

YOHEVED “VEDA” KAPLINSKY

Who is the Chairwoman at the Helm of Juilliard’s Piano Department?

By Hsing-ay Hsu

“Veda Kaplinsky is an institution within Juilliard, which has benefitted so greatly from her dedicated service over many years. Her passion for teaching each student is matched by her commitment to developing the piano department as a whole, and I am constantly inspired by how she hones artistry with care and devotion.”

—Damian Woetzel, president of the The Juilliard School

Yoheved “Veda” Kaplinsky, chair of The Juilliard School’s piano department and artistic advisor of the Pre-College program, is sitting with me at the Klavierhaus showroom. As we await a camera adjustment for filming our webinar for MTNA on July 11, she shares the recent success of pianoscope, an event that brought 25 piano faculty and students together onstage as collaborators for the first time. Almost the entire department showed up. Her eyes fill up with passion and incredible satisfaction as she relives that evening...

Beyond the demands of a full teaching load, few music educators find the bandwidth to contemplate the barriers to student success; even fewer will raise the crucial conversations, create viable solutions, gather momentum and persist long enough to see it through. The breadth of skills, emotional burden and

quantity of time required for an effective department chair is as daunting as for a CEO of any corporation. That is why Kaplinsky’s story is so fascinating: Not only does she create opportunities for her immediate circle, but she is also a model for others.

As an alumna of the Pre-College, BM and MM programs and one of the earliest DMA graduates, Kaplinsky has worked for many years to integrate her insider understanding with her powerful vision of focusing on the needs of the student.

Following the last issue’s focus on Kaplinsky’s impact, this interview reveals Kaplinsky’s grit, how she made changes at Juilliard and how she sees the world that our students face.

This transcript has been edited for flow and was condensed from more than 10 hours of interviews conducted in June and July 2018 and September through November 2024.



Damian Woetzel (left) and Veda Kaplinsky

Photo by Chris Lee

A Strong Anchor

Born in Tel Aviv, Israel, her parents began saving money for a piano when they discovered her perfect pitch at age 2. Kaplinsky went on to become a prizewinner at the J.S. Bach International Competition in Washington, D.C. She has given many recitals and performed in chamber groups and orchestras, making multiple appearances in Israel and the U.S. as well as on radio and television.

Hsing-ay Hsu: Where do you find your strength and inspiration to face complex challenges?

Yoheved Kaplinsky: I have to credit my dad. He was chair of the Israel Medical Association and founding dean of the medical school in Tel Aviv, and he was an activist without ever doing anything at the expense of anyone else. He never offended or attacked anyone, and he taught me by example that responsibility for the community always comes before self-interest. My parents and their son [my brother] survived the Holocaust, but they lost their entire family including a daughter. When the government of a country makes it their mission to wipe an entire people

off the planet, not just killing, but mental torture, physical torture—on that scale, there is nothing that can be compared to it.... They arrived in Israel after the war with absolutely nothing, and yet they kept their love and their compassion for others intact. Then during the War of Independence, there were no medical facilities available, so they turned their apartment into a delivery room and delivered 180 babies by themselves. My mom worked all day, then spent all night washing bloody sheets by hand. They set the example for me. They were used to adversity.

HH: So that empowers you to fight for what you value.

YK: If I see somebody fight for an ideological cause that I don't believe in, at least I respect them for it. But when I see fights that are built on lies, then my hair starts standing up, and I can't keep quiet. When I'm part of an institution, and I see that decisions are being made and propaganda is being used based on lies, that just drives me insane, and that's when I get involved. I have no problem fighting for others when I believe that they're right. And I think I'm taken seriously because I never fight for myself.

HH: It’s inspiring to hear about how they kept their optimism alive, even through the hell of the Holocaust.

YK: My parents taught me that happiness is a serious business. There will always be something you still can’t have, and you can’t “achieve” happiness. It’s something that comes to you when you are not expecting it, only when you have done the work.

HH: When does this “happiness” come to you personally?

YK: When I see the Juilliard student recitals and the quality and the high level of the students, I’m in heaven. I’ve kept all the letters from my students, and I think of how much joy my mom would have derived from reading them. My mom, who sacrificed so much...

Changes in the Making

Among her achievements, Kaplinsky has facilitated a fairer admissions process at Juilliard, introduced hands-on pedagogy training, implemented a department-wide piano forum to give students weekly performance opportunities and “broken down the walls” between studios to create a more collaborative culture.

As an undergraduate in the late 1990’s, I had firsthand experience of the internal politics among faculty. Since then, I have been amazed at the positive cultural changes. A rare female leader at the helm of the musical elite, Kaplinsky is a powerhouse beneath her demure exterior. Simultaneously strong and warm, she gives encouragement and practical advice to students in this hyper-competitive and shrinking world of concert pianists.

HH: What has been your biggest impact in making the audition process more fair and transparent at Juilliard and Aspen?

YK: It used to be that the disparity in the level was so extreme that it actually hurt the program. So we changed the system to having everybody vote on everybody without knowing who they requested. The big difference between now and when I first came is that the judging panel is much greater [bigger]. Almost every faculty member comes to the auditions, and there are enough of us, maybe six, who come every single day so that there is a unified overview of all the candidates. And none of us know who is asking for us, except in cases where we can’t avoid [it] when they contact us.

They will grade everybody based on their relative value to everybody else that has applied. So the results are much less skewed and much easier for the admissions committee to deal with.

HH: That also requires better relationships among the faculty.

YK: Yes. What has changed a lot in the culture here is that everybody has enough integrity and enough respect for their colleagues so that they will not grade anybody based on whether they want them in their studio or not. It’s about breaking down the studio walls. So there’s much more interaction among studios, and there’s an easier culture of changing teachers when it’s necessary.

HH: You worked for that cultural shift. How did it happen?

YK: It happened over many years. I never pushed on an issue, never took other people’s students. If something needed to be addressed, I would document everything, bring it to the administration, and it would be voted on. When the faculty could see for themselves that the proposal serves the mission of our school, then no one stood against it. We now have interaction among all the faculty; we are really a family. President Polisi was a great partner through all these efforts.

HH: How did you build your unique relationship with President Polisi?

YK: I went to see him and Dean Clapp about many issues, but not for myself. It was to improve the school on behalf of the students. And trust was built on that.

HH: You’re about looking forward by changing and adapting. But Juilliard is an institution with strong traditions. Did you feel a pushback?

YK: People can say, ‘Let’s keep the excellence going and not to change anything.’ Well, if you associate that excellence with the male components, then I guess that’s the case. But if the people at the head of an institution were also gender-blind, then there’s room for change. And I was when I got my position at Peabody—I was hired by a woman dean who was also black. And for me, it was such a great statement about the school that they chose a dean who was black and was a woman. And I

figured, here, the sky’s the limit because there are no boundaries.

I was lucky enough when I was offered a job here by President Polisi, a man who believed in human ability, who was also gender-blind. “Is she going to be able to manage this?” That’s all that mattered to him. When I attended the opening convocation that August [in 1993] and the students cheered President Polisi and Mary Rodgers Guettel, I saw that Juilliard was changing from the place it had been when I was a student. I became optimistic that I will find my place there and be part of a new chapter.

HH: In 1995, President Polisi and the trustees articulated a new school mission to train its students for leadership and to take an active role in shaping the future of classical music. You chaired a piano faculty of 12 men, most of them your senior in both age and time at Juilliard. How did you get a seat at the head of the table?

YK: We had elections for piano chair by secret ballot, and I won. After that, nobody else had wanted to run. When President Polisi asked me to take over the chairmanship, I said to him that I would only do it if he supports me with all the changes that I want to make. And he promised me to do that, and he did.

HH: You introduced new elements to the Juilliard curriculum, such as addressing stage presence and speaking to the audience. How do you help your students understand their responsibility to grow into a more well-rounded artist?

YK: From the time you come out onstage to the time you sit down, the audience has already decided whether to like you or not. Our culture has come to expect the pianist to be able to communicate and have a presence. When I first started organizing studio class, some colleagues complained because then their students also wanted to do it. Now, everyone has it, and it’s a place where I require my students to introduce their pieces. Then it transferred to their student recitals as well. We have now revamped keyboard skills, piano literature and added vocal accompaniment. Chamber music is also more defined and has follow-through with its own coordinator.



Veda Kaplinsky with Juilliard President Emeritus Joseph Polisi

HH: You also added the directorship of the Juilliard Pre-College to your plate in 2006. What made it so important to you?

YK: I always felt that the Pre-College was an important arm to the college. It sets the bar. The Pre-College division needed to be revamped, and one day [Itzhak] Perlman said to me, “If we go to the administration together, maybe they will consider our requests more seriously.” So we did. Then I served on a steering committee and was invited to be a consultant on policy making. We came up with recommendations on very specific areas: policies, faculty, admissions and fundraising. So when I was offered the director position, it was my chance to really see the changes through, the changes that I had already been fighting for.

HH: The Juilliard piano department website quote has two themes. You see students as individuals, and you want to help develop the holistic picture of who they are. I can imagine some of the applicants and their teachers and families would expect to stay with the old tradition.