

METRO

CHICAGOLAND

'It was mesmerizing. Just to see her interaction with her grandfather, that was pretty amazing. They really connect musically.'

—St. Ignatius social studies teacher Diane Haleas Hines



Tribune photo by Milbert O. Brown

Yi Wei laughs with St. Ignatius College Prep classmates Kate Beal (left) and Meghan Hartsell before graduation.

One stage at a time

One-time child violinist next heads to elite music program

By Jo Napolitano
Tribune staff reporter

As a 6-year-old immigrant, Yi Wei played violin with her grandfather for quarters and dollar bills, her nimble fingers plucking and strumming their way through Mozart and Pachelbel for hours at a time along Michigan Avenue.

In the years since, she has moved from the violin to percussion instruments, gained professional instruction and soloed on the marimba with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

On Saturday, Wei, now 18, gave the valedictory speech at St. Ignatius College Prep's graduation ceremony, urging students to mark their success with humanitarian work as well as academic achievement. After taking hold of her diploma, she turned her graduation cap tassel from left to right, marking the end of a successful high school career.

This fall, Wei will enter an elite, joint program of Harvard University and the New England Conservatory of Music, with expectations



Tribune file photo by John Lee

A young Yi Wei and her grandfather earned from \$30 to \$100 as street performers.

that she will be well on her way to becoming a professional percussionist in a major orchestra. Only five students were accepted into the program, and world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma, a Harvard graduate, called Wei to congratulate her, sharing tips on how to balance school and music.

Wei's extraordinary path from sidewalks to concert stages began at age 4, when her mother died in a car crash and Wei wound up with her grandparents in Chinatown. Her grandfather taught her to play violin and, to help support the family, took her out on the streets to play.

The attention-grabbing pair would play in the winter until their fingers turned red before the cold chased them indoors. In the summer, they'd play by the lakefront or in the shade of a leafy tree.

Wei dreaded the street

PLEASE SEE **MUSICIAN**, PAGE 6



Tribune file photo by John Lee

Before becoming a percussionist, Yi Wei learned to play the violin from her musician grandfather after her mother's death.

MUSICIAN: Technique, ability hailed as exceptional

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

performances and three-hour concertos at O'Hare and Midway Airports. Now though, she looks back on those early sessions and sees how they shaped her life, teaching her tenacity and independence.

"I didn't understand it," she said. "I didn't like it for a while. I would have to turn down birthday party invitations, or I couldn't stay after school to play, but after a while I got used to it. "It's part of who I am, part of my culture, part of my family. I learned to embrace it, and I'm proud of it today."

Wei remembers when her grandfather insisted they play outside one Thanksgiving, not understanding that the holiday meant many families would be indoors.

"Part of the Chinese culture was to obey what your parents say," Wei said. "We stood there for about an hour. It was so cold I couldn't move my fingers anymore."

Doug Waddell, a percussionist with the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Grant Park Symphony has been working with Wei for nine years, since she started with the symphony's percussion scholarship program. "I'm quite sure I will never

have another student like her again," Waddell said. "She's that exceptional. She has a flawless technique, a spectacular, natural music ability like I've never seen in anyone ever before. You show her something, and she does it. She can just do this stuff."

"She's way ahead of getting to her goal. Most grad students aren't where Yi is now. All she needs is a little time."

If Wei's early venues were unconventional, her musical lineage was strong.

Her grandfather was sent as a young man to the Hubei Conservatory, China's finest musical school. Upon graduating, he was appointed cultural minister for an entire province, but after expressing his doubts publicly about Chairman Mao Tse Tung, he was reassigned to work as a cook.

At her graduation ceremony, for which Wei wore her mother's green necktie, her grandfather, Ying Wei, was overjoyed at the thought of her taking her musical talents further than he was allowed.

"This is the happiest day of my life," he said through a translator. "I hoped for a day like this."

As for her departure to the East Coast, Ying Wei said, "She is a bird who needs to fly away."

Wei said that after her mother, Liu Ying, died and her father, Yuan Wei, couldn't care for her, it was her grandparents—their emotional and financial support, encouragement and love—that brought her this close to her dreams.

She invited her grandfather to St. Ignatius last year to play violin while she sang tradition-



Tribune photo by Wes Pope

Yi Wei moves a marimba at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Her instructor Doug Waddell said she has flawless technique.

al Chinese songs and danced beside him. "It was mesmerizing," social studies teacher Diane Haleas Hines said. "Just to see her interaction with her grandfather, that was pretty amazing. They really connect musically."

Wei was born in Guiyang, in central China, and lived there for 2½ years before leaving for the United States with her grandparents; her parents already had settled in Michigan.

Her father had come over in 1988, the year she was born, with a full scholarship to study music at Michigan State University. He soon got a job with the Nashville Symphony Orchestra.

On the night Wei's mother died, the baby girl was supposed to be in the car, too, riding from Nashville back to Michigan. Instead, the family had decided she would stay with her father in Nashville. Wei thinks her mother, also a violinist, fell asleep at the wheel on an icy road.

"My dad tried to take care of me for a while, but because of the symphony hours during the evenings and weekends, he

'They've basically become my parents. They're my role models for life.'

—Yi Wei, of her grandparents

wasn't able to support me by himself," she said. "He took me back to Chicago, which is where my grandparents had ended up."

"They've basically become my parents," she said. "They're my role models for life."

Wei's grandmother, Rui E Liu, worked as a professional in a factory in China, but when she came to the United States, she went to work as a baby-sitter. Neither grandparent speaks English.

"They've basically sacrificed their entire lives for their sons and for myself, and they've never complained," Wei said.

On Saturday, her grandmother thanked Wei's teachers, those who gave her scholarship money and the family's adopted country for Wei's success.

"When Yi lost her mother, we

were very poor," she said through a translator. "It was a low point in our lives. So many people came to help. They treated Yi like their own kid over the years."

But Wei throws the credit back to her grandparents, how they waited patiently for her first notes on the violin to turn into something more melodic. As a little girl, Wei's fingers were perfect: thin but plump at the tips, ideal for pushing down on the neck of the child-sized, wooden instrument.

She and her grandfather played together every day, taking half-hour breaks. They brought in between \$30 and \$100 per day, on the higher end near the holidays.

When they played outside Water Tower Place, Wei would go in and roam around. When they performed outside Borders, she'd spend her break checking out the children's books.

"That's where I learned to be independent and to think for myself," she said.

Despite the hard work, Wei insists that she was spoiled with love. She laughed as she talked about having no chores and no

job, her only task is to succeed at school. "As long as I got good grades and do well, they're happy with that," she said.

St. Ignatius Principal Catherine Karl said that Wei has been successful in subjects as diverse as Latin, physics and English, that she's confident and not afraid to try new things. At graduation, her grade-point average was 4.4.

"She has straight A-pluses. Her lowest grade is an A-minus in macroeconomics," Karl said.

Mike Kennelly, senior managing director at Huron Consulting Group, the company that provided Wei with a partial scholarship to attend St. Ignatius, called her unusually intelligent with a persistence that seems to run in the family.

Wei said it will be hard for her grandparents to let her go, but they'd rather see her move to another part of the country than limit her potential.

As for Wei, she is now ready to move on, having delivered that 8-minute speech, urging her classmates to "be the change they want to see in the world." jnapolitano@tribune.com