



Min Kwon at the Green-Wood Cemetery Catacombs in 2021 (courtesy of Death of Classical)

CONCERT REVIEW: MIN KWON – 'AMERICA/BEAUTIFUL'

👤 Jon Sobel 🕒 1 week ago 👁 735 Views

Each time Min Kwon plays an “America/Beautiful” concert she has 76 piano pieces to choose from. Each was written by a different composer for Kwon’s pandemic-era commissioning project. Each is a version or variation of “America the Beautiful,” which, at least back when I was a kid, every American child learned in elementary school.

So, unlike the typical classical music concert, where the audience knows ahead of time what will be on the program, each “America/Beautiful” show is different. It depends partly on what Kwon feels inspired to play that day – possibly even taking audience reaction into account. And so, what I heard at the Green-Wood Cemetery Catacombs on June 18, 2026 may not be what audiences on June 19th or 20th, or at future concerts in other venues, will hear.

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What I can tell you is that the pianist chose some excellent showpieces in a wide variety of styles. And that the selections flowed together in what felt like a well-thought-out sequence, enlivened further by Kwon's verbal introductions and, more important, her vigorous performance style.

America Through Many Lenses

The concert's start and finish reflected the composers' vast range of styles and approaches. First up were the jazz-inflected romantic flourishes of Reena Esmail's beautiful "America/Desh." Last up was the muscular "American Toccata" by Avner Dorman. For both composers, and for the pianist, the U.S. is in one way or another an adopted country – Kwon emigrated from Korea, Esmail from India, and the U.S.-based Dorman hails from Israel.

These choices said something about what made the United States what it is, and how wrong-headed, let alone cruel, current immigration policy is. But leave that aside for now. Min Kwon's project is a celebration of national ideals, not necessarily realities.

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The concert's other highlights included some pointedly modernist pieces. From its title, one might imagine Samuel Adler's "A Celebration of Our Beautiful Nation" to be awfully earnest. But this piece from this dean of contemporary music is highly cerebral; Elliott Carter's clawing intricacies came to mind. "FUSION" by Augusta Read Thomas, less heavy and more playful, felt free of boundaries and carried no audible trace of the source tune.

In fact there was a good deal of fun to be had. John Musto slapped a habanera feel on "America the Beautiful." John Harbison, another legendary figure, contributed the right-hand-only "Getting the Upper Hand on America," an impressively contrapuntal delight.

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Softer, more reflective moments came in "New Jersey" by Donnacha Dennehy, with an airy feel that glanced up against Debussy and Tori Amos, and the in the glittery but fraught romance of Texu Kim's "America the Dream & America the Polarized."

And then there were the bangers – literally, in the case of an arm-banging piece (I didn't catch the composer's name), and figuratively in the foreboding rumblings and stentorian chords of "Fantasy Variation (The Visible Enemy)" by Richard Danielpour.

Underground History

The acoustics in the Catacombs are wonderful for certain kinds of music – choral, early music, small-ensemble chamber music. And the space actually has a history with the "America/Beautiful" project – Death of Classical hosted the premiere of about 20 of the pieces there. As Kwon told me in our recent interview, it's "sonically resonant, visually haunting, and emotionally charged."

All true. However, at times her enthusiastic expressivity outgrew the bounds of the confined space. The brightness of the Yamaha grand piano clattered the eardrums at certain peak moments.

But the music was excellent and the performance colorful and dynamic. Min Kwon is even more likable in person than on her videos, and it was a pleasure to spend an hour in her company.

Death of Classical presents Min Kwon with “America/Beautiful” again June 19 and 20, 2026, and there’s much more in store during its current season.

Read more online about Min Kwon and the America/Beautiful project, including more concerts and the five-disc recording of all 76 pieces.

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