

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra: a conversation with violinist Moonhee Kim

by Stephanie Manning



When Moonhee Kim’s violin teacher said he wanted her to learn the Prokofiev Violin Concerto, she was hoping he would say the second one. Of the composer’s two concerti for the instrument, No. 2 is more commonly performed, and it was the one Kim was most familiar with. But Concerto No. 1 was what he had in mind — and as it turns out, that was the perfect choice.

On Sunday, May 8 at Severance Music Center, Kim will perform Prokofiev’s *Violin Concerto No. 1* with the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra under the direction of Vinay Parameswaran. The 7:00 pm program will also feature Reena Esmail’s *She Will Transform You*, Mendelssohn’s *Verleih uns Frieden*, and Rachmaninoff’s *Symphonic Dances*. Tickets are available [online](#).

“I can’t imagine doing a different concerto for this performance, because it’s become one of my favorite pieces that I’ve ever played,” Kim said in a recent phone interview. “The more I talk about No. 1, the more I hear things like, ‘Oh, I heard that concerto for the first time the other day, and I fell in love with it immediately.’ Even though Prokofiev 2 is so much more accessible, I think there’s this appeal to the first one that really draws people in.”

For Kim, something that set the work apart immediately was its technical demands. “This piece has been quite a challenge because it has a lot of technical elements that I’m not quite as used to — it’s a bit more contemporary,” she explained. “It’s definitely been a journey trying to get the technique down, but it’s also been incredibly rewarding trying to incorporate musical elements into those aspects of the piece.”

Arguably the concerto's most unusual quality is its structure. Prokofiev turned the typical three-movement, fast-slow-fast pattern on its head, instead opting for slow-fast-slow. As Kim tells it, the entire piece is a process of tangling and unraveling.

“The first movement starts very solemn — it has a main theme, and then it unravels into these chaotic, technical passages all throughout. It ends with the same theme in the flute, with the violin as kind of this accompanimental figure. The second movement is very, very fast and straightforward, and really technically challenging, but it all kind of unwinds in the third movement, which starts kind of sarcastically and has a very flirty theme to it. And again, the entire concerto unravels and it concludes with the same main theme that comes up in the beginning.”

That full-circle moment, where the opening theme makes a concluding appearance, has become meaningful for Kim on a personal level. “It reminds me of just a reflection on life. How you start with one thing, then it gets chaotic and different and experimental, but in the end you always return to this solemnness and this reflectiveness. So it's been a really special piece for me.”

Getting to perform a concerto with COYO is also a full-circle moment for the Beachwood High School senior, who called her six seasons with the group “absolutely transformative.” She recognized that it's been a period of growth not only for her, but also the orchestra as a whole. “We've had so many challenges with COVID, but the orchestra has really persevered and put everything into these performances. It's amazing to see how young minds can really persist through such difficult times, and it's a special thing that we can use music as a binding factor.”

With graduation on the horizon, what's next for Kim? Her college search process was all about finding a balance between her musical and academic pursuits — and she's confident that she's found it at Brown University, where she'll spend the next four years. “For a long time, it really felt like I betrayed a part of myself, you know, by not pursuing music,” she said. “But academics and music, they both have to coexist in my life, and they both complement each other in a way where if I'm just pursuing music, I have this intellectual factor that's not satisfied.”

While at Brown, she looks forward to studying subjects like literature, economics, and statistics, while continuing her musical studies through performance opportunities and taking lessons with a teacher in Boston. And she's found a steadfast supporter in COYO conductor Vinay Parameswaran, a Brown alumnus himself.

“I didn’t want to let music go by just pursuing academics, and I didn’t want to let my academic side go by just pursuing music. So I’m extremely lucky to have Brown as an option to explore both, and I’m excited to see where it takes me.”

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