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To Spread Hope, the Next Rutgers-New Brunswick Laureate Reimagines 'America the Beautiful'



Min Kwon, a music professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, is the second Rutgers University-New Brunswick Laureate.

Andrej Grilc

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By Mike Lucas

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Min Kwon, a music professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts and a concert pianist, performs reconceptualizations of the song by 76 composers

The pen may be mightier than the sword, but Rutgers professor Min Kwon notes that music can be more powerful than words in moving people's hearts and minds, serving as "a vitamin for the soul."



As the second [Rutgers University-New Brunswick Laureate](https://www.masongross.rutgers.edu/music-faculty-named-2026-27-rutgers-nb-laureate/) (<https://www.masongross.rutgers.edu/music-faculty-named-2026-27-rutgers-nb-laureate/>), Kwon aims to prove her point with *America/Beautiful* (<https://www.america-beautiful.com/>), a music project in which she performs variations of the iconic song “America the Beautiful” reimagined by scores of composers. Performances may include visual presentations featuring photographs of American landscapes and choreographies made to the score by dancers.

Kwon, a concert pianist, recording artist and professor of music in the [Mason Gross School of the Arts](https://www.masongross.rutgers.edu/) (<https://www.masongross.rutgers.edu/>) at Rutgers-New Brunswick, began developing the project during the COVID-19 pandemic to encourage new musical creation – and offer hope.

“We were all isolated as Americans and experiencing a true crisis together,” said [Kwon](https://www.masongross.rutgers.edu/bio/Min-Kwon/) (<https://www.masongross.rutgers.edu/bio/Min-Kwon/>), who has been a Rutgers faculty member for nearly 24 years. “As an artist, my job is to connect people and bring people together and encourage people to express themselves in a safe space.

“I’m a performer. I don’t compose. My job is to interpret other people’s works and bring them to life. So, I reached out to composers – American composers. To reach out to people who can create ... new music, new pieces of expression, new hope, giving new birth, was important to me.”

Noting that “America the Beautiful” became “the perfect vehicle because musically it has just the right ingredients,” Kwon asked the composers to write a new take of the song for a solo piano performance, compositions “that I can play and I can be the messenger of their feelings about America.”

Kwon wound up commissioning 76 composers, “and they are really America’s who’s who of living contemporary composers,” she said, adding there are more than a dozen Pulitzer Prize winners as well as multiple Grammy winners and MacArthur Fellows.



Min Kwon began developing her *America/Beautiful* project during the COVID-19 pandemic to offer hope.

Andrej Grilc

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Rutgers University-New Brunswick Laureate

The lineup of composers involved in *America/Beautiful* includes [Stewart Copeland](https://www.america-beautiful.com/composers/stewart-copeland/) (<https://www.america-beautiful.com/composers/stewart-copeland/>), former drummer for British rock band the Police who now composes operas, ballets, scores for films and music for television shows and video games, as well as two Rutgers alumni: [Andrew Bambridge](https://www.america-beautiful.com/composers/andrew-bambridge/) (<https://www.america-beautiful.com/composers/andrew-bambridge/>), a percussionist, composer and actor who earned a bachelor of music degree from Mason Gross, and [Patricio Molina](https://www.america-beautiful.com/composers/patricio-molina/) (<https://www.america-beautiful.com/composers/patricio-molina/>), a Chile-born pianist and composer who studied with Kwon and holds two doctoral degrees from the university.

Kwon is tapping Rutgers students on the project, too.

“I’ve already started working and shared the stage with our student dancers from the Rutgers Dance Department,” she said.



Established in 2025, the Rutgers-New Brunswick Laureate program was developed by administration officials to support faculty in the arts and humanities and nurture their ties throughout the university and with the community.

Kwon's Laureate project, entitled *America/Beautiful – Reimagining our Nation, Its Democracy and Civic Engagement through the Arts*, aims to build and expand her *America/Beautiful* project.



Min Kwon, a music professor at Rutgers, performs compositions from *America/Beautiful* during a concert.

Courtesy of 8va Music Consultancy

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“Professor Kwon's proposal stood out for its compelling integration of the arts and civic dialogue, reflecting the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration we seek to foster at Rutgers-New Brunswick,” said Jason Geary, provost and executive vice chancellor for academic affairs. “I find her project to be fresh and innovative in its use of creative practice as a way to probe timely questions of American identity and belonging.”

Kwon's plan for *America/Beautiful* is to connect Rutgers dance, music, literature, history (both American and African American, she said), film and women's gender studies departments and hold performances during film screenings, photography exhibitions, poetry readings and panel discussions both on campus and at New Brunswick venues.

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At Rutgers, “we will definitely be doing something with our students to culminate the year-long work,” maybe even performing during a Rutgers football game or a graduation ceremony at the stadium, she said.

Kwon said engaging with so many different composers helped push her out of her comfort zone and made her a more empathetic performer.



"I was a pianist who was comfortable playing Mozart and Rachmaninoff," said Kwon. "That's in my DNA. But the project made me a better artist, a better human being, because now I've learned to put myself in 76 different composers' shoes."

"All of these composers came from somewhere. Their parents, their grandparents and some of them even represent the cultural heritage of 33 different countries. That's the richness of America."

Kwon, who has performed nationally and internationally and has been a member of the Mason Gross faculty since 2002, has released 12 CDs, including a five-CD set (<https://outhere-music.com/en/albums/americabeautiful>) of *America/Beautiful*, released in early May on Delos Productions/Outhere Music.

Joining Rutgers "was my first job ever," Kwon said. "I mean, official job other than being a concert pianist."

She added that Rutgers isn't just where she works.

"My husband is here," said Kwon, who is married to Leonard Y. Lee, the James W. Mackenzie Professor and chair of the Department of Surgery at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and chief of surgical services at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. "It's in my home state. It's my family."

Min Kwon's *America/Beautiful*

StateoftheArtsNJ



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State of the Arts, a program of New Jersey's public media network NJ PBS, features Rutgers music professor and classical pianist Min Kwon in a 10-minute video feature.

She said Rutgers has been "really a hub where I can bring students I meet from all over the world from concertizing. I've taught students from 25 different countries right here in my studio at Rutgers, including students from as far as Sydney, Australia, from Copenhagen, Denmark, and they've all gone on to complete their graduate and doctoral studies at the Juilliard School and have incredible careers now."

"And Rutgers was the beginning of it all for them, for their American dream. So, it's really gratifying for me to do this work here, in my home state, to make some sort of a positive impact, to make a difference in people's lives through music. And that has always been my American dream."

Kwon performs *America/Beautiful 250* at the Green-Wood Cemetery Catacombs, 500 25th St., Brooklyn, N.Y., twice nightly from Thursday through Saturday as part of the [Death of Classical concert series](https://www.deathofclassical.com/concerts/america-beautiful-250) (<https://www.deathofclassical.com/concerts/america-beautiful-250>).