

ARTIST INTERVIEW

Pianist Hyung-ki Joo (left) and violinist Aleksey Igudesman.

Photo by Igudesman & Joo



The King of Classical Music Comedy

Pianist Hyung-ki Joo, Igudesman & Joo

For those hesitant to laugh at a classical music concert, Igudesman and Joo, the music duo, have the answer.

Igudesman and Joo are the masters of blending music and comedy: classical music with pop songs or screen music, slapstick comedy with salsa or riverdance, seasoned with satire. The result is their harmonious version of a new world symphony that appeals to classical music fans as well as new audiences of the 21st century.

Violinist Aleksey Igudesman and pianist Hyung-ki Joo have transformed a classical concert to a family-friendly theatrical experience. In the time of an aging classical music audience, they have brought a wider audience to concert halls.

In their New Year's Eve Celebration concert with the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall, the duo presented a program, titled "And Now Mozart," with dynamic and eclectic musical pieces combining classical music with comedy, pop and dance. Alan Gilbert, Maestro of the Philharmonic, cried with the musicians over Eric Carmen's "All by Myself" mashed up with the Adagio of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. Maestro Gilbert and the Philharmonic also played the world premier of "Ring in the Classics," a classical medley inspired by mobile phone ringtone, arranged by the duo.

Igudesman and Joo's supporters include other classical music superstars. Gidon Kremer, Emmanuel Ax, Mischa Maisky and Joshua Bell have performed with the comic duo. Actor John Malkovich, Sir Roger Moore and singer Billy Joel have also collaborated with them.

At the end of the Philharmonic's concert, violinist Joshua Bell was a surprise guest. Mr. Bell jumped up on stage from a seat in the orchestra, not only to play but also tell jokes. Have you seen classical musicians

talk on stage? The audience gave the unique and hilarious concert a standing ovation. With big laughs, the celebration was a pretty good way to say good-bye to 2013.

Ms. Hae-Young Ham, a Korean-American violinist who has played with the Philhar-

monic since 1986, joyfully joined the duo's riverdance gig with other fellows on stage. Ms. Ham said about the experience: "It was the most fun two hours I had on stage playing, dancing, singing and crying. Aleksey and Hyung-ki, an insanely talented duo, took everyone in Avery Fisher Hall for a wild ride."

Hyung-ki Joo (40) was born in Norwich to Korean parents. He started playing piano at the age of eight. Joo met Igudesman at Yehudi Menuhin School in England. At age twelve, a boy from Russia and a boy with Korean blood encountered each other with hatred at first sight.

One day, though, Joo knocked on Igudesman's door with some fish and chips, an offer Igudesman couldn't refuse. And thus they became lifelong friends.

Mr. Joo came to New York to study at the Manhattan School of Music, and Igudesman studied in Vienna, Austria. In 2004, they reunited in Vienna and lived together as struggling musicians to survive. One day they came up with an idea of mixing humor-

ous sketches with classical concerts and they created "A Little Nightmare Music."

Since then, Igudesman and Joo's videos on YouTube became viral and have been viewed more than 28 million times. The YouTube sensation has been watched all over the world. Now they are called "The kings of classical music comedy."

This is an interview with Mr. Joo.

Q: How was it like to perform with the New York Philharmonic for the New Year's Eve concert?

A: It was one of the grandest honors in the life of a musician to perform with the New York Philharmonic. For us, the honor is multiplied, as before us, our heroes and kindred spirits Danny Kaye and Victor Borge also

performed comedic programs with the orchestra. New York is one of our best audiences, and we are always looking forward to sharing a good time with the New York audience, always a mixture of cultures and walks of life. In general, our typical audience and fans range from kids to their grand-parents and include the regular concert-goers as well as people who have never been to a concert hall in their lives. New York is particularly special for me, as I studied here at the Manhattan School of Music with Nina Svetlanova, and also started my professional life here, when I was working with Billy Joel on the album *Fantasies and Delusions*.

Q: You were trained as a 'serious' classical musician. How did you come up with the idea of "Igudesman & Joo"?

A: When we were studying at the Yehudi Menuhin School in England, we both felt that the world of classical music was taking itself way too seriously. Going to a concert often resembled a funeral rather than being a celebration of life, and while a lot of music is serious and tragic, the whole ceremony surrounding classical music need not be so serious and elitist. This is one of the main reasons why so many people, and especially so many young people, are afraid of going to classical concerts and we dreamed of changing this. Any parent or kid who might be terrified of this music will never be scared again after coming to one of our shows. And partly it was just to annoy our strict teachers, which we were masterful at.

Q: Neither you nor Igudesman are native British. Do you think being non-British, outsiders, affected somehow your seeing the classical music world from a different point of view?

A: Being Korean, but growing up in England, and then going to an International school, certainly gives you a wider cultural understanding. Imagine eating fish and chips but also having Kimchi on the table; that unusual mixture does inspire one to see things outside of convention or tradition. Moreover, we make no distinction between different types of music. For us, all music comes from the same place. We don't like the term "crossover", as it implies that there was a border that had to be crossed. We ourselves listen to both types of music, Country AND Western.

Q: How much has YouTube helped to promote your performances?

A: We owe much of our success and popularity to YouTube and the Internet, in general. Before YouTube, we were not on the general public's radar, but since our first concert went viral, we've been able to enjoy touring all over the world. YouTube is also a wonderful way for us to connect with our fans. Often, we make little films and blogs to stay in touch, which in turn inspires some fans to connect among themselves.

Q: How different are your and Igudesman's characters on stage and how did

you develop them?

A: Our characters are the same and different! We can both play each other's roles. Many think that I'm the abusive one after they have seen Piano Lesson, in which I give Igudesman a "piano lesson" while hitting him and screaming at him in Korean - using some Korean bad words too! The whole idea of the sketch was not to say offensive things which people would understand but on the contrary, to speak aggressively with no one understanding, but the message being very clear. Sadly, all too often, teachers are abusive of their students and we wanted to express our sentiments about this. It's funny, yet painful at the same time. When we posted it on Youtube, we never imagined that so many Koreans would watch it. In fact, when we performed Piano Lesson in Korea, I speak German!

But Igudesman is also abusive towards me. He smashes my fingers in the piano lid, and in our news show "And Now Mozart," Igudesman plays a "Music Police Officer" and gives me a hard time about my "interpretation". Here, he not only terrorizes me by getting me to play all sorts of pieces and technical exercises, but at the end, also hits and screams at me to play faster!

Q: How much do you improvise on stage, and what is the most unexpected thing you have experienced during a performance?

A: We love surprises. And often we surprise each other without the other one having any clue. Recently, we had some Tae-Kwon Do teachers joining us on stage, without Igudesman knowing anything about it beforehand. We once had 100 violinists join us on stage to create the World Record for the "Most Dancing Violinists".

Q: Is there any venue or audience you would like to perform for in the future?

A: Until last November, we had not played in South America. Our first experience there was in Uruguay, where we were invited by the Ministry of Tourism to film our song Uruguay for their country. We had such a fantastic time there, and the meet is out of this world. There are no Korean restaurants there, but if someone would open one, we are sure that it would not only be a huge success, but will probably make the best tasting Galbi. This song Uruguay is now available to buy on iTunes.

Q: What is next?

A: 2014 will be an exciting year as two of our biggest dreams may come true. We are in discussions for our own TV series, and in the summer, we will launch our latest project, The League of X-traordinary Musicians, where we will perform our crazy ideas with some of the most unique musicians in the world, musicians that not only are masters of their instrument, but who can also eat fire, do acrobatics, beat-box, dance, all at the same time!

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Photo by Chris Lee



Igudesman & Joo performed with the New York Philharmonic on December 31 for a New Year's Eve Celebration concert at Avery Fisher Hall.

By Sukie Park