

SEOUL OF MOZART

Yeol Eum Son talks to **Peter Quantrill** about growing up in Korea, winning prizes in Moscow, studying in Germany, recording in London and playing, well, everywhere...

In a phrase that has recently gained a certain notoriety, Yeol Eum Son is a citizen of the world. Having grown up in her native Korea, she moved at the age of 20 to Germany. Long resident in Berlin, she appears entirely unfazed by the demands of an international career, intercontinental flights and living out of a suitcase. 'There are so many more demanding things for me,' she replies brightly. 'Like making a phone call! Or meeting many friends at the same time. Travelling by myself is not so hard for me. I learn repertoire that way.'

If Son has been hardened by experience, there is no sign of it in the laughter that punctuates her conversation. In two days' time she will play the Fourth Piano Concerto of Beethoven as the climax of the Winter Music Festival in PyeongChang. For now she is sitting with me over a beer in a hotel bar in Seoul, remembering the pleasure – and honour – of working with Sir Neville Marriner, the world's most recorded conductor, on what turned out to be his very last recording of all. The Concerto No 21 K467 forms the keystone of Son's new album, programmed with characteristic intelligence around the theme of Mozart in C.

A thinking pianist

C major may have suited Mozart like one of his brocaded coats, but it also matches Yeol Eum's open and sunny disposition. Not that she is any kind of musical naïf – and at the age of 31, the *Wunderkind* years are past her. Since 2010 she has contributed a weekly column to one of the Korean Sunday papers – all her own work, it should be added, not the kind of ghostwritten 'celebrity' hackjob scattered through the pages of UK newspapers.

Son has written the booklet notes for her new Mozart album on Onyx Classics – her debut international release, you might say, following several Korean-market recordings – and anyone who buys it will soon make out that here is a thinking musician. It's an impression borne out by her recital programmes. One Los Angeles recital in May opened with C major Mozart and closed with a selection from Friedrich Gulda's jazz suite *Play Piano Play*, taking in Arvo Pärt, Ravel and Rachmaninov along the way. For her next appearance in the UK, at the East Neuk Festival on 28 June, she has lined up four

Gershwin songs, *Le tombeau de Couperin* by Ravel and three pieces from Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. Little is foreign to her. If it's good, she'll play it.

Where did this open-mindedness to repertoire come from? Who put Schoenberg and Webern in front of her? 'I did!' comes the reply. 'I'm an audiophile – I love recordings! Not so many musicians are, but I always was. That's maybe my biggest passion of all: recordings. Everything in my repertoire has come from recordings I heard.' Lili Kraus is a favourite from the past, inevitably taking in her Mozart recordings such as the violin sonatas with Szymon Goldberg, her Brahms and Schumann too.

Alexis Weissenberg is another, contrasting passion: 'I love his Scarlatti, his Chopin Nocturnes, his Debussy, which is so full of extremes.' Son admires playing that takes risks, and perhaps pianists who can do things that are, as yet, beyond her. She plays the technically ferocious, jazz-inflected sonatas of Nikolai Kapustin, and I wonder if it's Weissenberg's jazz side that she responds to: after all, the Bulgarian-French pianist also produced his own work such as the *Sonata in a State of Jazz*. 'I hate sounding like a classical musician imitating jazz,' she replies. 'I had to learn jazz separately. And those lessons changed my playing completely. Jazz is something you assume is the art of improvisation and spontaneity. But it's so determined. At least as much as classical music.'

Prodigious beginnings

A short introduction may be in order. Son was born in 1986, the eldest child of parents who were not musically accomplished themselves but wanted a musical education for their three children. 'In Korea we have a big singing tradition,' she says, 'both at school and as part of church culture. My parents are Christian, and my mother was a worship leader in the local church. She was a huge classical music lover. My dad, a bit less.' Son began piano lessons at the tender age of three and a half: 'I found it fun from the beginning. I loved learning new pieces. So I was really quick to learn.'



So much so that, by the age of eight, she was performing with an orchestra. Not a whizzkid concerto, or even one of the 'easy' Mozart numbers – say the chamber-scaled K413-415, or K246 which she played at her last London concert in April – but K482 in E flat, one of the grandest of them all. 'That was just at the suggestion of my teacher,' says Son. 'I hardly knew what the piece meant! And then I did K467 in Boston as part of a summer music camp established by the Chinese/Taiwanese community there.'

From the age of 12 she took lessons with an eminent Korean pedagogue, Daejin Kim, and later with Yin Chengzong, the Chinese pianist who won a silver medal at the 1962 Moscow Tchaikovsky Competition (when Ashkenazy and Ogdon shared gold) – and who also taught George Li, cover star of *Pianist 97*. Is there such a thing as a Korean or Chinese piano school? 'I don't think so,' says Son. 'It's very new, the whole system of teaching and learning music here. It goes back only two or three generations. There are musicians like Kyung Wha Chung who were successful in the 1960s, but that was in the US. This country had a few pioneers but I think I was in the first generation [of Korean musicians with an international career] to come out of a local school, because I grew up in Korea until the age of 20. Whereas many of my friends went either to Europe or the US at the age of nine or ten.'

I wonder, as I often do with very young and gifted musicians, what kept her going through the hours of grinding practice. Was she more in love with the piano, or the music? 'I almost feel sorry for the piano,' replies Son, 'because it's just a tool for me. My affection was always for the music – 99% for the music, 1% for the piano!'

It is worth bearing in mind at this point a cultural difference. Son really means it when she says, 'People are

so crazy about high-quality education in Korea. They will do whatever it takes to make it happen.' In her case that meant leaving her family and her home city of Wonju for a four-year course of undergraduate study – aged just 15 – at the Korean National University of Arts in Seoul.

The big breaks

What Son identifies as a 'breaking point' in her career – perhaps the moment at which it became a career – took place when she moved from Seoul to Hannover, for postgraduate study with Arie Vardi, the Israeli pedagogue whom she still refers to as 'my teacher'. 'He's one of the last generations of teachers who is a walking encyclopedia,' she continues. 'Now it seems like you don't need that, it's all online. For example, when I was studying Bach with him, he would approach it from several different aspects – Bach as a dance music composer, a religious composer, a composer for strings, or for the organ. And if we were focusing on him as a dance composer, we would ask what kind of dance this is, what kind of costumes or floors there would be.'

There is a video on YouTube that makes for funny if uncomfortable viewing. A 20-something Yeol Eum sits at the keyboard. Leaning on it in chatshow-host fashion is Vardi, mugging to his local Israeli audience: 'We just can't pronounce your name in Israel. So we call you "The Korean Girl!" How do you say it again?' Yeol Eum obliges – YORE-UM – smiles sweetly, and proceeds to play *Sheep may safely graze* with a



If you could play only one composer?
Chopin.

One pianist (alive or dead) you'd travel long and far to hear?
Alexis Weissenberg.

Any technical areas you struggle with?
My left-hand pinky, because it's not strong enough! I always have to support it with my fourth finger.

Do you have a single piece of advice for an amateur? Find a good teacher.

Do you mark in fingerings? I used to do it a lot. Now I don't do it at all. Because once you write it down, you fix your interpretation, it becomes very specific. Now I look at the scores I used in my conservatoire days and I see my old fingerings, and I can immediately see what I wanted to do musically. So it helps sometimes, but I want to be more free.

One work you're not ready to tackle yet? The Goldberg Variations. I have played them on harpsichord, but on piano it would take a lot longer.

Which non-classical musician would you choose to listen to?
The Grateful Dead.

YEOL EUM SON ON... RECORDING MOZART WITH SIR NEVILLE MARRINER

I recorded the C major Concerto K467 with Sir Neville Marriner in 2016. I was working with him the year before on the E flat Concerto K482, which is so much more complicated: that really is a statement! And in K482 he had so much to say, so much guidance both in terms of specific places and in the whole image. But in K467, it felt like this was the air he breathed. There was nothing superficial or objective about what he did. He let himself flow in the music. We didn't actually talk so much at the time.

There was no sense of him carrying over what he'd done with people such as Alfred Brendel or Imogen Cooper. It was just me and him and the orchestra. And he was so open-minded. After the first take of the second movement, we went back to the control room. I thought the tempo was just a little too slow, and I talked to him about that, and he entirely took on board what I had to say. And so I talked a little more. And in the next take he changed everything for me. He was so easy-going.

The challenge with the pulse of that second movement is that whenever the strings or woodwind sing or I sing, it has to be all in the same tempo, but each kind of instrument has a different decay: the sound of the piano simply dies after you touch it, compared to the winds. The central section of the Andante is the core of the whole concerto, to be sure – but so short and compact! Every time I play K467 in concert, I feel as though the second movement is over almost before it has begun.



limpid simplicity that would draw tears from a stone.

Now she laughs at the recollection. It was under the guidance of Vardi that she reconsidered every aspect of her technique: 'Even the simplest things like phrasing or pedalling or the left hand, or the height of the chair. I was sitting so high, and then suddenly I was sitting so low. It started with the quality of *cantabile* that I was always seeking. One day I felt I was sitting too high to make a good legato.' What happened when she went down a few inches? 'I could do better *mezzo forte*, *mezzo piano*. When I was sitting higher, I was playing at the extremes. Afterwards I felt much more comfortable making the middle dynamics – which is after all where most music is. Where Mozart is.'

It was with the Concerto K467 that Son won Best Chamber Concerto Performance and then the silver medal at the 2011 Tchaikovsky International Competition in Moscow, coming second to Daniil Trifonov; there's no shame in that. Previous medals included bronze at the 2005 Rubinstein Competition in Tel Aviv and another silver at the 2009 Van Cliburn Competition.

YEOL EUM SON PLAYS MOZART



The covermount album features the finale of Mozart's Piano Concerto No 21 in C K467 played by Yeol Eum Son with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields conducted by Sir Neville Marriner

Her success in Moscow she describes as the fulfilment of a childhood dream. As for the rest, 'the competition circuit wasn't such a bad thing, because I couldn't care less about the winning part. I was doing it to get known. The Tchaikovsky Competition was an exception.' Has she now graduated from that particular merry-go-round? 'I hope so! I think I'm busy enough now. When I was here in Korea, all I was told about was competition. We didn't learn about becoming musicians other than to be competition winners. It was such an unnatural approach. I was one of the first of my generation to study here and win an international competition. The most fun part for me was listening to the others. That also brought about a big change in my own playing; a process of growing my taste, even more than recordings.'

Teaching and learning

On her blog (colorinmypiano.com), the Ohio-based piano teacher Joy Morin outlines some takeaways from a 2010 masterclass with Son. An open posture was one; another was ensuring that your fingers are ready for the next chord. No question that Son follows her own advice, watching her play Beethoven at the Winter Music Festival in PyeongChang, and then Mozart in London a few weeks later. Son herself is candid about the challenge of teaching: 'I don't like it so much! I don't enjoy not making any sound myself. And I don't know how to convey what I want to convey for myself. It's so hard because music is so much about what you cannot put into words.'

'My teacher [Vardi] says that in his opinion, the worst lesson is to tell the pupil, do the crescendo here, the diminuendo here. It's possible to read the notes in classical music without listening or thinking, just do what the text says, and there can be music in this process. But I always wanted to know *why* I am doing so and so. A good teacher provides those reasons. For some reason I can't do that yet!'

For now, she has plenty to be getting on with: not least her role as Associate Director of the PyeongChang Winter Music Festival and its big summertime sister, the Great Mountains Music Festival & School. The way she describes it, the festival holds aspirations to be a Korean Verbier, with two venues in a small mountain town, daily concerts and an academy for young musicians with international teachers.

And it's clear from YouTube that in this festival ambience, surrounded by friends and family, her music-making is at its boldest and most spontaneous. She is in imperious charge of three international colleagues for the Third Piano Quartet of Brahms; then primo to the secondo of Da Sol Kim in Schubert's F minor Fantasy. Playing the Goldberg Variations on harpsichord she thinks herself into a completely foreign expressive world: in no way is this 'pianist's Bach'. Watching it brings to mind her remarks concerning her approach to K467: 'It requires an extreme simplicity. More and more I feel I'm in a constant search for simplicity in my music-making. It has to deliver all the possibilities of the piece, but it has to be simple in expression.' ■