

Connecticut composer uses ancient Korean instrument to create music for today

Connecticut Public Radio | By [Diane Orson](#)

Published January 27, 2022 at 10:42 AM EST



LISTEN



Jin Hi Kim is a composer and performer of komungo, electric komungo and is a Korean music specialist. *Livia Sa*

A fourth-century Korean legend tells of a black crane that heard the sound of a large plucked zither. The bird flew over to the instrument and it became known as the "komungo" or "black bird zither." The komungo was traditionally performed by male Confucian scholars during meditation.

When she wanted to learn how to play the komungo, musician Jin Hi Kim of Bridgeport

"I was not really proud, playing this instrument back in Korea," she said. "So when I came to America, I had a mission as [an] artist. Because I [chose] a male instrument and then I brought the instrument to America, challenging this history and looking for balance and equality."

Kim has just been named one of this year's "USA Fellows." Each year, United States Artists, a Chicago-based national arts funding organization, provides unrestricted cash awards to people working creatively in a range of artistic disciplines.

Kim has developed a compositional concept which she calls "living tones." Because the komungo was originally played as part of meditation practice, she said there's space for each note to come alive, "...and then manipulating or shaping each note in my own way, energy or texture, articulation. It's totally meditation."

Kim is widely acclaimed as a pioneer. She introduced the komungo and an electric komungo onto the global contemporary music scene. For years she has collaborated with individual musicians and ensembles around the world and in the U.S., including the Kronos Quartet and American Composers Orchestra. Kim creates original live interactive multimedia performances. She said at this moment in time she's particularly called to create works that draw from and build upon the spiritual origins of her instrument.

"Music shouldn't be just for beautiful or interesting sounds on the stage," she said "But music has the role to heal people."

Her most recent work is called "A Ritual for Covid-19." She described it as a purification performance. While she plays the electric komungo, images are projected on a large screen. Community members join Kim onstage and a long white cloth is unfurled. Knots in the cloth are then slowly untied.

"In Korean Shamanism, when people died the shaman would release the knot. Knot means that anxiety, tragedy and sadness," Kim said.

The ritual is based on a belief that we on earth can only live peaceful lives if the deceased before us lie peacefully at rest.

Jin Hi Kim says her latest arts award will support her ongoing work: creating new music that connects ancient Korean wisdom to global challenges facing the world today.



Diane Orson

Diane Orson is a special correspondent with Connecticut Public. She is a longtime reporter and contributor to National Public Radio. Her stories have been heard on Morning Edition, All Things Considered, Weekend Edition and Here And Now. Diane spent seven years as CT Public Radio's local host for Morning Edition.

See stories by [Diane Orson](#)



Connecticut Public Radio / WNPR
All Things Considered