

# YOHEVED “VEDA” KAPLINSKY

## *A Legacy in Music Education*

By Hsing-ay Hsu

*“Kaplinsky is one of the great figures in our world of music. She cares so deeply about the whole well-being of the young people she guides and inspires, and she is at once supremely demanding and extraordinarily generous.”*

—Alan Fletcher, president of the  
Aspen Music Festival and School

**Y**oheved “Veda” Kaplinsky has left an indelible mark on our world of music education and in the hearts of her students. A Juilliard faculty member since 1993, she became chair of the piano department in 1997 and Susan W. Rose Chair in 2000. Her mentorship extends to the Juilliard Pre-College program and at the Aspen Music Festival as well as her prior years of teaching at the Peabody Conservatory and Manhattan School of Music. She has also represented the U.S. through international master classes and adjudications at prestigious events including the Cleveland, Cliburn and Tchaikovsky competitions.

A private, quiet presence, she has intentionally widened the definition of success, presented a different face from the typical leadership profile and lived out the most ambitious model of how a music educator can and should shape institutional culture for the sake of the students. Whether in music or in relationships, she doesn't hesitate to tackle complexity.





# YOHEVED “VEDA” KAPLINSKY



This exclusive three-part interview series presents Kaplinsky's impact, her personal story as chairwoman and her pedagogical advice to empower other music educators.

## **Defying Norms**

When Alan Fletcher introduced Kaplinsky a few years ago at an Aspen Music School master class, he admired her as a rare sage “who knows when not to talk.” My ears perked up. As an introvert who spent much of my life in a practice room, I often wondered what I could accomplish if I were born louder and taller. Yet, here was this quiet woman who forged partnerships with institutional leaders worldwide, ignoring the glass ceiling or any other limitation. Isn't that what artists do—defy traditional expectations with creative strategies to offer a fresh perspective?

## **A Personal Encounter**

As a Juilliard undergraduate in the late 1990s, I saw Kaplinsky as an unflappable figure always ready to protect and support her students. I was stunned that she made time to help *me*, an undergrad who was *not* her student. I had just won Juilliard's Petschek Award for a Lincoln Center recital when I developed a debilitating overuse injury. It was so horrifying to think I might lose the opportunity that I hid my injury, thereby making it a thousand times worse.

When I finally approached Kaplinsky for help, she advised me on how to request a one-year deferral of my recital, how to respectfully ask my teacher's permission prior to meeting with her, and then met with me to observe my positioning. She even made a personal call to a

neurologist, allowing me to get an appointment that same week.

Through that experience, I learned how to identify the decision makers, how to get them in the same room at the same time, how to find a solution that will be an easy decision for everyone and how to manage relationships well in the midst of an emotional situation. Kaplinsky’s generous desire to see everyone succeed gave me a vision for effective artistic leadership.

## In Her Own Words

Kaplinsky has been elusive to the public for most of her career and enjoys working behind the scenes. Now, as she reflects on how to pass on her values, she has been sharing her story with me over several years. I’ve visited with Kaplinsky at restaurants, at the Aspen Music Festival, at the International Keyboard Odyssey & Festival and in her studio at the Juilliard School, seeking to understand her perspective. This is part of an edited transcript, condensed from more than 10 hours of interviews conducted in June and July 2018 and September through November 2024.

**Hsing-ay Hsu: What impact do you want to have on your Juilliard students before they graduate?**

**Yoheved Kaplinsky:** The first impact that I want to have is to raise their level of expectation from themselves, which means raising their standard. If their standard is not high, they’re never going to have the patience to play on a higher level than they expect of themselves. If the level is not important to them, it’s never going to happen, because it takes too much work and effort. But if the end result is really important to them, they really care about the details and about the sound of every note they play. They care about the structure of the piece, and ask, “Why did the composer write this and that.” And they have that curiosity of trying to put themselves in the composer’s psyche and figuring out what he had in mind. Unless they have that, they’re never going to be performing musicians.

When students come here, the first thing that I try to make them realize is what the real world is like and what they need to do in terms of succeeding in this competitive market. Some

of them think, “Oh, I made it into Juilliard. I’ve got it made, and I can relax.” No—that’s only a beginning. And most of the Juilliard students are not going to be able to adorn stages, because they just don’t have that kind of commitment, which is fine. They can do other things in music.

But one thing that I really would like a student to have is an awareness of what kind of commitment it would entail. And different areas of music entail different levels of commitment. And then you start raising their standard, raising their expectation, raising their level of preparation to be much, much deeper and much more detail-oriented than what they are used to—and, in the process, improving their technique so they can do what they want to do. Because if their technique does not measure up, then they can have all these great intentions of what to do with the music, and they’re not going to be able to do it.



**HH: There are many female educators and performers, but I had never met a woman who can be at the table and have influence as a leader in the music industry before I met you. The gatekeepers in my life have been males—presidents, principals. You being a woman in leadership made it conceivable for me to impact my world, too.**

**YK:** This is how I would love to be remembered. But I never went through my life thinking,

“I’m a woman so I have to do this.” And I never felt like anybody was actually holding me back because I was a woman. Maybe it’s because what I wanted to do was in an educational field that has not been taboo for women. So, it was only when people kept asking me, how did you manage to be a woman in this position and all that? Then I realized, oh, it is unusual.

For a long time, I was the only woman in this piano department, and that really

## CHALLENGING THE WAY THINGS ARE

Kaplinsky defies many common myths of how things have to be. Her vision for collaborative, patient and effective leadership offers a powerful model for innovative educators and leaders.

### MYTH #1

#### **Success is limited to the elite few.**

The pressure to achieve one singular prescribed dream of success as a touring soloist in a world of diminishing opportunities can be debilitating. It is also heightened by the sacrifices many families make to bring their children to Juilliard’s doorstep.

I noticed Kaplinsky wasn’t teaching as a second prize to performing, but that it was her true passion. In recent conversations, she shared more about appreciating long-term career opportunities in any field. The discipline and creativity we learn in piano performance are transferable skills, and career ambitions can be pivoted to stellar achievements in broader terms and in other professions.

### MYTH #2

#### **Injuries are personal failures.**

At a time when many faculty considered it frivolous and distracting to talk about injury prevention, Kaplinsky prioritized student health. She brought in her neurologist friend to talk to students, advocating for a more comprehensive education that included physical well-being.

### MYTH #3

#### **Leadership is inherently male.**

Kaplinsky inspired a broader concept of what a leader can physically look like, and how generous a leader should be to everyone. For me, she also normalized a woman being strategic, decisive and influential.

### MYTH #4

#### **Administrators are inaccessible gatekeepers.**

At Juilliard, students used to perceive the leadership as distant and intimidating. Yet Kaplinsky was approachable, involved and deeply invested in students’ well-being. She fostered communication between administration, faculty and students.

### MYTH #5

#### **Piano faculty cannot work collaboratively.**

I was shocked a few years after I graduated to hear that Kaplinsky had recommended new faculty who were open to co-teaching. I had always enjoyed getting multiple perspectives for feedback at summer festivals, but never thought it would be possible on the territorial turfs of Juilliard until it happened. And I wondered, what else could happen? Why not? What if?

The exposure to her patient and fearless approach to life gave me a vision for how to lead, how to speak up when no one else wants to bother and how to empower students to find their own artistic voice.

### MYTH #6

#### **Enduring insults from teachers is part of the process.**

My freshman chamber coach yelled at me to stop playing like a dead chicken. I didn’t actually know what that sounded like, so I couldn’t really stop.

Over the years, Kaplinsky spoke up about hiring faculty who were not only skilled performers, but also cared about teaching and working collaboratively, in addition to just being high profile.

bothered me. I was glad that we were able to add two more women to the faculty in the last few years. Even though there are a lot of women teachers, the higher you climb, the more high-profile, the less there are. I would like to see more women lead.

But I’m totally gender blind when I listen to people, when I evaluate people. I grew up in an environment that told me that I can do anything I want. And maybe in Israel, it’s more true than it is here because women by necessity worked from the foundation of the country. Israel had a woman prime minister way before anybody else did. So, I never grew up feeling like I’m handicapped because I’m a woman.

**HH: Do you relate to the perspective that people have a hard time accepting women in leadership?**

**YK:** For most of my life, I never felt I was treated differently because of my gender. In the U.S., I am sad to see this remains an issue.

Years ago, when I was judging at the Van Cliburn, I was seriously harassed. My students compete in that competition (although we don’t vote on our students) as well as in other competitions. Someone became very aggressive about that circumstance and incited others to attack me through death threats, middle-of-the-night phone calls, to the point that I needed a police escort to attend the finals. At 11:00 P.M. one day, someone posted a blog on the Van Cliburn website with fake news, and the office was not aware of it until the next morning at 8:00 A.M. By then, over 100,000 people had read it, and the negative effects on my reputation have continued to even today. I could never figure out why I was targeted, but colleagues have suggested to me that my being a woman chair of 12 men at Juilliard does not sit well with everyone.

**HH: You don’t like to be in the spotlight. How did you deal with the aftermath of internet trolling and negative personal attacks?**

**YK:** Well, there is nothing I can do about the harm that has been caused intentionally. But I know that I have two reputations, one among those who know me and another among those who would believe whatever they read,

without discernment. What can I say? I am not going to curl up and die.

**HH: At a recent Kaufman Center master-class, you advised a student to strategize his interpretation, “You have to know where you are going and how you will get there.” That advice rings true in life, too. How are you able to be so influential in making a positive cultural impact? How do you build momentum and support among your colleagues?**

**YK:** People skills are everything. Using the right vocabulary is important. I compare it to teaching a master class. To improve something, the other side needs to feel comfortable and to know that his/her efforts are appreciated. When we work together with colleagues, we need to treat them with the greatest respect. If someone does something selfish, we can still interact *as if* they are behaving in the best way and *as if* their objective is the same as yours—to further the mission of the school. Deal only with the issues, never with personalities. Ask what their reason is for resistance, and if they don’t have one, they will stop resisting. *Always put the students’ well-being first.*

And with that clear mission, Kaplinsky goes back to her daily work. What does her work with students, colleagues and the administration look like? Find out in the next issue.

**AMT**

Steinway Artist **Hsing-ay Hsu** is a prize-winning performer, former University of Colorado faculty, *Conscious Listening* creator/producer, owner of Nutmeg Studio for adults, contributor at *Psychology Today* and an alum of Juilliard and Yale.



## Save the Date!

MTNA Webinar with Veda Kaplinsky and Hsing-ay Hsu Friday, July 11, 2025, 12:00 NOON Eastern Time.  
Hear pedagogy strategies and ask your questions live!