

The Jin Hi Kim Collection





In conjunction with Wesleyan University's World Music Archives & Music Library, where my scores and recordings are housed, I am donating nine CDs titled *The Jin Hi Kim Collection: Living Tones Compositions and Komungo Improvisations*.

These are released solely for educational purposes, with details found in my memoir, *JIN HI KIM: Duality of Ancient Korean Roots and Western New Music*.

Living Tones Compositions

I trained with Korea's great masters at the National High School for Korean Traditional Music and Seoul National University. Over time, however, I became disillusioned with both the Westernized direction of Korean traditional music and the deeply patriarchal system that restricted women's artistic agency. Korea was the only place I had ever lived – the country where I felt rooted as both a person and a musician – yet I feared it might not be possible to achieve my fullest creative potential there. In 1980, I left for the United States, where I studied composition at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Mills College with John Adams, Lou Harrison, Terry Riley, and David Rosenboom. A commission from the Kronos Quartet and collaborations with Henry Kaiser introduced me to the American experimental music scene, where I began blending Korean Buddhist and Shamanistic aesthetics with Western individualism.

In my Korean traditional music training, I did not encounter music governed by perfect notes, strict tuning, or mechanical time, as in the Western classical tradition. Instead, I experienced silence, elasticity of time, and the expressive “spices” of individual tones. Each tone is produced with a specific vibration and articulation, allowing each musician to cultivate a distinctive personal “seasoning” of sound. In 1986, I introduced the term “Living Tones” to describe this approach: each tone is alive, embodying its own shape, texture, vibrato, glissando, expressive nuance, and dynamic contour. The life of a tone is partly given by gesture, producing subtle microtonal fluctuations and timbral shifts. This philosophy aligns with Buddhist reverence for sound and is enriched by Korean Shamanistic expression. From this synthesis emerged my compositional method, Living Tones, which has become both my signature and my means of bringing Korean aesthetics into dialogue with Western music.

Living Tones Compositions CD 1 documents my “Living Tones Concert.” In 1995, following the Rodney King riots that devastated Los Angeles's Koreatown, former U.S. Ambassador to Korea Donald Gregg, then Board Chair of the Korea Society, invited me to prepare a concert to help heal the city's wounds. My cross-cultural ensemble approach reflected my belief that music can move beyond political ideology, economic disparity, and ethnic difference. I composed works pairing Western and Korean instruments in parallel, allowing their qualities to coexist.

Living Tones Compositions CD 2 is a collection of my orchestral works. With these compositions, I reached a major milestone by performing my own work *Eternal Rock* at

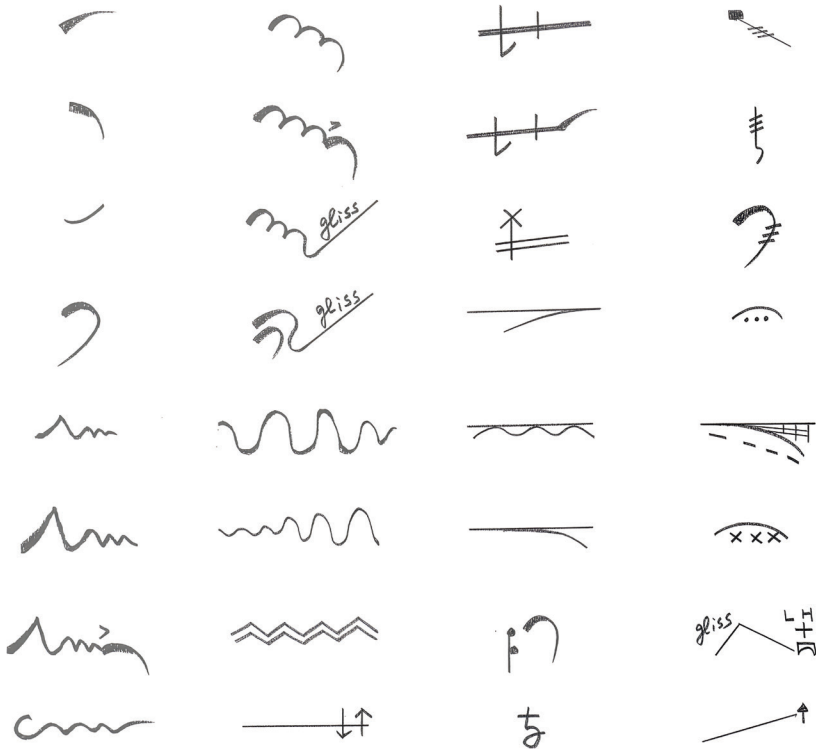
Carnegie Hall in 2001. I was awarded the 2000-2001 American Composers Orchestra Composer Fellowship, and *Eternal Rock* – my first orchestral piece – was commissioned and premiered there. In this work, celestial planets are imagined as immense rocks drifting through space. Sustained string drones reflect cosmic cycles, while the komungo separates from the orchestra, mirroring expansion and gravitational shift. In *Eternal Rock II* and *Monk Dance*, I introduced Korean suspended barrel drums into the orchestra. In Korean tradition, drumming is inseparable from bodily motion – a form of breathing through movement. *One Sky* was composed for the 55th anniversary of the Korean War at the DMZ between North and South Korea in Cheolwon Village, Kangwon Province, symbolizing the sky shared beyond borders and beliefs.

Living Tones Compositions CD 3 focuses on my percussion music. These works draw on Korean rhythmic cycles – structures that evolve through continuous variation, generating swing, momentum, and hypnotic energy. My composition *Nori* translates this rhythmic aesthetic into a Western instrumental context.

In 1991, I received a composition commission from the National Endowment for the Arts to collaborate with David Wessel. Together, we explored interactive music for komungo with custom touch pressure-sensitive sensors. *Tilings* investigates the illusion of repetition inspired by Korean visual design – patterns dissolving into layered echoes. In 1999, while organizing *Asian Women in Music Today* at the Asia Society in New York, I composed *Garden of Venus*, featuring four pioneering Asian women soloists whose transcendent artistry shaped a new Asian sound.

Linking, my first string quartet, reimagines Korean tonal qualities within a Western ensemble. During the early development of *Living Tones*, I created graphic notation for strings and composed *Kee Maek* as an exercise in gestural sound. Rather than unfolding as a single melody, the piece emerges as a succession of sonic landscapes. *X5 for Solo Flute* combines four prerecorded parts with a live fifth voice, reflecting early experimentation with tape. *Su-wol-yong-yul*, based on a 15th century song, uses graphic symbols and the Hierarchical Music Specification Language (HMSL) to generate computer-based *Living Tones* gestures.

In *Ritual for Earth 2024*, I invited participants to honor the natural acoustic world using 100 percussion instruments made from bamboo, clay, wood, and skin. Inspired by dawn forests, layered animal voices, and the endless movement of ocean waves, the work reflects life's cycles, continuity, and time as an eternal circle.



Kim's Living Tones graphic symbols

Komungo Improvisations

I see cross-cultural improvisation not only as a vital path to understanding humanity but also as a profound form of communication. I have been fortunate to collaborate with artists who combine exceptional training with open-minded curiosity. By embracing non-Korean musical elements with freedom and receptivity, I have discovered new ways of articulating sound on the komungo.

True influence is never imitation. It unfolds slowly, through deep immersion and engagement with the many dimensions of music – instrumental design, tonal character, acoustic phenomena, human emotion, spirituality, personality, sensitivity to time and energy, lifestyle, and environment. It is in this convergence that new musical expression is born.

In cross-cultural improvisation, individual identity becomes part of a collective expression, deeply intertwined with social and shared identity. This shared consciousness grows through reflection, myth, the echoes of ancestral human spirit in art across the world, discoveries of the cosmos, and visions of the unknown future. In this process, both personal and Korean identity expand into a broader human identity within the global village. As these identities engage with new environments, they merge into a dynamic field of intellectual inquiry, emotional resonance, cultural diversity, contemporary sensibility, and even the unfolding frontiers of electronic and computer-based artificial intelligence.

At the heart of improvisation lies listening, even more than playing. What I listen to includes my collaborator, the resonance we create together, and the sound yet to be born – a fleeting, silent idea hovering on the edge of emergence. These three layers converge in my ears almost simultaneously. Such acute, immediate concentration exists only within the realm of spontaneous improvisation.

Responding to the unfamiliar or unexpected becomes the gateway to new forms of expression. In that pivotal moment, a sound may erupt or be evoked. An eruption brings hesitation, a brief pause of uncertainty. An evocation, however, opens space for growth, allowing the music to unfold freely and fully. From this initial spark, new material emerges, extending into larger phrases and evolving sonic textures. Gradually, a new musical vocabulary takes shape, built through subtle pitch nuances, articulation, finger gestures, sonic materials, energy, spatial awareness, aesthetics, and even myth.

I developed the world's first electric komungo, expanding its possibilities through largescale, live interactive multimedia performances that integrate cutting-edge American art technology. The electric komungo, though echoing its 4th century origins, produces an astonishing spectrum of sounds and allows the layering of multiple sonic textures, giving birth to new musical landscapes. Through this instrument, I seek to weave the contemplative of Buddhism and the cosmic dimensions of Korean court music into a dialogue with the spirit of individualism and technological exploration. The electric komungo becomes a bridge between past and future, acoustic and digital, inward reflection and outward expansion. It is here, in this convergence of ancient and modern, human and machine, that a new, distinctive musical voice emerges – alive, transcendent, and fully my own.



Both my Living Tones compositions and Komungo Improvisations have grown into a diverse array of creative music projects, taking me across the USA, Canada, Europe, Asia, Russia, New Zealand, Australia, and South America. With the electric komungo, I have assumed the roles of creator, director, composer, and performer, developing evening-length multimedia productions. These ambitious works – grand in scale and intricate in design – demand precise technical coordination, seamlessly integrating the electric komungo with digital imagery, dance, sensors, stage props, light projection, narrative elements, and computer programs. Touring with these complex productions has allowed me to share this singular fusion of music, technology, and performance art with audiences around the world.

The komungo, with its more limited range of sounds compared to Western instruments, presented a challenge in engaging fully with the expansive sonic vocabulary of Western improvisers. Yet by listening deeply to their music, I was able to respond through the komungo's skeletal, resonant voice. In many improvisations, I became the bone, and they the muscle. While I was profoundly shaped by their masterful playing, at times they, too, were influenced by my sounds – some even echoing my komungo expressions on their own instruments, following my lead as the music unfolded. Many of the great master musicians I have collaborated with began by immersing themselves in the timbre and subtlety of the komungo and electric komungo, listening intently, and ultimately crafting unique sonic bouquets in the moment, born from this shared dialogue.

Had I not met Henry Kaiser in San Francisco, I might never have begun my journey as an improviser. Henry had a remarkable talent for absorbing others' music and blending it into his own style – he even mimicked the sound of the komungo. Playing with him was invigorating; each new sound he made pushed my komungo in unexpected directions, constantly reshaping my own voice. Through Henry, I met Elliott Sharp in New York City. For many years, I performed with Elliott in downtown New York and across the US, Canada, and Europe. What kept our collaboration alive was the continual surprise of each other's creativity. If we had performed similar patterns and sounds every time, we would have grown bored. Our fans seemed moved by this unexpected and individual approach. Our audience was always looking for a new and novel experience they had never encountered before.

Henry also introduced me to the German guitarist Hans Reichel, who invited me to join his ensemble in Germany several times. His saxophone is playful and inventive, often echoing

my komungo sounds on his instrument. One of our most memorable performances was at the Berlin Free Music Festival in 1999, documented in the second set of Komungo Improvisations CD 7, a collection of exceptional recordings.

Through Henry, I also met Derek Bailey and Bill Frisell. Derek's guitar work was intellectual and abstract, challenging me to think about how a single instrument could be played in radically different ways. At the Company Week Festival in London, I heard that Derek was playing quite forcefully on his electric guitar. I, too, ended up making very aggressive sounds on the electric komungo. I only played once with Bill Frisell. Bill's guitar music is more harmonious and comfortable, and I heard his gentle melodies were prominent. However, together we created huge sonic waves by bending notes, pushing the sound away, and extending repetitive sonic spirals. The audience was excited by how two performers who had never met before could produce music like that.

My komungo attracted these guitarists as a fretted string instrument. They all played electric guitar. Balancing the volume was difficult, and I was challenged by the music-making between the vulnerable acoustic komungo and the massive sound of the electric guitar. I decided to push the limits of the komungo. Eventually, I developed live interactive pieces for the electric komungo by processing its sound through a personal computer program, electrifying and altering the sounds via MIDI foot pedal control using a custom Max/MSP patch. In live performances, various musical parameters – such as texture, rhythm, intensity, and the processing program itself – are controlled in real time by a series of MIDI foot pedals. The live processing effects for the electric komungo include pitch accumulation, comb filtering, looping, shuffling, delay, and resonance modification.

In Saturn's Rings, the rings of Saturn's spinning moons are interpreted for electric komungo. I imagined the ever-repeating circle of the ring and some of the moons departing from the gravity of their orbit. In Exceeding, I pushed my limits to go beyond the common ways things are done. I also strive to transcend the reality of contemporary capitalism and pop culture. I do not create music as a commercial commodity but to exceed common expectations.

In 4th century Korea, when the komungo was newly built, a black crane (a bird of the sky) flew to the instrument. Thus, it was named the "black crane zither." Later, it became known as komungo, meaning "black zither." The ancient komungo was a mystical black crane instrument.

Joy of Flying is inspired by the black crane that flew to the ancient komungo, as well as the birds I encountered in Java and Sulawesi Islands in Indonesia, Yucatan in Mexico, and Joshua Tree in California during my komungo performance tours. These birds are very meaningful to me now in relation to my komungo solo. I developed Joy of Flying around three ideas: black crane, mystical birds, and joyous flying beyond boundaries.

I founded the Quagmire Trio with William Parker and Oliver Lake in 1995, when I was invited by the Korea Society to organize my Living Tones concert for the memorial event of the Korean Town riot in Los Angeles. Since then, the ensemble has toured, and I have also played with them individually. I love William's energy on bass. His musical space is grand and deep. With his bass, I feel my komungo is rich and fully supported. He is possessed by his sound, and his bass flows like timeless streaming water. I am deeply connected to his profound energy as I play komungo with intense concentration. As a result, he and I have played together something akin to Korean shamanic kut music, pushing energy higher and higher through long repetitions of the same rhythmic grooves. William calls it "trance music." Oliver's saxophone playing is like poetry, contrasting with the linear music I create on the komungo. I also understand his visual sonority. He and I can create a comprehensive dialogue between komungo and saxophone. Even though he has a much more colorful vocabulary and my komungo produces a monophonic impression, I can connect with him through my inner energy.

In 1990, Joseph Celli (oboe/English horn) and I founded No World Improvisation, an ensemble that rejected the notion of the "Third World," embracing instead the idea of "No World" – a world without boundaries.

In 2004, I co-founded a new ensemble, Asian Sound Revolution, with Min Xiao-Fen for Cornell University's East Asian Studies event, and again for Yale University's East Asian Studies program in 2013. Over the years, we toured extensively and expanded the ensemble with other musicians. Min and I share such an intuitive understanding that rehearsal is often unnecessary. I also collaborated for many years with Gerry Hemingway on different projects, notably on my Digital Buddha, performing together across Korea, the Dominican Republic, Spain, Indonesia, and the USA. In our duo improvisations, Pale Blue Dot and Unknot, he brought lyrical intuition and vivid sound painting on percussion, enriching and expanding the musical conversation.



Kim plays her Nong Rock with Kronos Quartet
at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center (1992)

Jin Hi Kim

Composer and innovative komungo virtuoso Jin Hi Kim is a Guggenheim Fellow, United States Artists Fellow, and recipient of other prestigious awards. She has performed her compositions worldwide, including at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Kennedy Center. In 2021, Grammy.com described her as “A musical philosopher and radiator of electricity.”

Kim bridges her ancient Korean roots with contemporary American culture, pioneering the introduction of the 4th century komungo (geomungo) to the international music scene. Through her compositional method Living Tones, she has created cross-cultural works performed with the Kronos Quartet, American Composers Orchestra, and Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

Over four decades, she has transformed the komungo into a contemporary instrument, developing the world’s only electric komungo with live interactive computer programming for large-scale multimedia performances. Her works – such as Ghost Komungobot, Touching The Moons, Digital Buddha, and A Ritual for Covid-19 – combine Asian mythology with cutting-edge technology. She is currently developing a komungobot, an algorithmic virtual robotic instrument that interacts with her electric komungo. Jin Hi Kim is Assistant Professor of the Practice in Music at Wesleyan University.





Above, Kim with John Cage

Left, Kim with Charles Amirkhanyan, Trimpin, Annea Lockwood, John Cage, Tania León, Conlon Nancarrow, at Composer-To-Composer in Telluride, Colorado 1989

"This is new music/world music at its finest, beyond political correctness, into the realm of the sublime, where words and cultural postures fall away." Josef Woodard, LA Times

"A gorgeously tactile piece that moved easily between an earthy folksiness and meditative refinement." Allan Kozinn, NY Times

"The delicacy of her effects (and of the Kronos Quartet's playing) were constantly riveting." John Rockwell, NY Times

"Moved through the orchestra like a curious outsider, wondering at the range of sounds it can make and using it as an extension of twangy vocabulary of solo komungo." Anne Midgette, NY Times



"The most exciting of the instrumental imports (to orchestra) was the set of barrel drums used by Jin Hi Kim in her own vibrant composition, Monk Dance ...her propulsive solos on drums took over, leaving the audience breathless." David Baker, New Haven Register

"(Kim) promises thoughtful, shimmering East-West amalgams in combinations that are both new and unlikely to be repeated." Peter Watrous, NY Times

"With her electric komungo, she floated sustained tones and rudimentary melodies or plucked twangs suggesting a jaw-harp or hinted at the bent notes of the blues." Jon Pareles, NY Times

"She performs brilliantly and evocatively on an amplified komungo." Joseph McLellan, Washington Post



Left, top: Quagmire Trio William Parker, Jin Hi Kim, and Oliver Lake at Merkin Hall, NYC 1995

Left middle: Hans Reichel, Jin Hi Kim, Carlos Zingaro, and Rudigal Carl at Free Music Festival, Berlin, Germany 1999

Left bottom: Asian Sound Revolution: Min Xiao-Fen, Jin Hi Kim, and Gerry Hemingway at Detroit Institute of Art 2025

Above: Kim's Piri Quartet performed by national living treasure, Chung Jae Guk, with musicians from the National Gugak Center and Joseph Celli, Merkin Hall, NYC 1995

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