



THE Q+A

Ji Su Jung

The newest member of Curtis's faculty aims to cultivate marimba fans.

BY
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PERCUSSIONISTS typically toil at the back of the orchestra stage, surrounded by a phalanx of instruments. But Ji Su Jung, a virtuoso of the marimba, is increasingly stepping out front and center, whether appearing as a soloist with the Baltimore and Houston Symphony Orchestras, presenting recitals of Bach, Debussy, and the Beatles, or tackling Steve Reich's intricate Sextet with the Percussion Collective, the renowned ensemble she joined in 2018. Ms. Jung is a winner of the 2022 Avery Fisher Career Grant, the latest in a raft of notable prizes, and is a graduate of the Yale School of Music.

where she completed her graduate studies in 2020.

This fall, the entrepreneurial Ms. Jung joins the Curtis timpani and percussion faculty alongside her former Yale (and Peabody Institute) mentor, percussion luminary Robert Van Sice. "I never thought that could happen. It's a beautiful environment to be with him and all these students here," she tells *Overtones*. Ms. Jung shares her excitement about this new role, and discusses her Avery Fisher win, her rise in the male-dominated world of percussion, and her passion for bringing classical music to new audiences.

Ryan: We're thrilled to have you with us at Curtis. As you begin to work with these talented young students, are there any words of wisdom you wish to impart?

Ji Su: Music should be about sharing. The moment that it comes to be about yourself, the music becomes a soulless spirit. You should only make music if you want to be in a position to share. It can be kind of dangerous for us to lose the purpose of doing this. The whole point is to present the music to the audience and the listener and be connected with them.

You began your musical journey at age four, a rarity in the world of percussion. What drew you to the marimba as a child?

I think it was the weight the sound has. My mom is living proof that I was kind of "haunted" by the instrument. I was so captivated. It was my voice instead of my own sometimes, and it became my own language to use. I was playing piano, violin, flute, and marimba, so I had a choice to make, and I thought none of them was as interesting. That was my first love.

What does it personally mean to receive the Avery Fisher Career Grant, and what has the \$25,000 prize enabled you to do?

It means so much to me to be the

very first percussionist ever to receive this prestigious award, not only for myself but for the whole community, as both a percussionist and a female percussionist. There will be a lot of commissioning of solo marimba pieces soon. Currently, I'm working with a few female composers throughout the world, not only in America, but Europe, and part of Asia, so we can cover the whole world with female musicians. I'm currently working on something to bring out female musicians and new voices. Female composer power!

Women and people of color have made significant strides within the historically male-dominated field of percussion, but progress has been slow. As a solo artist and in your work with various ensembles, how have you faced implicit gender or racial bias?

It's certainly a very different world now. Even the Imma Hogg Competition that I won in 2018, and the Avery Fisher Grant that I received in 2022, are very hopeful for me. I went through a lot of situations where you could not be a percussionist or successful because you're a girl. I see that there is change, but I wouldn't say it's the easiest world to be in as a female and person of color. There is a lot of growth still needed, and there are fantastic people working toward that mission, so I'm more hopeful than ever before.

How do you aim to attract a wider audience but also evolve and challenge yourself as a musician?

In my case what's been successful is to deal with the repertoire. I always include in my concert repertoire not only contemporary marimba pieces but also arrangements of Bach, Debussy, Ravel, or Chopin. So, there's familiarity. The second thing might be collaborating with different instruments. Let's say playing Piazzolla with a violinist or Tōru Takemitsu with a flutist. There's

always a better way to approach your audience without scaring them off. I do think about the audience more than anything when I choose the repertoire for concerts. I want to connect with the people there.

How do you feel your performances can spark the imagination, interest, and appreciation of marimba and classical music with audiences?

I think giving as many live performances as possible. It's important for me to not only play concerts in bigger cities but also visit places where it might be challenging for them to have these kinds of concerts. The Internet and live streaming are obviously there, but I don't think that they're the same. One time I played Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* on marimba at a juvenile detention center in South Korea. There was this part in "Summer," and I was starting to listen to the audience because it was a quiet movement. The whole room was singing together. I'd never felt that before. It was this beautiful community feeling that classical music can connect with whomever in the world regardless of situations or circumstances.

Who were your musical role models growing up in the suburbs of Seoul?

For the longest time, it was my parents. There was always music when I was around my parents—literally, 24/7 music. I think the way they dedicated their lives to supporting me in that way is probably why I'm able to be doing whatever I'm doing these days. I was listening to a lot of Hillary Hahn (Violin '99), Sarah Chang, and Marin Alsop's recordings that I admired, thinking that I want to be one of them when I grew up.

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