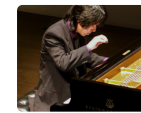


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# Americans in Rome in Review

*AMERICANS IN ROME IN REVIEW*

FEATURING FACULTY, STUDENTS, AND ALUMNI OF RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

MIN KWON, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND CURATOR

MIN KWON, WARREN JONES, ENRIQUETA SOMARRIBA, PIANOS; KAITLYN

DAVIS, SONYA HEADLAM, SOPRANOS; ANDREW MOORE, BASS-BARITONE

WEILL RECITAL HALL AT CARNEGIE HALL, NEW YORK, NY MAY 7, 2018

For some years now, the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers has sent its best faculty, students, and alumni to New York each spring for a celebration of their talent at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. Their programs are always thoughtfully conceived around a theme: this year's was "Americans in Rome," composers who benefited from a fellowship of some sort at the American Academy in Rome. Three iconic Americans, one lesser-known American, and one young Italian composer were all represented.

Perched atop its hill on the Vatican/Trastevere side of the Tiber River, the American Academy is a haven for creativity of all sorts, not just music: visual art, architecture, literature. (The French winners of the Prix de Rome (since the first recipient, Berlioz) are housed at the Villa Medici at the top of the Spanish Steps on the other side of the river.)

The program focused on Leonard Bernstein (this year is the centennial of his birth), Samuel Barber, and Aaron Copland, along with two world premieres composed specifically for pianist Min Kwon. She met the respective composers in Rome last year. What a cornucopia of entertainment they presented.

Ms. Kwon and her student Enriqueta Somarriba opened with a

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brash, perfectly coordinated rendition of Bernstein's *Music for Two Pianos*, written just for pleasure while he was a student at Harvard at age nineteen in 1937. In it, we already hear his preoccupation with jazzy content, and a foreshadowing of the fourth of Copland's *Four Piano Blues* (1948). In her excellent oral program notes, charmingly delivered before each section of the recital, Ms. Kwon stated that Bernstein considered Copland (eighteen years his senior) his "only composition teacher." Apparently, influence goes both ways.

Then Andrew Moore, a warmly expressive bass-baritone about to earn his Masters of Music degree from Rutgers this spring, sang *Lonely Town* from Bernstein's *On the Town*, and two of Copland's *Old American Songs: Simple Gifts* and *At the River*. His tone was beautifully produced, and his diction fantastically clear. He radiates unpretentious sincerity, and his large fan club showed him the love.

On this recital, I did feel that Copland got shortchanged, with just the two songs above representing him. I would have loved to hear Ms. Kwon and Ms. Somarriba (or Warren Jones) play the *Danzon Cubano*, or a section or two from *Rodeo*.

Then came the two world premieres. Italian composer Vittorio Montalti was in attendance for his haunting *Solo* (the title refers not only to a musical work, but the Italian word for alone), given a fiercely concentrated performance, which did not neglect beautiful sound, by Min Kwon. The work, which deals with solitude ("singing in the desert") begins with a very high keyboard cluster played so softly that one can only hear the "wood" of the key hitting the key-bed, this ostinato grows in intensity and volume, like a cosmic clock ticking, and repeats this growth in two cycles. Meanwhile, the left hand plays a fragmentary melody that "goes nowhere" in octaves. A few deep bass notes accompanied by filigree that would not be out of place in Messiaen are added. (I'm pretty sure Montalti did not mean to write a "distended" piece, as his program note states.) *Solo* shows a composer with a real ear for the possibilities of keyboard color.

Ms. Kwon followed this with her second world premiere, Jonathan Berger's *Il Beccafico* (a Roman warbler). In this charming programmatic piece, a bird annoyingly torments the concentration of the would-be composer, who is trying to recall bits of nineteenth-century piano repertoire at the piano in his studio, while the bird keeps intruding. Rather than use descriptive "real-life" imitations of the warbler, Berger cleverly turns its cries into psychological birdcalls within the frustrated head of the composer. Apparently, this happened not only in Rome, but also when Berger returned to New York. Ms. Kwon again proved herself to be a superb advocate for contemporary piano music.

The first half closed with the well-known Symphonic Dances from Bernstein's *West Side Story*, arranged for two pianos by John Musto, and played gorgeously by Ms. Kwon and Ms. Somarriba.

After intermission, Ms. Kwon was joined by legendary collaborative pianist Warren Jones for two pieces from Barber's *Souvenirs* for piano duet, Op. 28 (1952). Barber himself said that they were meant to evoke the aura of the afternoon teas at the Palm Court of the Plaza Hotel. The two movements played were the *Waltz*, with its swooning melody and flirtatious ending, and the *Hesitation Tango*, with its attraction/repulsion, and the ecstasy of the major-mode "love theme" and its "hesitation." I have heard smoother, suaver renditions of the waltz, but I enjoyed it because of *their* enjoyment. Ms. Kwon and Mr. Jones visually displayed not only their affectionate collegiality, but the salon charms of the work. I would have loved to hear the entire set!

Sonya Headlam took the stage with Min Kwon for the four songs of Barber's Op. 13. They are so different, as Ms. Headlam explained, but they are unified by an implicit presence of "woman" at varying stages of life and experience. Ms. Headlam has a light lyric voice with a fast vibrato. She communicated her complete involvement with each text and character very well, but Barber requires a bit more power and width in the middle-to-low passages, and clearer diction. *The Secrets of the Old* was a bit too

fast to allow the humor to be understood. Ms. Kwon's playing of the double-canon in *Sure on this shining night* (what the voice sings in the first half is the piano melody of the second part and vice versa) was ravishing. With Barber, rigorous structural details like this are so deftly tucked into a beautiful melodic/harmonic texture that they can go unperceived until pointed out.

The program concluded with a "mini" version of Bernstein's *Candide*, with three selections played at two pianos by Ms. Kwon and Mr. Jones: the Overture, *I Am Easily Assimilated*, and *Bon Voyage*. I did miss the words on "Assimilated," the poignant humor is so crucial. Then Kaitlyn Davis sang the showpiece *Glitter and Be Gay* (with Mr. Jones) in an appropriately hammy, humorous, and sleazy way, all the while removing an array of jewelry baubles from her décolleté and putting them on her fingers, wrists, neck, while singing!

As an encore, the three singers joined Mr. Jones for a fervent rendition of his own arrangement of *Somewhere* from *West Side Story*. Bravi to all.



by [Frank Daykin](#) for New York Concert Review; New York, NY

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MAY 16, 2018

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