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Pianist Min Kwon Explores the Meaning of America in Collaborative Collection 'America/Beautiful'



Lakshmi Hutchinson

Artist Spotlight

Interview

JUNE 29, 2026



For many of us, “America the Beautiful” is a familiar patriotic song from elementary school, something you might hear at sporting events or inaugurations. But for Korean American pianist Min Kwon, the iconic song presented an opportunity to showcase the cultural diversity of America.

Last month, Min Kwon released *America/Beautiful*, a 5-disc collection of solo piano variations on “America the Beautiful.” Kwon commissioned 76 composers for the project, including artists like Vijay Iyer, Stewart Copeland, Terry Riley, and Reena Esmail. The song itself was originally a poem penned by Katharine Lee Bates, later published with a tune by Samuel Ward and titled “America the Beautiful” in 1910. For Kwon, who immigrated to the United States at age 14, the song captures the possibilities of America. We spoke with Min Kwon about her background, and the inspiration behind *America/Beautiful*.

How did the piano become a part of your life?

My mother was a piano teacher. So even before I was born, that's all I heard. I was born with perfect pitch. My mom would tell me that when she was teaching, and I was 2 or 3, I would just go next to the piano. And whenever I heard a mistake by her students, I would go like that [*plugs ears*]. So I already recognized what was painful or not. I think it was just always in my life and I never left it, which is actually quite scary thinking how long a life I've had already!

So there was never a doubt that was going to be your career.

I knew I was going to be a musician. I think I contemplated, “Am I going to be a pianist, violinist, cellist or conductor?” Because I played all these instruments and I would conduct symphonies with chopsticks and whatnot. But then I settled on piano, which is really the love of my life.



Your project, *America/Beautiful* came out in May. How did you come up with the idea, and why that song in particular?

When I started, it was the really dark time in America during the pandemic. I wanted to bring people together because we were so isolated, and one way for me to do it was to bring together composers and musicians who could create and give hope, because we were quite hopeless at the time.

I was really thinking hard about what could be that one song or one theme, and then I landed on

"America the Beautiful" because it's about our ideal.

-Min Kwon

It was also important to me to create a legacy where the next generation can benefit. It's the thread of continuing this new American canon of piano music, which I think is very exciting. At the time I was thinking of some sort of variation—meaning you give a theme or a point of departure to people. And I was thinking something that's very iconic, something that's very American and connects us...all these people, no matter where we come from, we all came from somewhere else. If not us, our parents came from somewhere else or our grandparents, and that's what America is. I was really thinking hard about what could be that one song or one theme, and then I landed on "America the Beautiful" because it's about our ideal.

How did you select the composers to commission for this project?

I started with the ones that I already worked with, or was friends with or familiar with. And then it was just researching—learning who is writing out there and whose music resonates with me, or whose voices I want to help be the messenger to carry forward. I was trained in a very classical tradition, which means I went to the top conservatories like Curtis and Juilliard. And so it's like the American dream, where I came to America because I wanted to be a pianist and I wanted to study in these very prestigious schools that I read about in Korea. I was learning to play Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, all these very Western classical composers. And I never thought that I would become the champion of living American composers, but I am so glad that happened. Because now I have this friendship with people that are actually living with me in our own time, and that already is a very strong bond because we're experiencing America as it happens every day. And I'm not a composer, I'm a performer who interprets. And so that's been such a special privilege that I'm able to do that.



Photo credit: Andrej Grilc

With America's 250th coming up soon, what do you wish people understood about the immigrant experience?

With my album, or even my collection of composers, the purpose is not to answer that, but maybe to put a light on all this richness. There is no other country like this. I think for that reason, we are all so proud to be American. And I think that term just carries such meaning. I don't know any other country where you go and you see all these people who came from so many countries who have created, and I like to say, *contributed* something so meaningful to their adopted country. So in a way, I think this is just a little symbol, my collection—it's five hours of new music, 76 new piano pieces.

I've taught students from 35 countries. If I were not an American, if I were just sitting in Korea, even though classical music is on such a high level—so respected, so active and vibrant—I don't think I would've had that kind of opportunity or privilege to come across all these kinds of people.

I think music helps you to make something unfamiliar into familiar. Through these 76 composers, I really got to know their backgrounds and what makes

them say it this way. I just said, "Here's the song, here's the melody, here's the lyrics. Just go do what you want to do with it." I did not give any guidelines. There are so many Pulitzer Prize winners, Grammy winners, MacArthur Fellows, Ivy League university professors, as well as the young emerging composers, underrepresented composers. For these people to just kind of let go of their own ego or agenda and come together because they wanted to be a part of this...I think that's so touching and beautiful.

The responses have been so gratifying. That means people are curious—that people want to know what America is made of.

America/Beautiful is out now on **all streaming platforms**. You can keep up to date with Min Kwon's upcoming concerts and releases on her **website** and **Instagram**.

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