



THE ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Five Years Later: Elaine Kwon, Concert Pianist, Martial Artist and Lecturer



Award-winning concert pianist Elaine Kwon is a lecturer in music at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and has a career spanning sold-out performances at Carnegie Hall to collaborations with musicians such as Questlove.

ALIST Magazine: Looking back at where you were when you started this journey, where did you think it was going to lead you?

Elaine Kwon: As a kid, I never had a clear vision of what my life would be. I didn't start out in music with an end goal in mind. I started piano at age 4 because I wanted to be like my older sister -- my mom taught us both. I also didn't have many other opportunities to thrive in rural eastern Washington state as an Asian girl. It was tough growing up there. I dreamed of living in New York, and I was fascinated with variety shows: music, dancing, singing, comedy. At some point early on, I saw piano as a way to build confidence and identity, as well as being a ticket out of there, and I kept trying to achieve the next step in front of me along this path: local, state, national competitions and recitals. I had to defy my father (and break his heart) in order to pursue music as a career, so in college it was a constant struggle to excel and support myself through undergrad, masters and doctorate. I was driven forward more by necessity than passion.

I didn't realize until much later that my love for music could really take me anywhere, from playing with orchestras internationally to

performing annually at Carnegie Hall in benefit of a cause I deeply care about (Best Buddies). And I finally had the extra "bandwidth" to explore other dreams, such as learning martial arts.

Only recently have I started to find more joy in music as a way of expressing my varied interests and tying in the things I love, through Savor Your Senses, an immersive music pairing series that I co-founded with my husband in 2009. Since my last interview in ALIST, I've focused more on building this performance platform. I feel blessed to be having this much fun with music now -- performing with musicians from all genres, wine experts, chefs, and connecting them with audiences in bespoke, creative ways. As a kid, I couldn't have imagined that playing piano would lead to this so many years later.

AM: How do you define success and how do you measure up to your own definition?

EK: To me, success is when you can live each day with genuine happiness, kindness, hope and no regrets. It means doing the work to know who you are, what you want, what you can uniquely offer the world, and taking action to live as fully and as happily as possible. I think my success is still a work in progress. I'm doing my best every day.

I haven't always known what makes me feel genuinely happy. I spent a lot of time when I was younger, caring too much about what others thought, trying to please everyone around me. I've since learned that for me, happiness is living a balance of the things I love, the main elements of my life -- music, martial arts and teaching -- my Passion, Health and Purpose. They're all part of what call my LifeChord. My Passion for music and performing drives me forward, and the martial arts I train every day helps keep me Healthy and able to pursue my Purpose, which is teaching. I've taught at MIT since '99, and also through Savor Your Senses, which brings me full circle back to piano performance. As corny as it may sound, I truly hope that through my efforts to live my own LifeChord, I can influence others to form and live their own LifeChord, and we can all be successful.

AM: What do you worry about, and why?

EK: I worry about running out of time and not being able to do all that I want to do. As a late bloomer, it's taken a long time to find my own voice and create structures like Savor Your Senses and LifeChord, and now I feel time pressure. There's a lot of ageism these days, unfortunately, so I worry that may limit

opportunities. But I find inspiration in all the evidence of people doing phenomenal things in later stages of life. In my mind, 50 is the new 30. I truly believe it's never too late to create or do new things, make changes for the better, add value and be a kick-ass contributor to this world.

AM: If you won \$20 million in the lottery, what would you do with the money?

EK: So many things! But I guess first I would set up my family so they'd never have to worry about living comfortably. Then I'd expand everything I'm already doing right now: Savor Your Senses, charity performances, LifeChord and more. I'd invest in hiring people to help build Savor into an enduring, global platform. I'd create more Elaine Kwon and Friends benefit performances. My Carnegie Hall concerts and many Savor Your Senses events have helped raise money and awareness for different causes, and I'd love to continue this on a bigger scale. I would also customize a spacious loft in NYC to accommodate a couple concert grand pianos for Savor Your Senses events, chef's kitchen, big wine fridge and a side room that could house a kicking bag. And set up a lifetime supply of ripe persimmons!

AM: If you could select one person from history and have them truthfully answer one question, who would you select and what is the question?

EK: I would want to meet Beethoven and ask him a million questions! But since he was known to love wine, I would ask what kind of wine he would pair with the last movement of his "Appassionata" Sonata. In my Savor events, I've paired this piece with many different types of wine -- it would be amazing to know Beethoven's choice! This brings to mind a quote attributed to him: "Music is the wine which inspires one to new generative processes, and I am Bacchus who presses out this glorious wine for mankind and makes them spiritually drunken."

AM: What does ALIST Magazine mean to you?

EK: To me, ALIST means strength, empowerment, community, expression and hope. As Asian Americans, we need valuable resources like ALIST to help provide a bigger voice for us. It's comforting and inspiring to know about the amazing things Asian Americans are doing through these shared stories. I'm very grateful to be able to share mine through ALIST. Happy Anniversary and Happy 2018!