



Yeol Eum Son

Publication **Limelight Magazine**

Date **2 August 2022**

Yeol Eum Son: The fine art of programming

From Alkan to Kapustin, the South Korean virtuoso was born to be adventurous.

by Clive Paget on 2 August, 2022



Pianist Yeol Eum Son grew up, as she says, just a typical classical music-loving South Korean kid. However, by 2004 the 18-year-old was booked as a soloist playing Liszt with the New York Philharmonic and Lorin Maazel in Seoul, Daejeon and Tokyo. A silver medallist at both the Thirteenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition and the 2011 International Tchaikovsky Competition, these days she's renowned for the breath and diversity of her programs, as well as the all-round delicacy and imagination of her playing. Ahead of her four-city Australian debut, **Clive Paget** caught up with her on tour in Hanover to find out what makes her tick and how she curates her brilliantly inventive recitals.

Can I start by asking what was it that made you interested in becoming a classical pianist?

I was only three-and-a-half when I first started playing piano. At the time my country was very much into classical music. Half of my class, I would say 20 kids, were playing piano. It was just a regular school in South Korea, a public school, but it was the most natural thing to play at least one instrument, piano or violin or flute or cello. But then I got to love music very, very much. I loved listening to recordings and going to concerts, so it was the most natural thing to stick with it.



Looking at the things you're playing now and the diversity of music that you've recorded, obviously you have very broad tastes. Has that always been important for you?

I just love the contrast and the differences between it all. For example, when I focus only on, let's say Mozart, then I don't get to see the difference between one composer and another, but when I see Mozart in contrast with Prokofiev, Shostakovich or even Beethoven and Schumann, then I can see more clearly what Mozart is about and who he is.

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And how did you find some of that repertoire? Were your teachers saying, "You might enjoy this," or were you listening to records and taking them to class and saying, "Can I play this?"

When I was little, it was just my own discoveries. I went to so many concerts and I got to love all these records – I was a big audiophile when I was little. I always wanted to discover new things.

Were there particular pianists that you were interested in who were introducing you to this kind of repertoire?

There were so many pianists that I loved, like Rubinstein, who was into a very broad repertoire. I discovered many pieces through him. And there's an old French pianist Marcelle Meyer. She played a lot of contemporary pieces, which I didn't know. Also, pianists like Marc-André Hamelin who has introduced me to so many pieces.



In terms of your career, what were the moments that changed the direction you were going in? Were they competition wins or important debuts, or a mixture of both?

Competition winning, probably, the time I was in Moscow.

That was the Tchaikovsky competition?

Yes, I won in 2011 and then afterwards I started performing with Gergiev and the Mariinsky in many different places. It is one of the biggest prizes I ever received. I think it was my first big momentum and then afterwards I got to meet my manager, who I still work with. She then introduced me to many other places where I hadn't played before.

Looking at the standard repertoire you play, Mozart seems to be very important – I see you're playing him with the Sydney Symphony (though in Melbourne you play Ravel). In 2018, you recorded Mozart with Sir Neville Martinson, which must have been his last recording. What is draws you to back to Mozart again and again?

It's a big question. I love Mozart and I loved it since I was very little. It is like my mother language – I feel most comfortable when playing it. When listening to or playing to his music, I just feel there is no other way for it to be. There's nothing artificial from beginning to end. And there's so much drama that I love, because his pieces are basically little operas.

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Are there other composers who you feel that closeness to?

Yeah, I think I can say a few more names. I love Schumann and I feel very natural when I play his music. Maybe it's because I can naturally understand the ups and downs in Schumann's music. There's almost no in between, it's always either this or that. And it also goes very quickly from one [mood] to another.

And is that a part of your personality?

Yeah, I think so.



When you think about a recital program, how do you go about it? Are you deliberately trying to create something that's so wide-ranging?

Well, there are so many piano recitals and so many great pianists. People are used to all of this great repertoire, and I just want to be a bit different. I'm not interested in showing virtuosity. Of course, it's a nice thing to show off how great we are, but I just want to speak more about the music, and the connections and stories between these pieces. I also want to portray the whole thing as one picture, so people have one great impression after listening to my recital.

Looking at your Sydney and Melbourne recitals, which are the same program, you're playing Haydn, followed by Tchaikovsky, Arvo Pärt, Alkan, Franck, Rachmaninov and Kapustin. That's an incredible breadth of repertoire. What's your thinking behind it?

All these pieces are written as formal variations and piano variations can be really very interesting. Not so many instruments can do the same as piano. Even instruments like violin cannot, because they're one single voice. I also thought different types of variations from different composers can tell different stories. This program is very varied, with composers from different times and different regions. They're so very different from one to another, but I thought it would be interesting.

Although I don't think of Haydn, Tchaikovsky or Pärt as necessarily virtuosic, Alkan, Rachmaninov and Kapustin certainly are. Are you drawn to composers that allow you to display a certain energy and flamboyance on the keyboard?

Yes, I think, because it's basically fun that anyone can enjoy. Of course, there is lots of depth and profundity in piano music that can be uncovered, but these pieces are just really fun to listen to.



You've just recorded Kapustin as well. What is it about his music that you find engaging?

I like it very much, first because it is very well written, very cleverly written. It is a good example of hybrid music – a mix of classical and jazz and modern, contemporary. It has all these different elements, which are blended perfectly into one. He's very much one of a kind, like nothing else.

You could have played it safe and given the same recital program in all three Australian cities, but in Adelaide you're playing a very different program. It's Lekeu, Stravinsky's Three pieces from *Petrushka* – obviously enormously virtuosic – the Hirtz *Wizard of Oz Fantasy*, which I've never heard, Janáček – a very dark piece, the 1905 sonata – and again Kapustin. What's your thinking behind that program? And did you think it would be too boring to play the same program all three times?

Actually, this is one of the few programs where I gave it to the presenter, and surprisingly the presenter went, "Oh, I love pieces by Lekeu, and I love any pianist who plays it." So, she gladly accepted this program, which is very unusual. All these pieces were written in the late 1800s or early 1900s, which is a period I am greatly inspired by and am curious about because so many different things were being explored in this time. William Hirtz is still alive and composing, but the music of the movie *The Wizard of Oz* comes from this period. All these pieces are really very different from each other, but with so many imaginations and so many fantasies and fairy tales, there is a very specific flavour that I like.

Finally, will this be your first time in Australia?

Yes. I was supposed to be there in 2020, but everything was cancelled of course. Now I feel very fortunate to be finally going. I've heard just so many great things about the land and great things about the people, the food and the weather. I will spend about three weeks, which is unusually long for one place, so I'm really excited.

Yeol Eum Son performs in recital at Adelaide's Elder Hall on 19 August, Melbourne Recital Centre on 22 August and Sydney's City Recital Hall on 5 September. She plays with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra on 25 & 27 August, with the [Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra](#) in Hobart on 2 September, and with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra on 9 & 10 September. [Concert information.](#)