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Lasting Connections in Piano Pedagogy at Roosevelt University

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Dr. Yeeseon Kwon—Co-Chair of the Interdisciplinary Conservatory and Professor of Piano Musicianship and Piano Pedagogy in the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University—continually seeks ways to connect the academy with the larger world of piano study and performance. A deeply admired leader who stays on the forefront of both pedagogical and technological innovation, Kwon weaves her roles in teaching, research, and service together so that they all work in harmony to advance the field of piano pedagogy.

Kwon also develops and sustains purposeful relationships with an impressive array of people and organizations in her field. As she says, “I value making connections and building community.” Additionally, Kwon thoughtfully builds on current practices to work toward what is coming next. Brian Shepard, Chief Executive Officer of the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA), appreciates that Kwon is “focused on the future of music performance and music in society” and is “always looking for creative ways to move forward and to innovate.” Kwon’s dynamic, future-oriented focus is what drives her desire to develop new pedagogies, new approaches to working with emerging technology, and new initiatives to meet the needs of students and instructors alike.

Educator

Throughout her admirable career as a piano pedagogue, Kwon has maintained her attention on questions such as “How do we learn?” and “What impacts motivation?” Kevin Hampton, Dean of the Chicago College of Performing Arts, emphasizes that,

for Kwon, “it’s always about the students, whether research or contributing to new pedagogical approaches.” As Co-Chair of the Interdisciplinary Conservatory at Roosevelt University, Kwon has seen firsthand that many students want the flexibility and opportunities that can arise from working across disciplines. Similarly, MTNA’s Shepard admires the way that the various disciplines are “aligned and connected” under Kwon’s leadership; this alignment helps Kwon’s students to be successful in their future careers.

Kwon notes that students in the program she co-chairs are “people who said they want music AND” something else—such as those who are interested in arts administration, health, or the entertainment business. In their conservatory, Kwon and her colleagues want to ensure that they meet the needs of students today, when most music and theatre graduates will necessarily work in melded fields. Of course, Kwon says, jobs in orchestras and education will continue to be available, but other positions which draw on multiple fields

are emerging, such as in music and dance therapy, arts management, production and sound engineering, for example. As a result, Kwon highlights the need for music educators to think about how people are making, hearing, and producing music, how they are engaging in collaborations—and how they are helping their students to develop collaborative and transferrable skills.

Because of the pace of change in how audiences interact with music, some people fear that the arts could be fading. By contrast, Kwon states firmly that “the arts aren’t going anywhere.” She does point out, however, that “we need to cultivate the way we want to live in the future”—educators need to actively share their ideas about emerging possibilities so that students can develop more curiosity and imagine what might be achievable in times to come.

Expanding possibilities with technology

Throughout her career, Kwon has always embraced advancements in piano technology,



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and she continues to develop techniques for both the remote teaching and group lessons that these advancements can enable. Hampton admires that Kwon is a proponent and master of distance learning; she teaches both individual students and groups remotely. He says that she is “the go-to person for these approaches” and has become a nationally recognized leader in distance pedagogy. Kwon is excited by how much more accessible piano pedagogy can now be, given these tools to work with.

Because of her interest in the possibilities offered by emerging technology, Kwon has worked with Yamaha since her time in graduate school. She sees how technology “augments how we teach and learn,” so it is nothing to fear; instead, she sees emerging tech as an area of growth and exploration in options for teaching all students. Amy Sorter, Director of Higher Education Solutions and Outbound Sales at Yamaha Corporation of America, states that Kwon is endlessly innovative, “always on the cusp of using technology pedagogically.” Kwon finds that

Yamaha supports what she is trying to accomplish in working with her students, “to take to the next level.” Sorter says, when Yamaha representatives present at conferences, Kwon volunteers to help, noting that “other teachers want to hear what she’s doing; she’s a leader.”

One Yamaha instrument that Kwon uses is the Disklavier, among others. This acoustic piano has a variety of features to support cutting-edge piano pedagogy. Not only does it allow teachers to offer remote lessons, but it can also record performances on the piano itself using sensors which then recreate the original performance through the movement of the keys and pedals. For example, the Disklavier can record a student’s performance in a recital hall, and then Kwon and the student can listen to the performance from the audience’s perspective. Pianists can also pre-record accompaniment for vocalists and other musicians to use for later performances or engage in remote masterclass scenarios with more nuanced sophistication.

Adult learners

Kwon’s private music students span ages from young children to older adults; she even has some students in their eighties she has taught for over a decade. Kwon’s work with older adults has expanded her view of piano pedagogy to include not only adult learning but also wellness; music study has been shown to preserve neural connections within the brain. Shepard says that Kwon continues to develop her understanding of how music study in adulthood positively affects brain function: “active music-making slows mental aging.” Kwon has been pleased to learn that older piano students experience cognitive benefits stemming from the tactile experience of playing piano.

Service Leader

Kwon dedicates substantial amounts of time to supporting students and colleagues through her notable service work in several leading organizations. At the Frances Clark Center, Kwon holds the role of Institutional Engagement Director. According to its website, the center is “a not-for-profit

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educational organization ... that serves the advancement of piano teaching, learning, and performing.” Jennifer Snow, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Frances Clark Center, points out that “piano is a big world,” and Kwon is “an expert teacher” who is highly respected across the field. Snow states that the Frances Clark Center is lucky to have Kwon on board not only because of her dedication to service within the profession, but also due to her “positive, vibrant, and empathetic” nature.

As Institutional Engagement Director, Kwon has organized and led ongoing initiatives with young professionals and collegiate students, with programming around building networks of support. In doing this work, Snow says, Kwon connects with the “hopes and dreams of the next generation of leaders in the field.” In the Peer Connections program, Kwon organizes a quarterly virtual gathering for professional piano teachers to share their expertise relevant to their work. Participants

may discuss challenges they are facing and ask for ideas, suggestions, and resources. Each meeting offers a space for people to learn about professional support and opportunities while developing relationships within the world of piano pedagogy.

For the past three years, Kwon has also organized the Collegiate Connections program which invites students to share their work before they graduate and embark on their professional lives. Student cohorts answer formal calls for proposals, and their submissions are subjected to blind peer review. This program gives students helpful pre-professionalization collaborative experience, aligned with Kwon’s consistent focus on preparing students for future success.

Kwon also has a long track record of service within the Music Teachers National Association. Members of this organization are generally piano teachers of all kinds, including

college professors and private piano teachers, so constituents have need different types of support from the organization. Shepard appreciates how well Kwon is “in tune with MTNA’s mission to be creating artist-citizens,” and he notes that Kwon is “a unique member” because she has served at so many different levels in the organization, from local to national. Kwon is proud to have served in various MTNA roles, beginning during her student years. Most recently, Kwon joined the MTNA national board in March as the East Central Division Director. Many of MTNA’s members work with pre-college students, and Kwon wants to focus on the important impact on society that these teachers can have by making sure that the arts become an ongoing part of their students’ lives—whether or not they decide to pursue careers in the arts.

Kwon also serves in the College Music Society (CMS), whose members are musicians of all kinds working in higher education.



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Formerly Vice President of CMS, Kwon says that working with this organization is particularly rewarding because of the interdisciplinary insights she gains within the disciplines of music, including theory, education, musicology, composition, jazz, business, instrumental and vocal performance. Interacting with these colleagues is both “eye-opening and fulfilling,” she states. Within the CMS, Kwon facilitates the Inclusive Pedagogy in Music Cohort initiative because “this is a need in the lives of all college professionals.” Inclusive pedagogy spans many ideas, among them building diverse repertoire, establishing inclusive classroom practices, strengthening assessment practices, and creating meaningful spaces of belonging for students and faculty. Colleagues who are doing this work lead six sessions each year for participants. She is gratified that people have valued and participated in this work, and interest continues. Kwon emphasizes the idea that these issues continue to be of utmost importance.

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Kwon’s own current scholarly project relates to diversifying piano pedagogy. Kwon was granted research leave this term through a peer-reviewed, competitive process; she is curating a collection of compositions by Francis “Frank” Johnson, an under-recognized Black American composer. Johnson studied in Europe and was one of the first African American composers to publish single sheet music. Kwon will use the pieces she identifies to curate a progressive collection of intermediate piano repertoire, along with a pedagogical teaching guide for students and teachers. Hampton says that this project is “an important contribution to the literature available for piano lessons and performance.”

Kwon states that her many and varied experiences have repeatedly shown her the importance of collaboration. Working with students of all ages in private settings as well as in a variety of higher ed institutions, editing music publications, having worked as an editor for *Piano Magazine* and *Clavier*, and collaborating with Yamaha to showcase students and support fellow educators—all of these experiences have taught her the importance of not being siloed and to welcome working with many different kinds of educational and industry partners. Since she sees how all of the layers influence each other, she makes a point of bringing outside perspectives and approaches into the academy “to do what we do better.” Then, Kwon notes, “We need to bring it out to the people outside of academia. We need to help each other grow.” Kwon says that “it’s changing lives when we educate, transforming hearts and minds through music education. There is important work going on now and still to do.” Kwon provides an admirable model for professors and instructors in all fields to pursue connections to constituents within and beyond our campuses, and her example serves as a reminder that we can maintain vitality and excitement in our work by continuing to imagine emerging possibilities of the future.

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