

America the Beautiful — one song, many voices

Pianist Min Kwon is the driving force behind a project to use the patriotic standard to celebrate the US's diversity



'America/Beautiful' project creator Min Kwon © Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

Richard Fairman

Try an internet search on “America the Beautiful” and the performances that come up are many and varied. The one by Ray Charles is a classic. James Taylor was the singer at President Barack Obama's inauguration in

2013, and Jennifer Lopez for President Joe Biden this year. The musical styles embrace classical (Leontyne Price and Renée Fleming), country (Willie Nelson), the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and old faithfuls, such as Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley.

All of these are a curtainraiser to what is coming. The original song — first published in 1910 — is about to find itself the theme of a new set of variations commissioned from a cross-section of today's leading American composers. The idea has taken off beyond expectations and there are now 75 variations, due to get their first performances at a rate of 10–15 a night online, starting on July 4 (when else?).

The driving force behind the ambitious America/Beautiful project is Min Kwon, a pianist and professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts in New Jersey. Born in South Korea, she was struck by the US's diversity when she arrived as a student.



Left: Ray Charles gives his rendition of 'American the Beautiful' in Boston in 2003 © AP

Right: Jennifer Lopez performed the standard for Joe Biden's inauguration © Getty Images

“Immigration is what made America great,” she says. “I have lived here for 30 years and what shocked me when I arrived was seeing people of all these different colours.”

She felt the time was right to make a public statement. The country that had welcomed the young Korean immigrant was deeply divided, the word “patriot” a battleground. President Donald Trump’s speech to the UN in 2019 predicted that “the future belongs to patriots” and a movement to start a new “Patriot party” was floated after the 2020 election.

“As an immigrant, I find America has so many different meanings,” says Kwon. “This project is about embracing our diversity and remembering that by understanding and celebrating our differences we become stronger both as individuals and as a country.”

The potential for political controversy was not lost on the composers who were invited. Some gave a resounding yes, others a resounding no, mainly because of the political climate. Nevertheless, the 75 variations come from all corners of society, and the musical styles include tango, Persian, salsa, Indian-influenced, rap, minimalist, 12-tone and experimental. The nationalities embrace Chinese, Caribbean, Ghanaian, Iranian, Nigerian, Pakistani, Syrian, Uzbek, Vietnamese and native American.

The idea of the variations has a noble precedent. In 1819, the music publisher Anton Diabelli sent out a waltz to the leading composers of his day, inviting each to write a variation to form a “patriotic anthology”. One of them was Beethoven, who characteristically ignored the rules and turned out 33 variations of his own. That late masterpiece is his Op. 120. “I wanted to revisit Diabelli for the 21st-century US,” says Kwon. She started contacting composers at a rate of about eight a day. Each composer was paid \$1,000, funded by Kwon’s non-profit organisation, the Center for Musical Excellence, established to support gifted young musicians wanting to pursue a life in music in the US.



Terry Riley



Reena Esmail

The line-up includes many of contemporary music's leading voices: Timo Andres, Richard Danielpour, Jake Heggie, Fred Hersch, Vijay Iyer, Aaron Jay Kernis, Hannah Lash, Nico Muhly, Shulamit Ran, Huang Ruo, Augusta Read Thomas and others. One of the prestigious composers who came on board is Terry Riley, master American minimalist. Speaking from the mountains of Japan, he says: "The Ray Charles version of 'America the Beautiful' inspired me to try my hand at it, too. When I was a student, I used to play as a ragtime pianist at the Gold Street Saloon in San Francisco and my variation uses the theme as the basis for a ragtime piece. I think [Kwon's commitment] is touching."

For Reena Esmail, whose parents came to the US from India, the synthesis of cultures was the guiding light. "Min was looking for a wide [conspectus] of how people respond to America," she says. "We have lost the idea that patriotism can mean different things, to immigrants, to refugees, to the US Army. To me, it is about making a life you couldn't have made before. My mother is Catholic, my father Muslim, so they couldn't have married in India. I love to think that in my music different cultures are interacting to see how they develop."

Some composers took the opportunity to be outspoken. Others, says Kwon, preferred to look to the future and write with hope. “This was my dream — that we need to listen to each other and the greatest value that music can give is listening. We have to find unity.”

Online from July 4 at www.america-beautiful.com and including two live concerts at the Green-Wood Cemetery Catacombs, New York, as part of Death of Classical's ‘The Angel's Share’ festival