. Knowing this will give you the confidence you need to be successful and keep you from being less disappointed when doors are closed.

Always Remember

The tips I shared will not just help you in kick starting a career in entertainment, but they can apply to every opportunity you go for in your life. Yes, the road gets tough and you may not start off being where you want to be, but with hard work and patience comes success. In the words on Charles F. Kettering, "Keep on going, and chances are that you will stumble on something, perhaps when you are least expecting it. I never heard of anyone ever stumbling on something sitting down."

Author's Bio: Estella Brown, is a Senior Information Systems major at Chicago State University. She currently interns at Diversity MBA working as an Administrator/ Business Services Coordinator.



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