

CIPC for Young Artists Senior winner: A conversation with Saehyun Kim

by Mike Telin



A native of Seoul, South Korea, 16-year-old Saehyun Kim is no stranger to international competitions — in 2022 he won First Prize at both the Morningside Music Bridge International Concerto Competition and the New England Conservatory (NEC) Preparatory School Concerto Competition.

Kim has appeared as a soloist with the Sendai Philharmonic, and Korean

Symphony, and was invited to give interviews and performances for national music channels such as JTBC Classic Today and KBS Classic FM. Currently he is a Young Scholar of the Lang Lang International Music Foundation and a junior at Walnut Hill School for the Arts, studying with HaeSun Paik, faculty at the New England Conservatory.

On Saturday July 15, Kim added another win to his list when he was awarded First Prize (\$10,000) in the Senior Division of the Cleveland International Piano Competition for Young Artists. He was also awarded the Audience Prize, Senior Division (\$500) and the Junior Jury Prize, Senior Division (\$500).

I had the pleasure of speaking to Saehyun Kim via Zoom last week.

Mike Telin: Congratulations on your win.

Saehyun Kim: Thank you.

MT: Very impressive performances in all three rounds. I'm curious, what were your thoughts when you realized you had won?

SK: It all happened very quickly so I'm not sure if I remember it clearly, but of course I was very happy and excited. But I also felt a lot of responsibility at that moment because as a first prize winner there is a lot I have to prove after the competition win.

MT: What do you have to prove?

SK: That I can keep developing as a musician. This is not my peak.

MT: Exactly. There's a whole career ahead of you. Your first round repertoire was very interesting, and I must say, your "Scarbo" was just beautiful. Why did you choose those three pieces?

SK: I chose the Haydn *Sonata in D* because I thought it would be a nice opening to the recital. It's light and it's humorous, so I thought people would enjoy it as the first piece of the program. I added "Scarbo" because my teacher suggested that I learn the piece to study coloring on the piano. And to think about the piece in different perspectives, like first person, second person, third person. It's actually my first Ravel piece and wow, it was an interesting experience. It's a piece that contains everything. It has difficult technique, but also poetic elements. A lot of drama, and a lot of evil qualities as well. But at the same time a lot of humor, but it's a very different type of humor.

I chose the *Polonaise-fantasia in A-flat* by Chopin because, first of all, Chopin is my favorite composer, but it is also one of my favorite pieces by him. I think it's unique in the sense that he wrote it at a later period of his life, and it's a very spiritual piece.

I was a little worried when I chose it for the competition because everyone has their own interpretation of the piece, so I just tried to have my own voice. I've played it for quite some time — I first played it when I was 12, which is not a good age to attempt it. I've brought it back a couple of times and every time it's totally different. So I wanted to see where I am as a musician by testing out this repertoire.

MT: Your Brahms Piano Trio No. 1 in B was fantastic. Do you play a lot of chamber music?

SK: I go to an arts high school and we take chamber music almost every semester. So yes, I do play a lot of chamber music. We have about two rehearsals each week and one lesson. We get to form trios or quartets or piano quintets, so chamber music is a big part of my life. It's really great to play with my friends and it's an interesting switch from talking about school life. Suddenly we're in front of an instrument and we're totally different people.

MT: Did you enjoy working with your Cleveland Orchestra colleagues — violinist Jessica Lee and cellist Dane Johansen?

SK: Yes, very much. I think they're the best people I've ever played with. Whatever I did on the piano, they immediately reacted to it — like when I made sudden tempo changes or color changes. They're very sensitive and I think we worked well as a team.

MT: You just said that Chopin is your favorite composer, and so I guess it was clear from the beginning that you would play one of his concertos.

SK: Yes. I played the Second Concerto in a competition when I was 12, so I wanted to try out the E minor. Both are very beautiful, but the E minor is larger in scale. It has more ups and downs, a bit more drama, a bit more tragedy and more contrast. And I was fortunate enough to get to play it with the orchestra. It was a wonderful experience. When I was playing the concerto, I didn't feel like I was playing in a competition. I was just enjoying Chopin's music.

MT: Did you enjoy working with conductor Stephen Byess?

SK: Yes, he was a very nice person. When I played for him in our individual meeting, he told me that my interpretation was very clear and I suggested a couple of ideas here and there and he was so nice and open to new ideas. It was a joy, too.

MT: You have had success in a couple of competitions. What do you learn from entering them?

SK: I enter competitions mostly because I get to perform in front of a large audience and also a large online audience around the world. Of course, the competing part is stressful — I would be lying if I said it's not — but competitions are a great opportunity to share my music and test out repertoire.

What I learn in competitions is that just because you won first prize doesn't mean you play better than everyone. Just because you got eliminated doesn't mean that you played the worst. It all depends on the jury. And the most important thing is that I trust my relationship with music and believe in what I do. Anything can happen in a competition so it's important to accept whatever result I receive and not put too much meaning into it.

MT: I like your answer very much. I'm switching topics now. You made a big decision to move to the United States. Why was it important for you to do so?

SK: I lived in Korea for 14 years — I was born and raised there. I think my time in Korea really helped me push myself, and always search for something more in myself. Also, I found the atmosphere and the culture very competitive, and I don't think that benefits anyone. I don't think competitiveness and music go together.

When I first came here I was actually so shocked because it was like everyone was living in their own world, whereas in Korea, it's all about uniformity. We all have to have a similar style of hair or similar style of outfits, similar style in taste of food or movies or anything. There's always something that you have to follow. But here it's a lot more diverse — it's more about finding your own path in life, and I found that very intriguing.

MT: Along those lines of following your own path, what are your plans for the rest of the summer?

SK: I'm going back to Massachusetts, the suburbs near Boston, and I will relax for a bit. And then I'm planning on building my repertoire, and trying to find something new in myself. Also, I'm a rising senior so I need to get my college applications ready.

MT: Was this your first time in Cleveland?

SK: My second time. My first was when I was here recording the first round. The people here are really nice, and they're very warm and very humble. I've had the best time here.

MT: I'll say thank you on behalf of Cleveland. You said that you enjoy playing tennis, did you have any time to watch Wimbledon?

SK: I watched some of the highlights, like the highlights from the Djokovic/Sinner match and I just watched Alcaraz win the final point against Djokovic.

MT: Is there anyone you would like to say hello to or send a thanks to?

SK: My teacher at NEC, HaSun Paik. She's more than a teacher to me, she gives me great advice, not just about music, but also in life. She actually had a concert herself on the day of my finals and she still called me in the afternoon and was helping me to stay calm and prepare for what was coming.

I'd like to thank my family, they're always there for me. My mom came here to Cleveland for the finals. And my two teachers in Korea who taught me since I was in elementary school, Sojung Shin and Youngmi Cho. They're both wonderful teachers, and they've seen me grow — literally grow. They're always surprised when I go back to Korea and I'm taller.

And a big thank you to Mrs. Laura Beytas and Mr. Erol Beytas, they were our host family during the competition. They were so nice and helpful, driving us to places and taking us to restaurants.

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