

America at 250 Music

'Some are prayers, some are protests': 76 musicians reimagine America the Beautiful

The iconic song has been given a diverse new set of versions thanks to pianist Min Kwon's ambitious musical project



📷 Min Kwon: 'I do believe America, as a melting pot, is a heart of creation.' Photograph: Kevin Condon

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Tue 23 Jun 2026 12.00 CEST

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Despite what you may have heard, there is no definitive version of the song America the Beautiful.

Katharine Lee Bates wrote its lyrics as a poem in 1893, inspired by an ecstatic road trip from the Massachusetts house she shared with her longtime companion Katharine Coman to a teaching gig in Colorado. Over the next few decades, dozens of musicians set it to music, including a tune by New Jersey's Samuel A Ward. The uniting of the text to a hymn Ward had previously composed in 1882 became, in time, a standard. In 1972, Ray Charles recorded the more or less definitive performance of it. But everyone from Pete Seeger to Tammy Faye Messner have tried their hand at Bates's ode to equality between peoples and equanimity with nature. At Joe Biden's inauguration, Jennifer Lopez belted it into a medley, while Carrie Underwood struggled through it at Donald Trump's second one.

The Korean-born, New Jersey-based pianist Min Kwon has spent her career thinking of ways to build communities through interpretation. As professor of piano at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, she curated concerts featuring university pianists at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall - like a 2015 performance of 50 variations on a waltz the Viennese music publisher Anton Diabelli commissioned in the 1820s from composers including Franz Schubert and Franz Liszt. After that challenge, she says: "I wanted to create a kind of new American Diabelli." She just needed to find the right theme.

America/Beautiful Sampler

Min Kwon



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Kwon regularly leads masterclasses and tours around the world. Like much of the world, though, the Covid-19 lockdowns put all that on pause. "America

was in crisis, we were all feeling very isolated. We were desperate for connection and hope,” she says. “I remember feeling sad and fearful, like everybody else. And then I thought: ‘Wait a minute, there’s got to be something as an artist I can do that is the opposite of destruction and death and fear.’” She began looking around at the country she had made her home, which, in the summer of 2020, was rising up against the racist killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor while buckling under the rise of the far right. “I do believe America, as a melting pot, is a heart of creation,” she says. “I wanted somehow to celebrate that.”

What would that sound like? The Star-Spangled Banner, America’s actual anthem, was a little too patriotic for her taste. Bates and Ward’s America the Beautiful fit the bill better. “Lots of us have a connection memory to [the song] from childhood, or through inauguration or school graduations,” she says. “It’s also simple enough that composers can take flight with it.” And so, over the course of email threads and WhatsApp texts, lockdown Zoom calls and YouTube live streams, Kwon developed America/Beautiful, a flock of 76 interpretations. “Some are prayers, some are protests, some are dreams or confessions,” she says. “I was really surprised by the staggering depth and variety.” From American minimalist icon Terry Riley, for example, she says she was expecting long contemplation à la his classic song In C. Instead, his Crown of Brotherhood is, she says, “a piano ragtime, something so fun and in good humor”. Other compositions range from established figures like Nico Muhly, whose Refine rustles softly like fields of grain in a breeze, to up-and-comers like Tyson Davis, whose American Tableau is the very sound of human tears threatening to dim (alabaster-white) cities.



America/Beautiful

Min Kwon

Save on Spotify

00:00

- 1 America the Beautiful (Arr. for Piano by Samuel Adler) 00:54
Samuel A. Ward, Min Kwon
- 2 A Celebration of Our Beautiful Nation 02:07
Samuel Adler, Min Kwon
- 3 A Contemplation 02:49
Bruce Adolphe, Min Kwon

“When she suggested the project to me, I wasn’t feeling so positive about the country,” says composer, performer and media artist Pamela Z, whose 1987 album *Echolocation* mapped territory in vocal processing and delay techniques that artists are still exploring. “My thought was to think about it as a celebration of the *people*, not the political condition. Which,” she laughs, “was an interesting challenge.” Her offering – *America America America America America* – harvests fragments from recordings of Kwon reciting each of Bates’s stanzas, including stacked iterations of her saying America; Pamela Z then seeds those sounds across a bed of melody derived from the pitch and rhythm of Kwon’s intonation. “This long list of Americas ended up sounding plaintive, even distressed,” she says. “But it doesn’t tell people something specific. It just teases out this little bit of confusion.”

Kwon has recorded each of the compositions for a five-CD box set, released in time for America’s 250th anniversary. She has also mounted performances of them, including a collaboration with the New York City-based non-profit *Death of Classical*, which, in June, found her on a black grand piano that barely fit into the main passage between the 30 or so family vaults deep within the catacombs at Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery. An impressively physical player, Kwon passionately negotiated avant-pop phenomenon Leila Adu-Gilmore’s *United Underdog*, in which her moody processional through passages of the original composition grow into a finale so ferocious Kwon performed it via slammed forearms across the keyboard.

A more gentle counterpoint arrived with a special guest, Vijay Iyer, who joined her at the piano for his *Crown thy Good*, an elegiac duet in which each

vanished into a vault behind them during the other's solo selections. It became a moment of showing up for each other, of finding common ground and mutual creation. Kwon's daughters happened to be born on President's Day and the Fourth of July, she says. "I want to leave a body of new work for them, that later generations can look back on [and] say: 'Lots of bad things happened, but look what came out of it.'"

America/Beautiful is out now on streaming services and on CD

This article was amended on 25 June 2026 to clarify that Samuel A Ward paired the poem to a hymn he had composed in 1882, not that the pairing happened in 1882.