

KEVIN CONNOLLY



America/Beautiful

In 1819, Anton Diabelli sent a waltz he had just written to 50 leading composers in the Austrian Empire, asking them to compose a variation on it. The result was a compendium of generally uninspired and uninspiring works that fail to add up to more than the sum of their parts (with the notable exception, of course, of Beethoven's contribution, which ended up being published separately). Two hundred years later, in 2019, Korean-born American pianist Min Kwon commissioned 75 American composers – from aspiring students in their 20s to Pulitzer Prize winners and veterans in their 80s and 90s – to write a variation on the anthem *America the Beautiful*. The result, which was aired last July, is a monumental statement, both about contemporary America and about contemporary music, that will surely establish itself as one of the major musical works of this century.

Kwon, who came to America as a student, had the idea before the arrival of Covid-19, but it inevitably became associated with the social, political and artistic challenges provoked by the pandemic. Her aim was 'to paint a sonic picture of her adopted country in all of its sprawling complexity, and ultimately try to find the beauty at the core of the American experiment and its credo of *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). Ultimately this project is about embracing our diversity, and remembering that by understanding, appreciating, and celebrating our differences, we become stronger both as

individuals and as a country. The fact that 70 composers can hear the same song in a completely different way is, to me, something truly beautiful.'

Her choice of 'song' was inspired. Itself a collaborative project, *America the Beautiful* combined words by feminist poet Katharine Bates, first published as *America* on 4 July 1895, with music by church organist Samuel Ward, originally titled *Maierna*. The two were put together and appeared in 1910 with the title *America the Beautiful*. The song quickly became one of the country's favourite 'anthems'; it has even been argued that it should be America's official national anthem. Ward's simple melody and harmonies lend themselves well to variation, and Bates' poem contains phrases that have resonated with many of the composers, who have also been inspired by other American writers and contemporary public figures. Most significantly, the piece's title and 'message' are intrinsically controversial.

Thus, the composers' responses to the theme are indeed 'completely different', reflecting everything that has been going on in America (and indeed the world) since early 2020: from melodious meditations to angry outbursts, from jazzy send-ups to 12-tone deconstructions. But what makes the whole so much more than the sum of its disparate parts is the fact that every piece is clearly deeply considered and felt – a sense that is confirmed by the composers' own spoken introductions to their music. And if

there is a common thread, voiced explicitly by many of them, it is that these artists all want America to be 'beautiful' but are keenly aware that it is not and perhaps never has been. As one of them puts it, America is 'a failed project' that nevertheless continues to strive to be successful. It is this contradictory sense of regret and hope, of disappointment and optimism that pervades the project and makes it so moving, inspiring and uplifting.

It should be added that Kwon's performances are always committed, polished and expressive and her presentation imaginative, attractive and suitably varied, with different pianos, settings and even outfits chosen to suit the mood of each piece. Two of the variations involve other instruments as well as the piano and, again, the performances are outstanding.

'The voices of these "United Composers of America" form a powerful chorus, a collective musical snapshot that I'm sure will reverberate far beyond the present moment', says Kwon. 'My desire and goal for the project is that it's going to live a very long life.'

We must hope that all the music is eventually published so that others can perform it and ensure that this goal is realised, cementing *America/Beautiful* as a cornerstone of the piano repertoire. **JP**
JOSEPH LAREDO

Min Kwon's performances of America/Beautiful are available to stream via her YouTube channel. [america-beautiful.com](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)