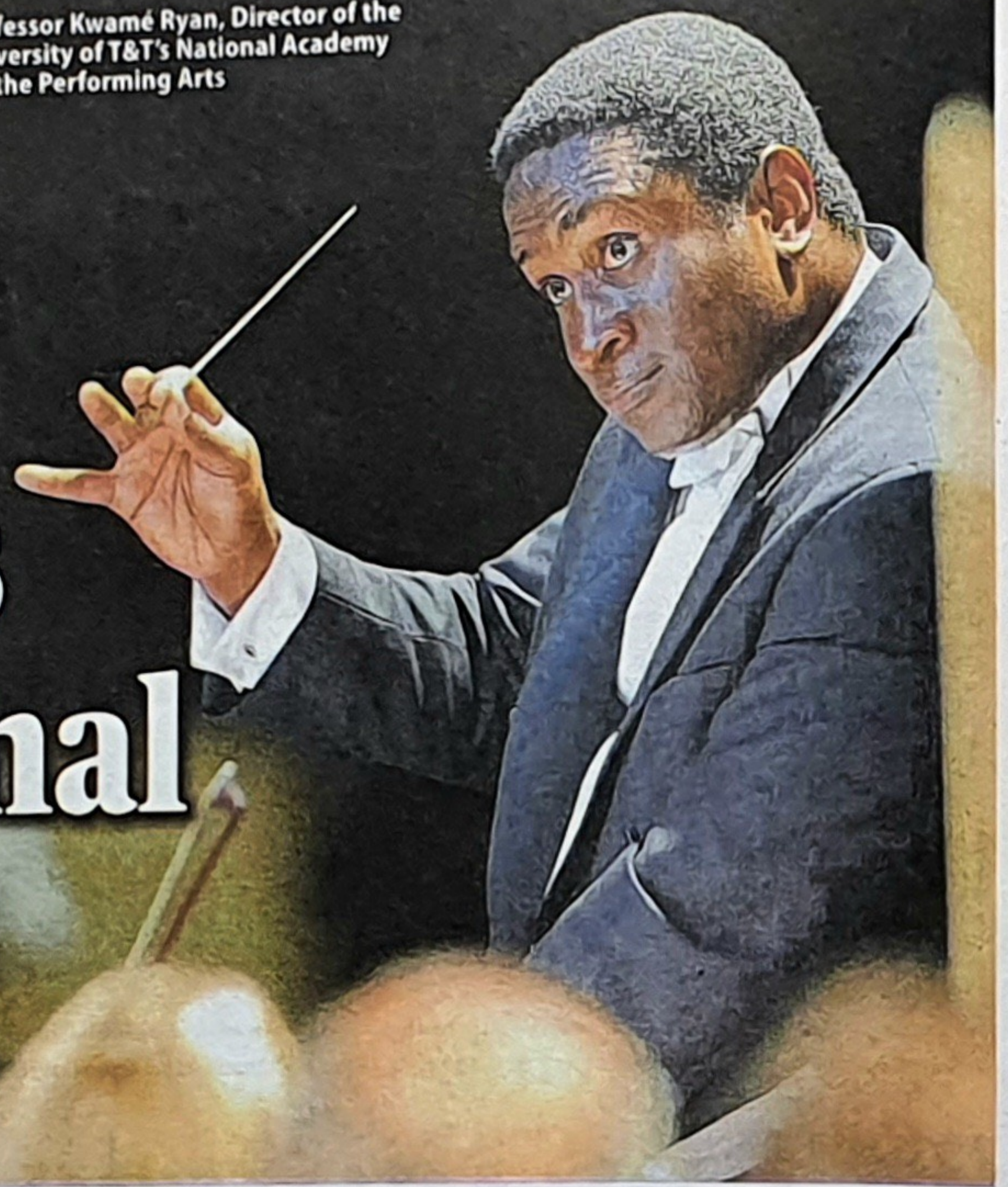


Professor Kwamé Ryan, Director of the University of T&T's National Academy for the Performing Arts

Prof Kwame Ryan returns to international conducting



Professor Kwamé Ryan, director of the University of T&T's National Academy for the Performing Arts (NAPA) is returning to full-time international conducting, having fulfilled his six-year commitment at the helm of that institution.

His return to the international stage will see him conduct at several prestigious concert venues including London's Royal Albert Hall, the Strathmore Music Centre in Bethesda, USA, and the Stavanger Concert Hall in Norway during the 2022-23 season.

A Sabga Award laureate for achievements in the Arts, Prof Ryan joined the APA in 2013 after six years as Music and Artistic Director of the National Orchestra of Bordeaux, France, and two as Music Director of the National Youth Orchestra of France.

As he returns to the international stage, his legacy is characterised by high-quality training, mentorship and performance opportunities for T&T's young creatives, a focus which, he reflects, was inspired by his own childhood experiences.

He recounted: "During my time at The University School and Fatima College, both institutions with good music programmes, I was aware that local training avenues for young artists with professional aspirations were limited.

"Those who wanted to have a realistic chance of success had to go abroad—the younger the better—for specialist training. I was fortunate that my family was able to send me to England at the age of fifteen, but it was clear to me, even then, that only a small percentage of my peers might have similar access.

"So, fast forward twenty years, and you can imagine why, as I'm leading a state-sponsored music education programme in France, I start to think about how similar opportunities could

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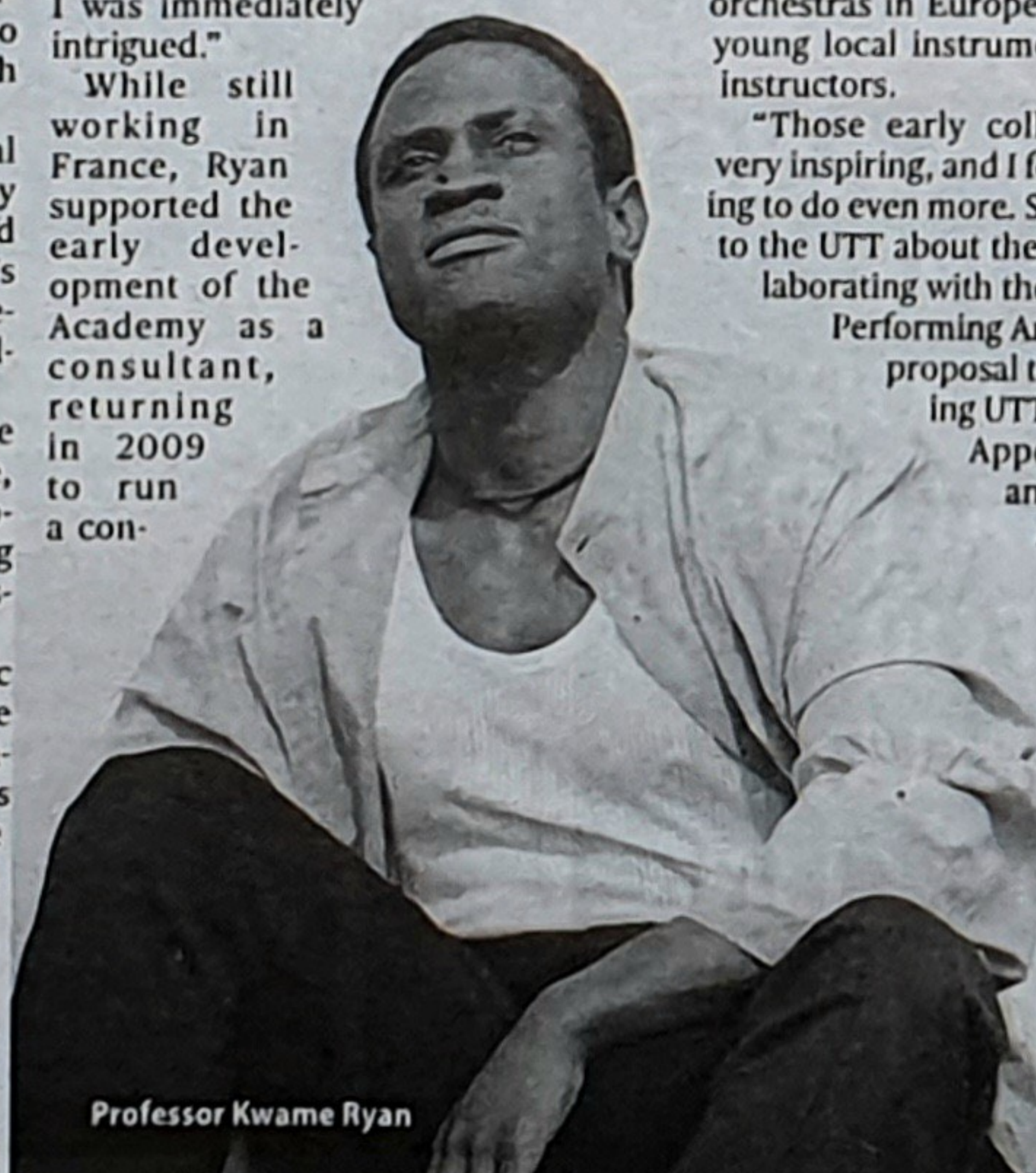
be created in the Caribbean. Coincidentally, it was just around this time that I heard about Trinidad and Tobago's new Academy for the Performing Arts, and I was immediately intrigued."

While still working in France, Ryan supported the early development of the Academy as a consultant, returning in 2009 to run a con-

ducting workshop, and again in 2012 to mount Tango in Trinidad, a Heroes Foundation event at which musicians selected from his professional and youth orchestras in Europe played alongside young local instrumentalists and APA instructors.

"Those early collaborations were very inspiring, and I found myself wanting to do even more. So, in 2012, I wrote to the UTT about the possibility of collaborating with the Academy for the Performing Arts, and it was that proposal that led to my joining UTT in 2013," he said.

Appointed Professor and Director of the APA in 2016, Ryan envisioned it as the region's premiere institution for Performing Arts pedagogy, emphasising as top priorities: early exposure, mentorship by industry-active practitioners, and regular student performances.



Professor Kwame Ryan

In the first three years of his tenure, Ryan created the student recruitment fair, APA EXPO, and staged three editions of APA FEST, the Academy's annual performing arts showcase.

These innovations nurtured a lively performance culture, that also saw the development of such popular formats as APA Panorama, Pan on de Steps and special presentations to celebrate Diwali, Carnival, Spiritual Baptist Day, and Christmas.

"A colleague once said to me: 'A performing arts institution that isn't audible and visible within the community, doesn't exist'. This is, of course, a somewhat exaggerated, rhetorical statement, but as a commentary on the importance of perception, it certainly rang true to me, which is why I placed visibility and community outreach at the core of my vision for the Academy for the Performing Arts."

Beyond the walls of the Academy, Ryan founded the non-profit organisation Searchlight International which, in collaboration with UTT,

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Professor Kwamé Ryan

New chapter ahead for both Academy for the Performing Arts, faculty

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brought young musicians from youth orchestras and universities in the USA, France, South America, and Germany to Trinidad for exchange visits.

One early beneficiary of the Searchlight programme has recently graduated from Harvard University, and is about to begin his Master's at Boston's Berkeley School of Music.

Son of Joya Gomez, a local actor who worked with Dereck Walcott and was a member of Helen Camps' Trinidad Tent Theatre, Ryan became familiar with the theatrical environment at a young age.

This formed his belief about how important early exposure and opportunities are to the development of performing arts professionals.

"I was fortunate to have been around performers as a child, which made it possible for me to learn the ropes with more fun than pressure.

"I wanted my students to have the same early opportunities, and worked towards that during my time at the Academy."

Ryan is also reflective that he is returning to an entertainment industry that is evolving in response to the increased dialogue on diversity.

"From movies and television to live theatre and concert events—representation in the arts has evolved remarkably in the last few years.

"Here in the Caribbean, we sometimes take diversity and inclusion for granted, which is perhaps why the contemporary hyper-vigilance around these themes in Europe and the USA, sometimes feels disorienting to us.

"And yet, I think the perspective we West Indians bring to the global conversation is important and needs to be expressed.

"In the Classical music business—which is my working environment—there aren't very many of us. While significant progress has been made of late, with far more opportunities for Black, Asian and ethnically diverse creatives than when I joined UTT, there is much important work yet to be done."

Speaking about the future, Ryan highlights that his recent work and some planned projects continue to push the boundaries of music as a reflection of social change.

"What I'm seeing now in the world of Music Theatre, compared to earlier times, is not only much more inclusion on stage, and in the creative teams, but just as significantly, in the stories that are being told."

This is also reflected in his own recent international work which includes operatic productions dealing with race and cultural

identity, sexuality and tolerance as well as white on black police violence in the USA.

"I think there's a contemporary social zeitgeist behind this trend in Music Theatre, a "re-imagining", playing out alongside many other momentous world events. As challenging as it is to navigate, I'm excited to be in the mix, as a Caribbean creative."

Fittingly, this new phase in Ryan's career also coincides with UTT's preparations for its own "reboot" of sorts, which will see thousands of students return to in-person instruction after years of full or partial campus lockdowns—a new chapter therefore, for both the Academy for the Performing Arts and its faculty after an extended period of social and creative distancing.

"I delivered on my commitment to a six-year tenure at APA which, I felt, was the minimum amount of time (Deputy Director) Katy Gainham and I would need to really develop the ethos I'd envisioned.

"In some ways, it's a pity that two of those years, overshadowed by the pandemic, really limited live performance, which is as much a priority and passion for our students as it is for me.

"But, despite that setback, we did make progress in other areas, not least of all in the adoption of blended online instruction and on-line performance.

"That said, I know our students are burning to get back to live performance at least as much as I am."

Asked for his thoughts as he moves to this next phase of shining a light on Trinidad and Tobago talent, Ryan was full of optimism and hope.

"I left Trinidad as a teenager to realise my dream of becoming a professional performer.

"I came back to enable today's teenagers in the realisation of their own performance dreams, and now, having done that to the best of my ability, I feel ready to continue my own journey which has itself, been transformed by my experiences at APA.

"Returning to the international stage now really doesn't change my enthusiasm to create opportunities for local talent. I'll just be doing it from a different platform and in a different way.

"That Trinidad and Tobago now has the kind of artistic home and headquarters I had only dreamed of as a boy, makes me incredibly happy, and so I move on feeling privileged to have co-authored its beginnings, and confident that its next chapter is in safe hands."

Visit www.kwameryan.com to stay up to date on Kwamé Ryan's news and events.