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Guest Artist Recital Series: Eunmi Ko, Piano; February 22, 2024

Eunmi Ko

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**Illinois State University
Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts
School of Music**

Guest Artist Recital Series

Eunmi Ko, *Piano*

**Kemp Recital Hall
February 22, 2024
Thursday Evening
7:30 p.m.**

This is the one hundred and eighth program of the 2023-2024 season.

Program

Please silence all electronics for the duration of the concert. Thank you.

<i>from Orchard</i> (2019) Buddha's hand	Tyler Kline (born 1991)
<i>Sequenza IV</i>	Luciano Berio (1925-2003)
<i>Approaching somber waves*</i> (MUTED Project)	Chen-Hui Jen (born 1981)
<i>Me-Ah-ri*</i> (MUTED Project)	Grace Ann Lee (born 1996)
<i>Reflections</i> (MUTED Project) 1. <i>Dragon Lotus</i> 2. <i>Ni Hao</i> 3. <i>My Dear Absent Voice</i>	Anruo Cheng
<i>Night Music: Ten Variations on a Lead Sheet</i> X. <i>Nocturne</i>	John Liberatore

*World premiere

Program Notes

MUTED Project

Asians lack presence. Asians take up apologetic space. We don't even have enough presence to be considered real minorities. We're not racial enough to be token. We're so post-racial we're silicon. – Cathy Park Hong, from *Minor Feelings*

I moved to the United States in 2004. Since then, I have transitioned from a graduate student to a professional performer and faculty member at a university. Although I went through different phases in life, I have always been seen as an Asian woman. What American society sees in me has not changed. I was a stereotypical Asian woman, and I am a stereotypical Asian woman – subdued and demure, in other words, “muted.” I am a muted person without vivid colors. Naturally, a muted person's voice wouldn't be heard. My voice is muted.

The muted piano sound is not a representation of traditional piano sound. Piano has been compared with an orchestra. Piano offers virtuosity, brilliance, sensitivity, seven-octave ranges, rich colors, thick and massive chords, and multiple voices. Muffled(muted) sound was not associated with the characteristics of a piano. However, muting strings turns the piano into a different animal. Piano becomes a percussion instrument, and, at the same time, it becomes a string instrument. It generates harmonics. It produces timbres that mimic percussion. The mix of muted and unmuted sounds gives a stark contrast and even whimsy. Playing inside of piano does not make the immense volume. Muted notes will be soft, just like my own voice. I want to explore the muted piano sound. I want to express myself as a performer and person through muted notes that are quiet, muffled, and unbrilliant.

MUTED was supported by New Music USA's Creator Fund with support in part from the Howard Gilman Foundation, The Cheswaty Foundation, The ASCAP Foundation Bart Howard Fund, and the BMI Foundation. Support for New York-based artists is provided by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, and/or the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council. Support for the Creator Fund is also provided by contributions from the New Music USA endowment.

Buddha's hand (subtly sweet, fragrant, splayed) from *Orchard* (2019) commissioned by and dedicated to Eunmi Ko

For quite some time now, I have been interested in exploring agrarian values in my music. The act of farming and the act of composing probably seem like two disparate things, but more and more I am seeing correlations that are meaningful to me. You cultivate the land. You plant the seed. You care for it. You harvest the bounty. It's a life cycle, much like beginning and completing a piece of music.

I was born and raised in Kentucky, a mostly rural state (my hometown, as of the 2010 census, has just under 7,000 residents), and at any given point I was likely a mile within a farm. I even had music teachers who owned and operated family farms. After moving away, I became interested in the work of Kentucky writer Wendell Berry, and these writings have been very influential in leading me to consider composition in these ways. Not only that, but in researching my own ancestors, I have discovered that for many generations in the past they were farmers. Incorporating these values into my compositional thinking, and specifically creating music that is "about" soil, plant life, etc. is my way of honoring that legacy. "Orchard" was born out of these considerations.

An orchard is a plot of land used to plant and harvest fruit trees. This collection includes fifty pieces, ranging from 45 seconds to just over three minutes, all titled after, and, in one way or another, inspired by botanical fruit. When composing each piece, I considered the various features of a particular fruit in order to arrive at compositional decisions. So, in essence, the music takes on my interpretation of a fruit's texture, shape, color, or flavor - either in combination or focusing on just one of those elements. To this end, given the brevity of each piece, I almost see these as "seeds" of what could be more long-form musical ideas. Each piece lasts long enough to express a specific idea - to "make a point" - and then it's over. There's no further development or variation, and no kind of extension into a formal pattern. My goal, then, is that when audiences listen to this music they will experience something similar to actually eating a fruit: the experience is brief, but satisfying.

Due to the number of individual pieces in "Orchard," and the fact that in order to perform every piece would require devoting an entire recital or concert to just this music, pianists are encouraged to pick and choose the pieces that meet their programming needs and order them however they'd like. The prospect of this is truly exciting to me as a composer, because it means that there will inevitably be combinations put together by performers that I would never have imagined. Plus, I believe ordering the pieces in various ways will put the music in different contexts, creating a unique experience each time a pianist performs the music.

"Orchard" is the result of a commissioning consortium made up of 30 pianists and supporters, and was composed from January to August 2018. – *Tyler Kline* <https://www.tylerklinemusic.com/>

Me-Ah-ri (2024)

The title “Me-Ah-ri [메아리]” means mountain echo in Korean. As the commission called for the muted piano sound, I wanted to explore the quiet notes in the piano that are resonant and muffled, almost like the sound of an “echo.” The first section explores these muted sound of the piano, introducing the large space and the peace and calm, which later explodes and free into a faster tempo based on “Jangdan [장단]”, a Korean traditional rhythm repeated with a percussion instrument. Here, the piano plays both the lively melodic line and a percussive role, imitating “Jang-gu [장구]” which is a two-sided drum played by two sticks or bare hands. – Grace Ann Lee <https://www.graceannlee.com/>

Reflections (2023)

"Reflection" is a piano suite with three movements dedicated to pianist Eunmi Ko and the "Muted" project. It explores the intricate relationship between Asian females and the Western world, touching on stereotypes, cultural differences in politeness, self-awareness of societal unfairness, and the challenges faced by individual Asian women when asserting their voices in the face of impolite or unjust treatment.

1. Dragon Lotus

Asian female characters in American media and pop culture frequently face racist stereotypes, typically fitting into the lotus blossom or dragon lady archetypes. These stereotypes often manifest in real life, where Asian women are perceived as submissive and voiceless like the lotus blossom, or as powerful, exotic, cunning, and sexual like the dragon lady. Yet, simplistic labels cannot capture the profound complexity, diversity, and beauty of these souls. Just like women of other ethnicities, they may be dragons, they may be lotus blossoms, or neither, or both.

2. Ni Hao

Asian women often find themselves greeted with "Ni Hao" (“Hello” in Chinese Mandarin) by strangers upon their initial encounters. While some may interpret this gesture as a display of kindness, many others consider it offensive. It can be seen as impolite and ignorant, as it assumes that all Asians speak Mandarin. In many Asian countries, knocking on a bowl is considered a cultural taboo. What if knocking on a bowl during a concert, even with a piano accompaniment? Is it still inappropriate? This movement explores the line between politeness and impoliteness in encounters with cultural differences.

3. My Dear Absent Voice

Sometimes, I find it challenging to make my voice heard in the face of injustice. This difficulty can be attributed to various factors, including my conservative cultural background, strict family upbringing, or societal neglect within Western contexts. It may take the form of active suppression, passive dismissal, or a combination of both, making it a complex topic. The purpose of this movement is to portray the obstruction and stifling of self-expression as an Asian woman in the Western society.

The text in this movement:

Frequencies oscillate in unseen waves,

Interpret the whispers of absence.

Oh here comes the Queen!

Queen of silence, your muted throne echoes my heartbeat. Quiet, you are speaking the language of the unheard,

unspoken, unseen, unclaimed, unfamiliar, unexplored, unnoticed! A coda of “lalala,” a silent plea,

accompanied by the absence of voice.

The voice of a pianist,

The voice of a composer,

The voice of a woman, who happens to be an Asian Can be heard? –

Anruo Cheng <https://www.anruocheng.com/>

About the Artist:

Hailed as “exceedingly interesting” (New York Concert Review) and “kaleidoscopic” (San Francisco Classical Voice), pianist Eunmi Ko concertizes as a recitalist and chamber musician throughout Asia, Europe, and the Americas. As a sought-after collaborator and champion of new music, she works with contemporary composers, ensembles, and performers from around the world.

Ko is the co-founder and President of the Contemporary Art Music Project (CAMP). She teaches at the University of South Florida as Associate Professor of Piano. Her past positions include co- advisor of USF New Music Consortium (2016-2021), artist faculty on the Rebecca Penneys Piano Festival (2013-2018), and the assistant director of the Women in Music Festival at Eastman (2011).

Ko holds graduate degrees (MM and DMA) from the Eastman School of Music. She may also be heard on the recently published CD release of solo and chamber music. <http://eunmiko.com/>

Upcoming Events

Friday, February 23
Jazz Ensemble I & II
8:00 p.m.
CPA

Sunday, February 25
Trombone Studio Recital
2:30 pm
Kemp

Men's Glee, Treble Choir and Belle Voix
3:00 p.m.
CPA

Concert Choir Concert with Normal Community High School
6:00 p.m.
CPA

Tuesday, February 27

Guest Artist Recital Series: Nick Beltchev, *tuba*
7:30 p.m.
Kemp

Wednesday, February 28
Philharmonia Orchestra Concert
7:30 p.m.
Kemp

Friday, March 1- 3
Guitar Ensemble Festival
Kemp and CPA

Sunday, March 3
Afternoon of Brass
5:00 p.m.
CPA

SAI Recital Celebrating Women's History Month
7:00 pm
Kemp

Monday, March 4
Charles W. Bolen Faculty Recital Series: Rachel Hockenberry, *horn*
7:30 p.m.
Kemp

Tuesday, March 5
Symphonic Band with University High School
7:00 p.m.
CPA

Charles W. Bolen Recital Series: Oforiwaa Aduonum
7:30 pm
Kemp