

Cover Story

Pianist Eun Young Lee

“It is my ultimate goal and greatest pleasure to communicate with audiences. I cannot help but continue to challenge myself without being complacent.”

Pianist Eun Young Lee, who is recognized by her concert series touching on unique and various subjects, says she spends most of her time shaping ideas for making enjoyable recitals. She believes it is a musician's first job and duty to help audiences to be interested and immersed in classical music. She emphasized that it is not an easy task, although it may sound simple. Today, we will talk with Pianist Eun Young Lee, the cover story of the issue, about the fundamental base of her philosophy in performance and education.

Pianist Eun Young Lee began her musical journey as a young music prodigy when she won some of the most well-known competitions in Korea. After going to the United States, she started to attract international attention by winning several international competitions. Currently, she passionately teaches students mainly in Michigan as a leading piano teacher. She also spreads a high-level of classical music to many communities with *Fiorire Soloist*, which she founded to give young professional musicians more performance opportunities.

- How did you start majoring in classical music?

I started playing piano as a child since my parents loved classical music so much. After graduating from Seoul Arts High School, I received my Bachelor of Music and Master of Music from Ewha Women's University. I came to the United States to earn a Performer Diploma from Indiana University and DMA from the University of Michigan. These days, I have been performing in various cities, including Boston, New York, and numerous cities in Michigan. I am also a founder and an artist of Fiorire Soloists, a group composed of young professional classical musicians, founded to provide communities with a high-level live classical concert and give young musicians more performance opportunities. I have also helped Professor Christopher Harding, a chair of the University of Michigan's piano department, with teaching his students as his assistant.

- You have won several international competitions. Which competition was most memorable?

To me, the final concerts for the competition winners I performed are more memorable than the competitions themselves.

When I performed a piece by Grazyna Bacewicz at the Carnegie Hall as a winner of the American Protégé Competition, I had a chance to talk with a gentleman in the backstage who has been working there for decades. The conversation was delightful; he said it was quite rare for him to find a pianist playing the work by Bacewicz, although he listened to a wide range of repertoire in the hall all the time. He also said he was fascinated by the piece and asked me what made me decide to play that. It felt priceless to hear that from somebody who must have heard countless piano pieces at the hall. I think it is a uniquely special memory for me because that was when I decided to bring not only frequently-played works but also other relatively lesser-known works that I love to the stage.

- What is the most important thing when you are on stage?

I remind myself that I go up to a stage, not to be judged, but to present repertoires I love. I also try to remember that I am on stage to introduce my favorite pieces to my audiences and explore a beautiful world in it together. Sounds like nothing, right? But I learned it in the hard way. Like many other young music students, I grew up in an environment where my performances were ranked all the time. No matter if audiences were musicians or not, I was always more nervous than needed. I had this weird idea that everyone judges my performance so harshly. But at some point, as I started presenting concerts more frequently, I started looking at my audience's face more closely. It made me notice that a lot of audiences, who clap automatically when I walk on a stage, end up passionately applauding with a great smile on their face after seeing my performance. That helped me realize the truth; "I am a person who goes up to stage to play the music I love and make people smile; that's my job."

Since then, my motivation to prepare for performance has also changed. I used to practice to prove that I am a good pianist. But now, I practice because I want to present beautiful concerts that touch audiences' hearts, make them laugh, and help them feel the profound happiness from classical music. Without question, to be a better musician, we sometimes need sharp critiques and the self-reflection time on our unsuccessful past performances. However, I believe the mind-set to prepare for the stage always has to be positive. Otherwise, your performance date becomes nothing but a nerve-wracking test date.

- Please let us know about your performance philosophies.

If I have any, it must be my belief that a concert program itself has to be a well-planned, well-thought-out work, just like literature. I believe it needs an introduction, development, and conclusion. It is not good enough to simply collect and present works you have confidence with or have played recently. Whether your concert has a theme or not, you need to figure out the best way to draw people's attention to your program and make them enjoy it to the end of the concert. It doesn't mean you need to play only a popular or easy-hearable repertoire for your recital. You can increase people's interest even with unique pieces by locating them effectively.

Last year, I had a recital in a city named Gaylord in Northern Michigan in the U. S. for almost 300 people. Many of them were very familiar with neither a piano concert nor a classical music repertoire only except for some most famous pieces. However, I started the program with intense and avant-garde pieces by Messiaen, and an American composer Amy Beach. Of course, everyone clapped when I finished playing those first two pieces, but they all looked bewildered. I grabbed a microphone and said, "Don't worry, the next piece is not this weird. I promise." Everyone laughed out loud and enjoyed the following Chopin's Mazurka with a smile. After the concert, one gentleman came to me saying, "You know what? I love weird things so much." Some other people also said they would make sure to listen to other works by those two composers, which gave me immense satisfaction as a musician. Whenever I plan a concert, I always try to find the right balance between popular pieces and experimental pieces. That is all from my effort to make a one-hour repertoire that can really keep the audience's attention and concentration to the end.

- Who affected your music the most?

I have to say I got affected by my teachers the most. My principal professor at Ewha Women's' University gave me such great energy when I studied with her. She is also the one who changed my view of a music lesson. Thanks to her, I realized a lesson doesn't have to be nervous all the time, but it can be a fun activity freely exchanging musical ideas with each other.

Also, I learned so many things from Professor Harding from the University of Michigan about piano performance and what I need in my life as a musician. Besides being absolutely

committed to their students, they both keep challenging themselves to improve themselves more and more as a performer, so seeing them always inspires me to be better pianists.

-What do you think your individuality is that differentiates you from other musicians?

It may sound boring, but I believe it's my patience. The patience that keeps me sitting on a piano bench and practicing even when my progress is slow. It supported me in finishing my study in the U. S, and now it helps me think hard about what I can suggest for my students even when they are not ready for a lesson.

- I noticed that you're especially intrigued by French music. What point of French music fascinated you?

While pursuing my DMA degree, I realized I wasn't very experienced in French music, so I decided to have a recital only composed of French repertoire to challenge myself. At that moment, I simply wanted to expand my musical area wider. Well, I have to say I regretted my decision a little when starting preparing for it because it felt so uncomfortable and new to my fingers. I found all the pieces from the program quite challenging. Even the phrases that didn't look difficult took me almost twice a longer time to get used to. It literally felt like I was learning a new language that I didn't have any experience with.

However, the more I explored the pieces, the more I realized that French music has surprisingly sentimental elements that directly touch listeners' hearts and sensitivity.

I believe French music has to be spotlighted and performed much more, considering how many French composers -Faure, Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc, Messiaen, and more- influenced classical music in general. Besides playing the pieces by the composers I mentioned, we can research and explore various repertoire to feel what kind of music styles were prevalent in Paris when the composers pursued their musical career, which is a fascinating and valuable study. It is a shame that the French music we hear from most concerts is usually only written by Ravel, Debussy, and a little less frequently Messiaen. There are numerous other exciting French pieces you can bring to stages. As a performer, I enjoy incorporating French pieces for my concerts since I almost always receive a great comment from audiences on them. I recommend you to check French works if you are planning on a recital and thinking of a new repertoire!

- You're the founder of Fiorire Soloists. Can you let us know what your motivation was to create it? Please introduce the group as well.

The word *Fiorire*, meaning 'to blossom,' 'to flower' in Italian, metaphorically represents the performers and the musical works that beautifully blossom in a concert performance. As I graduated with a DMA degree, I noticed it could be so tricky for young musicians to find a chance to present their abilities. That's why I decided to create a group: to give young, gifted, and professional classical musicians more performance opportunities. I accommodate every member's schedule and search for a venue, which is actually more demanding than just planning my solo recital. However, our members' efforts and passion for concerts make it all worthwhile.

Also, it is a huge plus we can offer more interesting and exciting programs because the entire members have their own diverse repertoire. We recently had a concert introducing various forms existing in classical music such as Sonata, Intermezzo, Ballade, Romanza, and Fantasy. The fact our audience was able to listen to a more varied repertoire with explanations for each piece made me very pleased. I would like to produce more concerts and find places that want to invite musicians to support our members with performance opportunities.

- You've been teaching all ages of students in the U. S, including undergraduate and graduate students. Do you have any unique method when you teach piano?

I always prioritize two things; first, help students listen to their playing as objective as possible, and second, to encourage them to devise musical ideas on their own.

In most cases, especially for a high-level student, music education is done through a one-on-one lesson. Naturally, communication between a teacher and a student tends to be one-sided as well, from a teacher to a student.

Consequently, many students are accustomed to fixing parts pointed out by their teacher, instead of thinking of their preferred way of performance and a specific reason for that.

During a lesson, I often record a student's playing, listen to it, and ask if they could find any awkwardness from it and figure out how to fix them. Many of the students find it very difficult; some even fail to point out what they specifically don't like from their playing, although they are not happy with what they heard. Then I encourage them to start listening to it from the smallest details, like if they can hear any awkwardly-protruding notes or think an

ending of a phrase sounds natural. And we exchange opinions on how we can improve those parts so that the students can incorporate their thoughts into their practice.

I always find differences from students practicing this way from others who don't. They believe in their musical interpretation and performance because they actively participated in the process instead of just following their teacher's advice. And one thing I can guarantee you as a performer is that that belief always makes a tremendous difference on stage.

Another thing is, although this is probably closer to my education philosophy than my teaching method, I believe a music teacher's effort to understand students has to be accompanied by the teacher's steady performance activity. Giving students proper advice requires the teacher's growth as a musician as well, and I think the growth usually comes from the heavy pressure of having a performance soon!

In my case, I am the type of pianist who needs to explore a lot of different methods to perform technically challenging pieces, it always takes me a good amount of time and effort to acquire a suitable technique for those pieces. There was time I felt tired and unhappy about it, but as soon as I started teaching students, I realized all of that experience and process were enormously helpful for me. When students are confused by a challenging piece and have a hard time figuring out a proper way to practice, at least a few of the many methods I tried for my own performance work for them and let them take the next step. That is why I firmly believe effort as a performer has to go with effort as a teacher.

- Could you give young music-majoring students any pieces of advice?

I know it probably is the same for other fields as well, but I think patience is a key and an essential element for music. If you have a passion for piano, I would like to tell you this: brace yourself and keep putting effort into practice and study, not being blinded or disappointed by your current position. You may not know your strength as a musician right now, but you may realize it later, like in 10 years from now. The point is your basic skill and ability have to be well equipped when you finally realize that, that's why you never should be negligent in practicing.

Also, I recommend playing with other instrumentalists as frequently as possible. Since I hadn't had many chances to play chamber music in Korea, I was amazed at how often I

needed to perform with other instrumentalists when I came to the United States for the first time. Playing chamber music allows you to improve your skill in listening to yourself carefully and how to interact with other musicians during a performance. Whenever I have an opportunity to play chamber music, I will never turn it down.

- Please let us know your plans for the near future.

I am trying to keep myself very busy with recitals and concert plans. There are still many programs I want to present, and I have been realizing more and more how satisfying it is producing a concert for several artists ever since I founded Fiorire Soloists. It feels much trickier than planning a solo recital for myself, but I am tremendously proud to see our artists bow for audiences after giving an excellent performance. I am also scheduling concert plans for relatively small cities in the United States which don't have many opportunities to hold live classical music concerts. I cannot forget the smile of an audience member who came to me after my recital to say, "It is my first time in my life to be in a concert by a professional pianist, and I have to say, I have never seen anything like this." I want to give more people more chances to attend a concert of high-level classical music, that is my goal.

Pianist Eun Young Lee

Pianist Eun Young Lee graduated from Seoul Arts High School and went to Ewha Women's University for her Bachelor and Master of Music degrees. She received a Performer Diploma from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, and graduated from the University of Michigan with her Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Piano Performance in 2019.

She stood out as a young talented musician winning numerous competitions and auditions, such as the Kumho Prodigy Concert Audition, the first prize at the Music Education News competition, and awards at the Kyunghyang Music Newspaper's Harmonia competition, Korean German Brahms Association competition, Korean Philharmonic Orchestra competition, and more. She also steadily and passionately presented diverse concerts, including Ewha Women's University Keyboard Concerts and several solo recitals. The concerto concert she played with the Oradea State Philharmonic Orchestra and Ewha Women's University Orchestra proved her excellent talent as a soloist.

In the United States, she successively won the first prize at the American Protégé Competition, International Maestro Piano and Strings Competition, the second prize Concert Artists International Virtuoso Competition, Golden Classical Music Awards International Competition. She has actively given solo and chamber music recitals throughout the United States, which include three times of performances at the Carnegie Hall in New York and a concerto concert with the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra. She also received attention from several media outlets; The Michigan Daily and the Gaylord Harold Times featured an article on her performance. The Bloomfield Community Television aired her performance on the Television several times.

Lee, who believes the key to the steady improvement of classical music is to invite the public to live classical music performances so that they feel the music in person, has given recitals with unique themes, such as 'A Glimpse of French Music,' 'Francis Poulenc and His Pianistic Language,' 'Invocation: Great Composers' Spiritually Inspired Pieces' and received terrific comments from musicians and faculty, including an "extremely imaginative programmer of a piano recital." from professor Christopher Harding, the chair of the piano department at the University of Michigan. After graduation, she founded Fiorire Soloists, a group of young professional classical musicians, to give more performance opportunities to the members and spread classical music to communities. Her concert series presenting a high level of performance and explanation for exploring a wide range of repertoire and subjects is continuously invited by concert halls and a variety of places such as local hospitals and churches.

Lee, who taught all ages of students in Korea, currently teaches undergraduates and graduate students in the U. S. She has proved her teaching skills on many occasions, including a teaching master class with Boris Berman, a Yale University professor. She received a comment on her teaching from Professor Christopher Harding, "One of the very best young teachers that I know."