

SUSAN RAND BROWN



Left: Jin Hi Kim, *Autumn Meditation at Lake Mohegan, Connecticut*, 2014. Photo: Dustin DeMilio.

## Jin Hi Kim

In Jin Hi Kim's high-ceilinged studio in Bridgeport, CT, a bronze statue of Shiva, Hindu god of destruction, shares a shelf with a pair of black compact speakers used to amplify sounds from her electric komungo—a six-foot-long, classical Korean stringed instrument that she redesigned to take advantage of computer MIDI technology. She also plays a traditional komungo.

Still, she cautions, "What kind of music you make is more important than making a new instrument." The Buddhist principle of life in constant flux inspires Kim to flights of experimental sound technology, harmonizing Eastern and Western approaches to life as well as music-making. Demonstrating in her studio, she presses her left hand gently on the wooden instrument's strings, while holding a pencil-sized bamboo stick in her right hand to pluck individual strings, creating ornamented phrases as if weaving melodies in the air.

Kim was born in South Korea in the late 1950s, after Japan had occupied the country and sidelined its traditional culture. Her parents found a high school where she could study komungo, ordinarily played by Confucian scholars for meditation. After mastering this difficult instrument, Kim saw herself as a musician who could integrate cross-cultural

work with emerging technology. She emigrated to the West Coast in her early 20s and received an MFA in electronic music and recording media from Mills College—a renowned center for experimental music. During the 1980s, Terry Riley and John Cage, icons of minimalist music, were her mentors. Since then, this Guggenheim Fellowship-winning musician has been blending Eastern and Western traditions, performing solo and composing for string quartets, orchestras, jazz ensembles and creative improvisers.

A score commissioned by the Kronos Quartet, notated with calligraphic symbols Kim created to illustrate to Western musicians the articulation of each tone, is spread on her work table. Vocalizing in a haunting vibrato, Kim demonstrates her performance technique. "String players can make a lot of living tones," she says. "They can bend and shape the note." Kim's own seemingly limitless repertoire of sounds is cascading and calming. Each note is given a life of its own. She describes this philosophy of composing and performing as Living Tones. Kim has spread awareness of this concept at many universities and conservatories across the country including Wesleyan University, where she is an assistant professor of music.

Her multimedia work *Digital Buddha*, for komungo and electric komungo, was performed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in conjunction with the 2014 exhibition *Silla: Korea's Golden Kingdom*. Other recent commissions include *One Sky II* (2018), dedicated to the

reunification of Korea and performed by the Wesleyan University Orchestra, and *Child of War* (2014), a choral piece inspired by Kim Phuc, the Vietnamese "girl in the picture" (the iconic image of a child running after being burned by napalm), and performed by the Mendelssohn Choir of Connecticut. "She goes around the world, talking about forgiveness. I find that incredibly inspiring," says Kim.

*Sound Calendar*, a fusion of art and science, is one of Kim's current multimedia composition projects in which sounds are partially crowd-sourced (the ambient sounds, images and details about participation can be found on her website). Current audio contributions range from the quotidian (fried eggs cooking) to the poetic (Indonesian bamboo bushes) to the cataclysmic (floods and volcanoes). One of Kim's goals is to demonstrate the beauty as well as the devastation of our sonic environment due to erosion of rivers and forests. Such changes are best understood through close listening. The music Kim composes from these sounds is posted online as sound-scores. "You have to imagine you are above the earth and can hear sounds from any country, simultaneously," she says. The project is sponsored by Wesleyan's College of the Environment.

Kim is also fascinated by artificial intelligence and has designed a Komungobot, a virtual robotic instrument. This, her third komungo, is programmed to improvise in response to her own playing. Her *Ghost Komungobot* is an interdisciplinary performance piece created at CultureHub, an incubator for creativity in partnership with New York's La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club. Making music using robotics continues to be another step in Kim's journey to spread awareness of Living Tones—those subtle nuances of sound, detected in Buddhist temples and described by Western philosophers and poets as music of the spheres, that surround the attentive listener.

Susan Rand Brown is a poet, art critic and frequent contributor to Art New England. She writes for Provincetown Arts and The Provincetown Banner.

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