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A Young Harpist's Two Worlds

By SUSAN CHIRA

NAOKO YOSHINO'S school friends did not know for many years that she played the harp. She didn't talk about it much, preferring instead to practice quietly at home and travel abroad occasionally for concerts. But when she won a harp contest in Jerusalem at the age of 18, her friends began coming to hear her play.

"Some of my friends who came to my concerts said I seemed so different from the way I was at school," Miss Yoshino said. "They were so surprised."

At 19, she is already acknowledged to be one of the masters of her instrument. Yehudi Menuhin, who heard her play when she was 14, said, "She is destined to become one of the great harpists of our day." She was the youngest winner ever of the International Harp Contest in Israel. On Tuesday, she will make her New York debut with a matinee concert at Merkin Hall, playing works by C.P.E. Bach, Hindemith, Prokofiev, Fauré and Spohr and a solo written for her by the Japanese composer Yuzo Toyama.

Miss Yoshino's friends may have been taken aback when they connected their cheerful, even bubbly, classmate with the composed and confident virtuoso. But Miss Yoshino has clearly lived with the demands and rewards of her music for so long that she is able to step smoothly from one world to the next. She says that she does not really remember exactly why she wanted to start playing, only that it was natural for her to start and continue. Her mother is a harpist, and Miss Yoshino remembers hearing harp music around her from her earliest years.

Indeed, she used to accompany her mother to harp lessons in Los Angeles, where her father, a banker, was transferred when Miss Yoshino was 6. At the age of 8, she won the Los Angeles Young Musicians Foundation audition and embarked on a round of concert appearances that has continued to this day.

For most of these years, Miss Yoshino has maintained a remarkable long-distance relationship with her teacher, Susann McDonald of Indiana University. Miss Yoshino began studying with Professor McDonald — who also taught her mother — in Los Angeles, where she was then teaching. When she was 9, however, her father was transferred back to



Vera Etzion

Naoko Yoshino moves easily between her professional music career and her school life in Tokyo.

Tokyo. Since then she has lived in Tokyo and seen her teacher but twice a year, on her summer and winter vacations. The rest of the time, she practices by herself, with her mother's help. Sometimes she will send a tape to Professor McDonald, who will return it with her suggestions.

But Miss Yoshino has not led the life of a sheltered prodigy, sacrificing all for the demands of her music. She practices about two hours a day — and admits, with an embarrassed giggle, that she used to practice less, perhaps an hour and a half a day. "Oh, I hate it when people ask me that," she said. "But I think it's how much you concentrate. You can play for six hours without thinking about it, but an average of two hours really concentrating is better. My mother wouldn't push me to practice. She said if I wanted to quit I could — I didn't have to be a harpist. I didn't feel very pressured."

Indeed, Miss Yoshino said she has tried very hard to participate as fully as possible in school life. Since her return from Los Angeles, Miss Yoshino — who speaks perfect colloquial English — has attended international

schools in Tokyo. She is finishing her first year at International Christian University in the Tokyo suburb of Mitaka. Sitting in a Tokyo hotel coffee shop, dressed demurely in a white sweater and wool skirt, she spoke earnestly about balancing the requirements of her profession with her desire to lead as normal a life as possible.

"When I'm at school, I like to think of myself as a regular student," Miss Yoshino said. "A lot of people go to music college, but I wanted to be a more well-rounded person. In junior high and high school, I couldn't join any clubs, but I tried to do other things, participate in school festivals. When I had a concert, I would try to go to class at least in the morning."

International attention at her age can be a burden, though. "It's sort of scary if you really think about it — people know you, and all that. But I always try to be myself, and now I just want to try to go to college and get an education as well as perform, try to experience a lot of things. I hope all of that will come into my music."

When she talks about her music, Miss Yoshino's tone grows more seri-

ous. She performs in Tokyo two or three times a month, and will give four concerts abroad this year — in addition to New York, she will appear with the Philadelphia Orchestra in June, the World Harp Congress in Vienna in July and with the Berlin Philharmonic in November. It is her hope to gain more recognition for the harp — an instrument, she said, that most people associate only with background music.

She is beginning to get that kind of recognition in Japan. On hearing her play last year, the music critic Genri Nakagawa wrote in the Asahi Shimbun newspaper, "Listening to her performance, I found for the first time that a harp could be as rhetorical as a piano."

Miss Yoshino believes that, to keep growing as a musician, she has to move beyond a narrow round of study at home. "Of course, I'll go back to my teacher for advice and lessons, but I think it's really important now to try to talk with other musicians — violinists, pianists — and look at music as a whole, to widen my knowledge and experience, if possible, all around the world." □