



Contemporary composers respond to 'America the Beautiful' for pianist Min Kwon

27/06/2026 by Daniele Sahr

 **United States Various, Chelsea Music Festival – 'Every Story Counts':** Min Kwon, Timo Andres, Jorge Tabarés, Chaihun Kim (pianos), Claire Bourg (violin). St. Paul's German Lutheran Church, New York, 22.6.2026. (DS)



Min Kwon © Fadi Kheir

Pianist Min Kwon kept trying to get past the first Chopinesque chords of the song 'America the Beautiful' as re-worked by Samuel Adler. Technical quirks were hindering her iPad score and forced her to stop and tinker with the device. Piqued by the moment but more concerned about the audience, she checked to see that we were all still having a good time. Our response: a surge of applause. Because Kwon is more than an outstanding pianist, she's an attentive host.

At the Chelsea Music Festival recital, she proved this beyond a doubt, giving the fourth performance in a series held across the weekend for her recently released album, *America/Beautiful*. For the project, Kwon began asking composers in 2020 to reflect on their feelings, concerns and wishes for America by means of artistic responses to the anthem song 'America the Beautiful' (with lyrics from Katharine Lee Bates's 1895 poem). Clearly a convincing and motivating leader, Kwon reached 76 composers, all of whom rose to the challenge. It resulted in a veritable 'journal' of thoughts on what it is to be American today and was conveyed more effectively in music than in words. Pushing through obstacles (even if just technical ones) while maintaining a positive spirit seemed aptly appropriate to the mettle required to navigate the current times.

The evening's music was suitably paired with Park Joon's black-and-white photographs of American landscapes which use crisp contrasts of light and dark. This choice harkened back to Bates's poem which was inspired by a visit to Colorado's Pike's Peak (before it was set to music by Samuel A. Ward). While none of the works on the program were written to match the images, they benefitted the overall performance experience – a rare success in marrying the visual with the musical.

With the exception of Stewart Copeland's cheerful *America Quite Beautiful* – which included a fiddle-leaning violin part played biting by Claire Bourg – the evening was mostly shaped by serious-minded, reflective works. In the brief explanations that Kwon interjected throughout the program, she kept assuring us that lighter fare would come – but it never really did. And that was for the best. The solemn care given to the writing (and performance) of each work reflected a spectrum of protest, lament, questioning and introspection that made for a magnificent tribute to a deeper kind of patriotism.

In Vijay Iyer's *Crown Thy Good*, an elixir of minor modal figures developed in elegant traction to the original tune material, echoing effectively Iyer's belief that 'nationalistic sentiment is dangerous'. Jessica Meyer's *Halcyon Skies* mirrored the country's divisions across race, religion and wealth in bold chordal material that used dissonance in a declarative spirit. Nico Muhly's *Refine* began with Kwon's elegant fingerwork transforming the woody percussive piano sound into that of a stream of water running over jagged rocks, encapsulating Muhly's intended metaphor for a much-needed yet hopeful refining of America.

All the works coalesced around a common sense of soul-searching and, in the foundational American spirit, a sense of freedom to embark on inquiry. *Meditation* by Huang Ruo took several emotional turns that rubbed up against moments of possible optimism. *Endeavor* by Pierre Jalbert (performed exquisitely by one of Kwon's doctoral students, Jorge Tabarés) struck an innocent, exploratory style. *In darkness veiled* – played with a subtle yet somber touch by another Kwon student, Chaihun Kim – had a mysterious, diaphanous texture that dwelled mostly in quieter, introspective material.

There were also heavily-structured, modernist, Ives-like works such as Adler's *A Celebration of Our Beautiful Nation* and Lewis's *America, the changing same* which clocked in at the same running time as the original song but used atonality to mine the complex foundations of the meaning of Americanism. Lewis, especially, played with the idea of patriotic criticism by creating a dense layer of stark motifs that pulled from the original tune but left out certain notes. The space of these missing notes symbolized an absence waiting to be filled by America's ability to someday live up to its ideals – only after it eats its vegetables will dessert be served! Kwon performed both pieces with a discerning approach that revealed the sequential patterns within the atonal landscapes of the composers. The material could have fallen into a chaotic rumble, but Kwon communicated the modernist language with clarity, revealing structure in that which lacks melody.

She graciously passed the baton to pianist and composer Timo Andres to perform the world premiere of his *American Coda Variation* – which hinted at the end of time but

with chordal developments that ultimately seemed to be reaching further into the future with a hopefulness that nevertheless held fast to some trepidation. An ideal response for this moment in history.

Before Andres sat at the keys, Kwon left us with one more point of consideration. She vigorously played a work by Fred Hersch written for the left hand, followed by one (which she pointed out with relief was only for the right, her dominant hand) aptly titled *Getting the Upper Hand on America* by John Harbison. Intentional or not, the message landed clearly. It takes both sides working together to make music with ease. The same could be said for America, when it is at its most beautiful.

Daniele Sahr

Featured Image: Pianist Min Kwon with photos by Park Joon © Fadi Kheir

Ward (arr. Samuel Adler) – 'America the Beautiful'

Adler – *A Celebration of Our Beautiful Nation*

Larsen – *Amber (Variation)*

Meyer – *Halcyon Skies*

Muhly – *Refine*

Iyer – *Crown Thy Good*

Ludwig – *Qaddiś for Ruth Bader Ginsburg*

Ruo – *Meditation*

Jalbert – *Endeavor*

Zaimont – *In darkness veiled*

Copeland – *America Quite Beautiful*

Bunch – *Beauty for All (Or for None at All)*

Lewis – *America, the changing same*

Gandolfi – *Of Liberating Strife*

Hersch – *Four Windows into America*

Harbison – *Getting the Upper Hand on America*

Andres – *America Coda Variation (World Premiere)*

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