

Cooper International Violin Competition: catching up with Seohyun Kim

by Mike Telin



After the final notes of the 2022 Cooper International Violin Competition had been played, the jury announced that the First Prize winner was Seohyun Kim of South Korea.

In addition to the prestige that comes with winning, the 13-year-old was awarded \$US 20,000, a two-year partnership with MKI Artists, and the opportunity to give the world

premiere of a new work by Jeff Scott. Kim will also have exclusive rights to the piece for two years, during which time she will be loaned an instrument from Jonathan Solars Fine Violins made by Marco Antonio Cerin in Venice circa 1785-90.

Earlier this morning I caught up with the young violinist via Zoom from her home in Seoul and began by asking her how she felt when she realized she had won.

Seohyun Kim: I was so excited. Actually, when I decided to participate in the competition I didn't expect to win. But when I did, I got really excited.

Mike Telin: Why did you decide to enter the Cooper Competition?

SK: I have participated in many national competitions in Korea but my first international competition was the Menuhin in Richmond. But that was held online because of COVID. After that I entered other international competitions that were also held online like the Ysaye and the Leonid Kogan. *[In 2021 she won both.]* So I wanted to participate in one that was in person and I thought the Cooper would be a good opportunity for me.

MT: *Did you enjoy yourself during the week?*

SK: Of course, everything was perfect. Being with friends making music — and the Oberlin campus is so beautiful. The whole week was wonderful — I felt like I was in a dream.

MT: *I enjoyed your first and second round performances very much but your Brahms was stunning. Why did you choose that concerto?*

SK: There were six concertos in the final round repertoire, and I wanted to choose the most challenging one for me. My goal was not to get a prize but to learn [as much as possible] about the concerto by preparing for the competition.

MT: *When did you begin learning it?*

SK: I started learning it in March [2022] for the recorded preliminary round. I had to submit the video by May 1.

MT: *Wow, I thought you would say at least a year. What were the challenges of learning the piece?*

SK: Technically it was kind of hard, but it was also fun to learn how to express the different characters in it. The first and second movements are full of sadness and desperation, but the third has a lot of happiness.

MT: *How did you feel about your performance?*

SK: I was happy with it. When I was first learning it I thought the concerto was just powerful and heavy. But the more I practiced it I realized just how beautiful and elegant it is.

MT: *It also has a beautiful orchestra part. Did you enjoy working with Gerhardt Zimmermann and the Canton Symphony?*

SK: Yes, very much. He was so amazing — he treated me like a granddaughter. I was so comfortable during the rehearsal and the performance. And the orchestra played wonderfully so I enjoyed playing with them very much.

MT: *Now to the big question. You won an amazing prize package — have you had time to think about how you will spend the \$20,000?*



The winner with Thomas and Evon Cooper.

SK: Actually, I didn't think I would win first prize so I haven't really thought about it. But I do need to think about it now.

MT: I understand that you started playing the violin at the age of 5 — why did you choose that instrument?

SK: First I played the piano but I wasn't interested in it. So my mom suggested the violin. I started learning it at a Suzuki academy near my home and it was quite fun. I'm a fast learner so I enjoyed it right away.

MT: So it was like love at first sight?

SK: (Laughing) Yes.

MT: Do you come from a musical family?

SK: No, my dad works for a financial company and my mom works at an IT company. But my mom's cousin is a violinist. She studied at the Royal College of Music in London. I've always loved her playing and it inspired me to play the violin.

MT: Do you want to say hello to your teacher, Sunny Lee?

SK: Yes, she is a great teacher and I think meeting her is one of the biggest gifts for me in my life. I'm so lucky to have a teacher like her. I also want to thank Hyunjung Kim. She's the pianist who works with me in Korea. Her performances are always musically inspiring for me.

MT: A good pianist who is fun to work with is important.

SK: Yes. During the competition I worked with Tatiana [Lokhina]. I really liked her. She's a wonderful player and I think that we fit together very well.

MT: Now to a different topic — how do you spend your time when you're not playing the violin?

SK: I like to play with my sister and my dog. I like to go for walks, to read, and watch TV.

MT: How old is your sister?

SK: She's two years younger than me. She's eleven.

MT: And what kind of dog do you have?

SK: She's a poodle — Minji — it's a Korean name.

MT: That's cool. People should know you have a poodle.

SK: Yeah, she's cute.

MT: Again, congratulations and thank you for taking the time to talk. Is there anything else you would like to say?

SK: I just want to say that I was so happy to meet all the talented violinists at the Cooper Competition. And there are so many people from around the world who have congratulated me through social media and I want to take this opportunity to thank them. And it was a pleasure to meet you.

MT: It was a pleasure to meet you too, and I'm sure we will be talking again in the future.

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