



DOYEON KIM

WORKING ON IT

BY ADAM DAVIDSON

For Korean-born DoYeon Kim, music is a way of channeling complex emotions and experiences into art with the potential to change a listener's perception of the world. Before moving to America in 2014 to study at Boston's New England Conservatory, she felt constrained by the musical language of traditional Korean music and felt unable to express herself fully. "In Korea, there was (colonial rule and) war and we were occupied by Japan (1910-45), so our goal is always to protect and preserve our culture; it's very important," says Kim. "(But) I am a musician in the 21st century and what I'm playing, the gayageum, was invented in 8 BC."

Kim had to overcome hurdles to even get accepted into a school as many wouldn't allow her to audition with a gayageum—a plucked zither. "I reached out to everyone but...they all recommended me to (study) musicology and ethnomusicology, more theoretical courses. But I wanted to be a performer, not a scholar," she says. Because there are only a few musicians around the world who are continuing the Korean tradition of playing the gayageum, Kim had no reference points for learning improvisation; therefore she had to mimic other instruments and then discover her own musical language. She was able to take inspiration from performers such as South Korean cellist Okkyung Lee, whose improvisation had a profound impact on the young musician as she "created her own musical language" with a clarity about what she wanted to say. As Kim established herself in America, she got the opportunity to learn from established improvisers. One such impactful collaboration was with guitarist Joe Morris on the 2018 album *Macrocosm*. Says Kim, "He really introduced me to improvisation. When I play with (Joe), I feel like I am traveling the universe with him. There is different, clear sound sharing and an atmosphere. He's such a great supporter, listener and leader. He showed me the true freedom of music."

The freedom she experienced through learning improvisation has had a deep effect on her personal life as well. When she moved to America, beyond music, she truly discovered herself in the process. In her artistic freedom while performing she relates she was able to take off "the mask" that she had to wear in Korea—an ethos that puts the collective needs of society above individual needs. She says about the process of discovery, "I talk with myself a lot and find out who I am and even what trauma I had and how I deal with it. When you improvise, I must mentally face all of that and brave through it to truly (speak my mind)...Through improvisation I can truly see my vision and join that space."

From student to teacher, Kim has guest lectured at many universities worldwide, including Harvard, Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest and Universidad Nacional De Colombia. One of the first things she teaches her students is about the common misconception of what improvisation is. "Some people think that improvisation is a moment and can be anything. I don't think so. It's so complicated and high-skilled," she explains. "It's freedom. Freedom doesn't just come from anything, it comes from if you

have a rule or guidance and that sets you free—I need to have a specific thing that I want to say." Kim further explains about the role of the audience in the process: they are a group who not only chooses to see the artist, but who are curious about what the performer wants to say and is feeling. "As a performer, you need to consider the audience and what (and how) you want to deliver as the message."

Beyond improvisation on her own terms, Kim's roots in classical Korean music still provides her the platform to start from. "Having a classical technique is very important because I have a better understanding of how I create the sound," she says. "When I think about notes and rhythm and the musical structure, it's different from Western music, so through that I find comfort. Western music has broadened my musical world but having a root is important." Although she is clearly influenced by jazz and tradition, Kim doesn't want to be defined by any particular genre and instead is carving out her own path and unique sound. "I just found through (those genres) my own way to write my own story about what I want to say to the world."

NYC-based pianist Mara Rosenbloom, who also curates the annual Brooklyn Free Spirit Festival (BFSF), says of Kim: "(her) work emits incredible strength. Like all the artists invited to take part in BFSF, I see her work as creating connection—it bridges cultures, genres, histories, and I believe that translates into literal bonds between people. Humans are so varied, so complex—there is always a demand for spontaneity, inventiveness and space for freedom of expression. Without those things, we lose the ability to form social bonds and develop the flexibility to see our existing relationships through. BFSF simply aims to hold space for this and I'm particularly excited for the trio DoYeon is bringing to BFSF."

Kim will perform with two distinct trios this month: the above mentioned BFSF concert (presented by Siren Xypher Collective with support from Alan Feller and Creative Music Studio) at Ibeam Brooklyn (with multi-instrumentalist Cooper-Moore and percussionist Satoshi Takeishi) and another at Joe's Pub (with pianist Kris Davis and drummer Tom Rainey). In addition, she has two albums planned (quartet and quintet projects), plus a tour of Korea later this year. Having recently focused her attention particularly on composing music, she declares that this experience has given her not only the confidence, but a clearer idea of what she wants to express. And in developing a specific vision for her music to convey her message, Kim has discovered that she needs the right tool, and so has opted to use a bow to create the sound that she has been looking for. "String instruments you pluck and flick, so it's more rhythmical," she explains. "To deliver what I want to say, I need long melodies and more energy and that's why I started to use a bow." In this process, she relates that she tried using cello and violin bows, even children's violin bows, but ended up using Uzbekistan folk strings. "I am still trying to find the perfect shape," she says. "I'm working on it..."

For more info visit doyeonmusic.com. Kim is at Joe's Pub Jul. 8. She is also at Ibeam Brooklyn Jul. 13 (part of Brooklyn Free Spirit Festival). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- DoYeon Kim/Chase Morrin—*Gapi* (CJ E&M Music, 2017)
- Joe Morris/DoYeon Kim—*Macrocosm* (Glacial Erratic, 2018)
- Agustí Fernandez Ensemble—*Via Augusta* (Sirulita, 2019)
- Nick Dunston—*Spider Season* (Out Of Your Head, 2021)
- Stemeseder-Lillinger—*Umbra* (Intakt, 2022)
- Brandon Lopez/DoYeon Kim—*Syzygy, Vol. 1* (577 Records, 2024)



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