



Yeol Eum Son

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PIANIST YEOL EUM SON IN CONVERSATION WITH GREGOR TASSIE

Music lovers in Scotland will be able to enjoy a rare festive musical occasion when the brilliant young Korean pianist plays Mozart's sparkling Concerto No.27 in B flat. She is not only magnificent at the keyboard, but also an artist of the highest order. In musical terms, Yeol Eum shares Shakespeare's truism, 'To thine own self be true', reflecting 'As an artist, I want to become more adventurous, free and daring but, at the same time, remain curious and "up-to-date".' Her choice of repertoire, which spans the works of Bach and Mozart to those of Shchedrin and Kapustin, is guided chiefly by the quality and depth of the music.

In December Yeol Eum Son makes her debut with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra following a busy few months touring Australia and New Zealand playing in solo recitals, chamber and orchestral concerts. This is not her first visit to Scotland as she toured with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra in February 2020 before the worldwide pandemic. On that afternoon, she played the Ravel Concerto for Left Hand, from my review of that afternoon. 'She is a diminutive and fragile figure on stage, yet at the keyboard, she has an imposing authority. [...] She has a brilliant, crystal-clear articulation, typical of which was her bringing out the nimbly pronounced sardonic idea – backed by marvellously orchestral playing, yet again helped by splendid playing from the wind section, with a burnished hue from the brass'. A mark of her personality was the encore she gave that afternoon; Moniuszko's Waltz in E major, in which we could see her opening up her musicality!

In February, this year, Yeol Eum returned for another concerto performance, on this occasion with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and Salonen's Piano Concerto, another hint of her commitment to exploring modern music and the neglected corners of classical and romantic music. In Salonen's piece, she showed that she can combine strong powerful piano writing with exquisite dexterity. In recent seasons, Yeol Eum has championed lesser-known music in her recitals most notably of Kapustin, Alkan, Lekeu, Galuppi and Pärt.

Yeol Eum was born in Wonju, South Korea in 1986, and began studying the piano at the age of three-and-a-half. She made her recital debut in the Kumho Prodigy Concert Series in July 1998. She studied with Cheng-Zong Yin, one of China's most prominent pianists, and later continued her studies with pianist Dae Jin Kim when she was 12. At age 16, she entered the Korea National University of Arts graduating with a degree in piano studies. In 1997, she was among the prize winners at the International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians and won the Oberlin International Piano Competition two years later. Yeol Eum continued her studies with Professor Arie Vardi at the Hochschule für Musik, Theater und Medien Hannover.

Her international career began to take off when Yeol Eum won second prize and the Best Chamber Music Performance at the 2009 Van Cliburn Competition. Her promise was underlined at the 2011 International Tchaikovsky Competition, where she won the Silver Medal (when Daniil Trifonov won the Gold Medal) and awarded the coveted Best Chamber Concerto Performance and Best Performance of the Commissioned Work. The YouTube video of her performance of KV.467 at the International Tchaikovsky Competition has been viewed almost 23 million times, which is considered a record figure for any live Mozart work on the platform.

The breadth of her interests within and beyond music informed the monthly column she contributed for six years to one of South Korea's leading newspapers, and the book-length anthology of her

journalism sold out within two days of its publication. Yeol Eum refuses to impose limits on her artistic freedom and remains determined to explore new artistic territory.

Poetic elegance, an innate feeling for expressive nuance and the power to project boldly dramatic contrasts are among the arresting attributes of Yeol Eum Son's pianism. Her refined artistry rises from breath-taking technical control and a profound empathy for the emotional temper of the works within her strikingly wide repertoire. She is driven above all by a natural curiosity to explore a multitude of musical genres and styles and the desire to reveal what she describes as the 'pure essence' of everything she performs.

Yeol Eum has won critical plaudits for the profound insights and intelligence of her interpretations. Her development as an all-round artist has been gained from collaborations with conductors as diverse as Lorin Maazel, Dmitri Kitajenko, Valery Gergiev, Andrew Manze, Jaime Martin, Jun Märkl, Roberto González-Monjas, Joana Carneiro, Gergely Madaras and Omer Meir Welber. She has explored fresh creative prospects since her appointment in 2018 as Artistic Director of Music in PyeongChang and as a regular chamber music partner with, among others, the violinist Svetlin Roussev and the Modigliani Quartet.

Yeol Eum opened her 2022-23 season in Sydney with a recital that included works by Haydn, Tchaikovsky, Pärt and Alkan alongside Franck, Rachmaninov and Kapustin. Other season highlights include a tour of the United States featuring Janáček's Piano Sonata 1.X.1905, 'From the Street', Kapustin's Piano Sonata No.2, *The Wizard of Oz Fantasy* by William Hirtz and Guido Agosti's transcription of Stravinsky's *The Firebird Suite*, and a recital of Prokofiev's Piano Sonatas Nos.1-3 offered together with Kapustin's Piano Sonata No.4 and Piano Sonata No.2 at Amsterdam's Muziekgebouw.

In addition to her all-Mozart album for Onyx (2018), Yeol Eum's discography includes *Modern Times*, an album of works by Berg, Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Ravel (Decca, 2016), a recording of Schumann's *Fantasy in C*, *Kreisleriana* and *Arabesque* (Onyx, 2020) and a disc devoted to Nikolai Kapustin's Eight Concert Etudes, Piano Sonata No.2 and other representative compositions (Onyx, 2021).

Yeol Eum returned from Australia to Europe in September 2022 to launch her term as Artist-in-Residence with the Residentie Orkest with Ravel's Piano Concerto in G major. The nine-concert residency continues throughout the season with performances of Mozart's Piano Concerto in D minor, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *I Got Rhythm*, Saint-Saëns's Piano Concerto No.2 and Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand. During her recent tour of New Zealand, Yeol Eum Son found the time to talk to me about her career.

GT: *Do you play music by Korean composers? The music of composers such as Isang Yun and Unsuk Chin have become more popular in recent years.*

YES: I play their pieces, I love them, and I would like to discover more of their music, particularly of the younger generation, [those who are] like me, of my own generation, but I hope to play much more in the future.

GT: *Who are your most important teachers, and do you keep in touch with them?*

YES: Well, among my teachers was Arie Vardi in Hannover in Germany, and I would say that he is the most important teacher and the biggest influence in my musical life so far, and I have learned so much from him, and I consider him a friend and I play for him and ask him for advice [and about] what [pieces] and how I should play and so on, so I think it is great to stay close to the mentor, not only as a mentor but as a teacher as well.

GT: *Are there any favourite musicians that you like listening to? I have in mind pianists or conductors.*

YES: There are too many musicians, pianists and singers and cellists [to mention], and many of them are from the old times, I [can] mention a few names like Lilli Krauss, and Alicia de Larrocha, or people like Alexis Weissenberg who is my very favourite pianist, also I like Shura Cherkassky, I like playing those old records mainly, I love listening to them.

GT: *Is it important that Lilli Kraus and Alicia de Larrocha are women, and do their careers inspire you?*

YES: I don't know, I think it's a coincidence that they are women, I just love their playing and their lives were also a great inspiration, I personally have no preference whether they are male or female pianists or anything like this, obviously I adore what they do.

GT: *You played in Edinburgh a few years ago before the pandemic, did you have a chance to see the city and Scotland?*

YES: Actually, I think it was in February 2020 before everything happened [for the outbreak of the pandemic] and my dad joined me for this concert, and he came all the way from Korea. We just walked around and enjoyed the sights of this beautiful city, but the weather was raining, and went to the hotel and had some Scotch which I enjoyed. I had a nice time, and I remember that this was one of the last concerts before everything shut down, I remember these moments and would like to see more next time.

GT: *Because you live in South Korea, how do you cope with the long distances in travelling, and are there any favourite countries you like to visit?*

YES: I still have my place in Germany, so I spend some time between my concerts in Europe, so I spend more time in Europe, so I am there more often, and travelling is hard after the pandemic but now it is much better it not always pleasant to be on the plane all the time, but I look on the bright side. I enjoy playing for different audiences and going to different places. It's hard to tell, I always like playing for European audiences, but actually I am in New Zealand now, and this summer I was in Australia for the first time and had five or six concerts there and loved all of them so much, I think it's interesting to see a new place and discover something which I didn't know before.

GT: *What composers or musical works are you planning for the next season?*

YES: Obviously it is in my interest to find something new, new names, I mean composers like Nikolai Kapustin who I started playing, and others like him, nobody knew about him so everywhere I go to, people question me about him, and I feel happy playing his music to people who didn't know his name before, so I love to think about new repertoire, to find some new names that I didn't know before.

GT: *How do cope with being away from your home and family when you are touring around the world?*

YES: Well, actually now I am trying to have more private time, time off with my family, and I know nothing is more important than having this connection, time with loved ones and now after the pandemic I am trying to make time, I will try in February and March to have some free time, I think it's important to have this balance. After the pandemic I was working quite hard and was really on the go every day so I will now try to enjoy life much more.

GT: *Are you making new recordings?*

YES: I actually made recordings of the complete sonatas of Mozart in the first six months of this year and this release will be quite soon in the first months of next year and I have made some other recordings like the Ligeti Piano Concerto for the 100th anniversary next year and that will come out next year too, and I have also done the Ravel Concerto which will come out then as well, but for me the most important is the Mozart piano sonatas.

GT: *What interests do you have apart from music?*

YES: I have liked reading books from my earliest years, I also have developed an interest in the fine arts, as well as history, more recently contemporary history.

GT: *Well, thank you very much for finding the time to talk to me, and I think everyone is looking very much to hearing you playing with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra soon.*

Gregor Tassie

Yeol Eum Son plays the Mozart Piano Concerto No.27 in B flat, KV.595 with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh on 15 December, and at the City Halls, Glasgow on 16 December. Andrew Manze is the conductor in this programme which includes Bacewicz's Concerto for String Orchestra and Dvořák's Symphony No.7 in D minor.