

Music for Life

Korean-born concert pianist Michelle Kim recently moved to Hong Kong from New York. Described as an artist of intense passion and profound sincerity, she has performed with orchestras and in recital throughout the world, including major concert halls such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Chicago Cultural Center, the Teatro Massimo di Catania in Italy and the Sejong Cultural Center in Korea. Michelle began her musical studies at age four and gave her orchestral debut with the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra at age ten. She studied at The Juilliard School in New York where she earned her Bachelors and Masters of Music and garnered top prizes in international competitions. Here she shares with us two of her big passions in life – music and food. Michelle reckons that the best way to understand a culture is to listen to the music and experience the cuisine.



Photo: Sonmy Chung

You started the piano when you were very young – when did you decide that this is what you wanted to do in life?

Michelle Kim: I started playing the piano at the age of four. My parents were very driven and they also got me doing a lot of activities like painting and figure skating. I really enjoyed the piano, but my piano teacher was shocked that I didn't practise much, and told my parents that they had to get this kid to do more as I had exceptional talent! It was never a conscious choice to concentrate on the piano. I fell in love with it over and over again, it is my passion.

You obviously accepted the need for practise! How many hours does that take up and how do you prepare for a live appearance?

MK: I practise for six to eight hours a day, but that goes up to 12-plus hours before a concert. You have to live and breathe the music in order to prepare for a performance. For a couple of days or so before a concert, I cut out social activities; I have to empty myself. On the day of the concert, the way I practise is very methodical so that I can conserve my energy and be free on stage. But it is a wonderful experience to be able to

communicate directly with the audience and experience the joy you get from touching people's hearts, and the energy that the audience brings. I feel privileged to do that – I'm so glad now that my parents forced me to practise!

I approach recordings quite differently. The learning process is the same, but when you play live, it could be the best or the worst experience. It is very unforgiving – you can't go back and do it again. Recording can be repetitive and is not as inspiring but you can perfect it in a way that you want. You have the freedom to try different things in the way you want. Sometimes the result can be quite surprising.

Who are your favourite composers?

MK: If I have to pick one, it would be Johann Sebastian Bach, but I do like the Russian composers such as Rachmaninov and Prokofiev – I love their emotion. Bach, however, is a messenger, a vessel for the great gift of music. He never puts himself above the music, it is so heartfelt. I love the classical romanticism of Schubert and Mendelssohn, too. I am fortunate to be able to perform both styles. When people first see me on the concert stage, they don't expect me

to play Prokofiev. But I have that powerful quality to be able to play Prokofiev and Rachmaninov – I can rock the piano! – as well as the poetry of Schubert.

What about musicians? Who are your heroes?

MK: Yo-Yo Ma, not only because he is a wonderful musician but he also makes classical music accessible through collaboration with other artists. He is so innovative. That cultural exchange is very important in music. I am hoping to do something similar and collaborate with other performers in the future. You can share music, yet still keep the integrity of the great composers; in fact, this is a way to keep classical music alive. Yo-Yo Ma is able to make Western classical music accessible to a lot of different people, no matter what their politics, class or other boundaries. That is the power of music. It can really touch people. I was in Honduras a few years ago for a charity concert for underprivileged children. As an encore, I played "Silent Night", and the kids spontaneously started to sing along in Spanish. Before Honduras, I had performed at a concert in Paris – what a contrast!

Traveling must be very much a part of your job – do you like it?

MK: Fortunately I love traveling! At times it can be tiring, but most of the time I see it as one of the perks of being a concert pianist. I feel as if travel has helped me to grow as a person as well as an artist.

How do you like being here in Hong Kong?

MK: I love it. I consider myself to be a New Yorker, and I find the energy here to be very similar. I fell in love with Hong Kong when I first came through here to perform in China and I thought, "This is where I could live". We arrived here last April – my husband, who is Korean American, moved here with his job at Citibank. Hong Kong is a big city, yet you can be among the natural environment so easily. I love the transport system. Moving here has changed things a bit workwise, but with email it is easy to keep in touch, though it does mean more travel. But I wanted to seek new opportunities, so it is a fresh beginning.

When you are not playing the piano, what do you like to do?

MK: I love to eat – it is one of the great joys in life. It's like music

in that it is another way to learn about the culture of a place. I have a sensitive palate, so a particular taste will evoke a place. My best dining experience is a tiny, family-owned place in Sicily – I go there with friends and you eat whatever the chef decides to serve that day. It is the most incredible food and you feel like you are a part of the family. Food and music are universal languages.



I enjoy watching movies on DVD and getting the extras like the director's commentary. One of my favourite movies is *The Godfather* – I love the Italian background, the family dynamics and the music. Another favourite is *Citizen Kane*, which I can watch over and over. Paintings are another passion – I like Neoclassical as well as Impressionism. There is a link between painting and music – Debussy, Ravel, Monet, Manet – it was a whole movement, breaking with convention.

What do you like about the American Club?

MK: We come to the Town Club very often, as it is close to where we live. My husband does a lot of lunch meetings for work here. It's a home away from home for us. I love to come to here for the burgers and chicken wings and the Rueben sandwich – all those things I miss from New York! The people in the Club are great, the service is great – and so is the view!

When can we hear you live in Hong Kong?

MK: I am performing at the American Women's Association Charity on April 27 at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. I'm very excited about it and looking forward to it!



AWA Charity Concert
"To Hong Kong with Love"
presenting Michelle Kim
April 27, 2008 (Sunday) 8:00pm
HK Academy for Performing Arts
Tickets available from
Tom Lee Music Stores,
HKCEC, HKAPA, Fringe Club &
Asia World ExpoHK
Phone booking: 3128 8288
Internet booking: www.hkicketing.com