A Clarinetist Who Astounds Audiences at the Parrish

By Christopher Walsh

There are some musicians who seem incapable of hitting a sour note, or failing to astound their audience every time. Whether natural ability, the hard work of mastering their instrument, or, most likely, a combination of the two, a few are inexorably destined for greatness.

Yoonah Kim appears to be one such musician. A winner of the 2016 Concert Artists Guild International Competition, she was the first solo clarinetist to win that contest in nearly 30 years. Also last year, she was a featured soloist at the Juilliard School’s Focus Festival, performing Donald Martino’s “A Set for Clarinet” at Peter Jay Sharp Theater in New York, and she became the first woman to win first prize at the Vandoren Emerging Artist Competition, leading to her world premiere performance of “Pocket Concerto” by the composer Dag Gabrielsen at the Music for All National Festival in Indianapolis. All of these accomplishments, by the way, have come before her 25th birthday.

Tomorrow at 6 p.m., Ms. Kim will give her debut performance at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill. The concert is part of the museum’s Salon Series, which introduces the new generation of classical musicians.

The clarinet was not even her first choice. “I picked the flute because I thought it was a beautiful instrument,” said Ms. Kim, who was born in Seoul and moved with her family to British Columbia when she was 8. “But I could not get a sound out of it! Now I can play it, but it was weird in the beginning.”

The clarinet, she said, was her mother’s suggestion. “She loves the clarinet a lot and said, ‘Why don’t you try?’ ”

After graduating from high school in 2010, Ms. Kim moved to New York to attend the Mannes School of Music, earning a Bachelor of Music before going on to Juilliard, where she earned a Master of Music degree. As principal clarinetist of both schools’ orchestras, she has performed at venues including Carnegie Hall, David Geffen Hall, Alice Tully Hall, and Symphony Space, all in New York. She has also been the principal clarinetist of the New York Youth Symphony and the Vancouver Youth Symphony Orchestra. With the latter, she appeared in the closing ceremony of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics.

She has also performed at chamber music festivals including the Sarasota Music Festival, the Banff Centre Music Festival, and Caroga Lake Music Festival. “It’s starting to get busier,” she said, modestly, of her performance schedule.

Last fall, she joined a selective two-year fellowship program under the auspices of Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard School, and the...
Weill Institute called Ensemble Connect. The ensemble performs regularly at Carnegie Hall, and in December was at the Philharmonie de Paris. The program partners with the New York City public school system, which takes Ms. Kim to Robert F. Wagner Middle School, where she works with music students. “It’s really hard,” she said, “but rewarding.”

There is even more in this young musician’s skill set: In a jazz ensemble she played bass and trumpet. “I love playing jazz,” she said. Tomorrow, accompanied by Kevin Ahfat on piano, Ms. Kim will perform works including “Pièce en forme de Habanera” by Maurice Ravel, a clarinet sonata by Johannes Brahms, a sonata for clarinet and piano by Francis Poulenc, and a solo piece by Jorg Widmann. “That is a new piece,” she said, by “a living composer who’s a clarinetist. He composed it in 1993 and played it for his Juilliard audition. I played it for my audition as well, so there is that personal connection. It’s one of my favorites — it’s so fun, and allows me to really turn into something I’m not.”

Ms. Kim has certainly accomplished a lot in a short time, but seems destined to achieve quite a bit more in her creative pursuits. Asked about her other interests, she said, “This is random, but I used to tap dance, for five or six years. I’m thinking of somehow bringing it back into my life. Maybe, possibly, a collaboration, with tap dancing and clarinet.”