

Akron Symphony: Jinjoo Cho, kitchen magnets & the Korngold Concerto

by Jarrett Hoffman



Sometimes it feels appropriate to get right down to business. Last week, when I got in touch with [Jinjoo Cho](#), that would have meant delving immediately into Korngold's *Concerto*, which she played in the final round at the 2014 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis enroute to winning the Gold Medal. She'll revisit the piece with Christopher Wilkins and the Akron Symphony this Saturday, March 16 at 8:00 pm at E.J. Thomas Hall.

But there was something I'd read at the bottom of her bio that I needed to clear up first. So when she picked up the phone, I quickly put on my reporter's hat and began to investigate.

"In the beginning they were more like souvenirs," Cho said of her collection of kitchen magnets. "I would get one that reminded me of someplace. Now I feel like it's become a full-on obsession. Whenever I see a cute one, I just can't not buy it."

She got her first one in high school — a gift from her mom from the Grand Canyon. After she graduated and started living alone, the magnets began to accumulate. Her favorite is from Muir Woods in California. "I went there for a friend's wedding, and it was just really magical. Whenever I look at the magnet, I think of the woods and the amazing trees, and just the whole vibe from the forest. It makes me happy."

Just as those magnets started out as mere souvenirs, the Korngold Concerto entered Cho's life as basically another gig. "An orchestra in Korea was looking for somebody to play it, and they were having trouble finding a soloist who was willing to take on the task. I feel

like it's become quite popular in the last five years or so, but at that time, maybe eight or nine years ago, there was nobody who was regularly playing it.”

Cho's reaction when the orchestra approached her? “I said, ‘Sure, why not,’ and just tackled it. And I remember the concert was really special. I'll never forget the way the second movement came together with the winds. And how all the voices and rhythms that didn't make much sense when I was playing by myself or with piano — they started to click together, and it became this fantastical narrative. I just completely fell in love with the piece at that moment, and I've been enjoying it ever since.” (Click [here](#) to read our interview with Cho following her 2014 win in Indianapolis.)



Korngold is known as one of the most influential composers of film scores, and this concert from 1945 actually includes themes from several of his scores. Cho doesn't think of herself as a particular fan of movies or movie music, but she is drawn to music from that time. She mentioned singers like Edith Piaf and Judy Garland who sang with backup orchestras, producing a sound that was “very distinctly that era,” she said. “It's quite magical, and I try to create that same sense of magic in this piece.”

Another reason she enjoys the Korngold: she finds that it affords her more room for interpretation than the standard violin concertos by Tchaikovsky, Sibelius, and Brahms.

“There isn't such a thick layer of tradition that goes along with it, so I feel a little bit freer.”

I asked her to say more about the tradition associated with those pieces. “You want to come up with an interpretation that is distinctively yours, and you always try to do that,” she said. “But at the same time, you grew up listening to these pieces, not just in concert halls but also in studio classes. People that you looked up to when you were little — they all played them. So it's not so much that you are weighed down from this tradition, but rather affected by it, almost in an inevitable way. You can't help it. It's possible to come up with a fresh interpretation — you always challenge yourself that way — but it's more difficult.”

Cho said she played the Korngold quite a bit for a season or two following the competition in 2014. “Then I stopped, and I think that was a good thing,” she said. “You always need a little bit of a break from pieces that mean a lot to you.” In recent months, she has brought the Concerto to the Incheon Philharmonic in Korea and the North

Carolina Symphony. “This season has been quite heavily Korngold, and it happened totally by coincidence. Everybody just wanted to hear it.”

That made me curious to ask her how presenters select concertos. “You know, being a soloist doesn’t leave a lot of choice up to you,” she said. “Often you are chosen and given a limited number of options. I just enjoy every task and challenge that comes my way, especially if it’s with great collaboration.”

Just for fun, let’s end with something else that Cho collects: stationery and pencils. She loves giving people handwritten thank-you cards and decorating her room. But these things also come in handy for her studio at the Schulich School of Music at McGill University. “When students are forgetting to write stuff down, I’ll give them a passive-aggressive gift of a case of pencils,” she said.

Ouch. But if they need some ice for that burn, no worries — a gift from her collection of stickers should do the trick.

Saturday’s program also includes John Adams’ A Short Ride in a Fast Machine, excerpts from John Williams’ Close Encounters of the Third Kind, and Richard Strauss’s Also sprach Zarathustra — part of a theme centered around the 60th anniversary of NASA and the 50th anniversary of the Moon landing. Christopher Wilkins will discuss the program at 7:00 pm. Tickets are available [here](#).

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