

# THE VERSATILE WOMAN

Elaine Kwon

Concert pianist performing annually at Carnegie Hall; Lecturer in Music at MIT; Martial arts and fitness model; President and Artistic Director of Savor Your Senses

Elaine Kwon is a prize-winning concert pianist and Lecturer in Music at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), whose diverse talents have placed her in a category of her own. She has performed solo and chamber music concerts globally and has been broadcast on TV/radio in the US, Canada, China and Bulgaria. She received standing ovations in seven sold-out Carnegie Hall benefit concerts for Best Buddies (Elaine Kwon and Friends, 2008-2016), and as soloist with numerous orchestras including the National Music Festival Symphony, Toronto Philharmonia, Union Symphony, and Slovak Sinfonietta. For ten years she toured regularly as part of the Hebert/Kwon piano duo, and has been an active chamber musician with OCTET, Forecast New Music Group, among others.



Elaine is Co-founder/Artistic Director of the immersive music pairing series, *Savor Your Senses®*, which has delighted audiences world-wide with sensory music experiences of wine, food, spirits and more.

She has recorded on the Artist's Choice Recording and Naxos labels. Her latest recording with chamber ensemble OCTET, hit #1 on Amazon Hot New Releases in Classical Music, and was featured in iTunes New and Noteworthy. She holds a Doctorate of Musical Arts in Piano Performance and has been a Lecturer/Affiliated Artist in the music department at MIT since 1999.

Dr. Kwon has been a featured guest on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and *StarTalk* with Neil deGrasse Tyson. She was honored as a *2008 Power Woman of New York*, and was the subject of a documentary for the Arirang television series, *Dream It* in 2010, which was broadcast to 89 million households internationally. In 2012,

she was profiled on the Better TV Show segment, "Women Who Inspire", showcased in ALIST Magazine's 2013 Female Leaders Issue, and highlighted in Road Trip Nation's 2015 book, *Road Map*.

As an avid martial artist, Elaine is a second-degree black belt, five-time U.S. National Tae Kwon Do Forms Champion and currently studies Shaolin Kung Fu at the USA Shaolin Temple. She represented Nike in Asian ad campaigns and has appeared in *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Women's Health*, and numerous other magazines, ads, videos, and books.

She makes her home in New York City, where she continues to explore ways to combine and communicate her passion for music, martial arts, creative education and optimal living. [www.elainekwon.com](http://www.elainekwon.com)

**EPN:** How do you juggle all the things you do - as concert pianist performing annually at Carnegie Hall, being a Lecturer in Music at MIT, doing martial

arts and fitness modeling, and being President and Artistic Director of Savor Your Senses?

**Elaine:** To "juggle" is hard, but the key is to focus on the ball that's in your hand at that particular moment while understanding the relationship to the other balls. I definitely have my hands full, and every day I'm moving at full speed. Obviously, I try not to waste any time, but I also find connections between the different aspects of my life. For instance, it's especially busy when I'm commuting between living in NYC and teaching in Boston during the semester at MIT. I squeeze a week of work into 3 days so I can get back to NYC, but that means I need to squeeze in Kung Fu workouts in the hallway at MIT. People think I'm crazy! My motion sickness keeps me from working much on the train, so I'm able to watch my TV shows and movies, and now I'm blending theme music into my performances. I find inspiration in that down time. I "work" seven days a week, putting my focus on one thing at



a time, in distinct segments throughout the day - and the night. I really love everything I do, so it doesn't feel like work. But it's not easy, and sometimes I just want to do nothing! Luckily that feeling usually doesn't last very long.

To me, all the different elements are seamlessly connected, and I need all of them in my life to stay balanced and happy. They're all part of what I call my LifeChord™. I weave together the main elements of my life: music, martial arts and teaching - My Passion, Health and Purpose - I call it my PHP. My passion for music and performing drives me forward, and the martial arts I train every day helps keep me healthy and refreshed to pursue my purpose, which is teaching. I've taught at MIT since '99, and also teach through my concert series, Savor Your Senses, which brings me full circle to piano performance.

I think everyone has their own unique LifeChord, their own PHP, and if it's blended well, it can create harmony and a stronger life. I try to live my LifeChord every day.

**EPN.** You recently performed in Barbados, tell us about that experience.

**Elaine:** It was incredible to be in Barbados and escape the cold in December! It was the

3rd year of the Classical Pops Festival, which draws some of the world's best orchestra members together for two days of concerts on a beautiful outdoor stage seating 2000 people. "Elaine Kwon and Friends" was the opening act for the second evening. I played solo and also brought in some wonderful musicians for collaborations - Austrian recording artist/vocalist/composer Dalal, who was featured on the cover of your magazine! Also jazz percussionist Nate Jolley, Albanian concert cellist Gjilberta Lucaj, and lovely Barbadian soprano, Shantal Martin. They wanted something current to attract a broad audience, so I made it "TV Theme Night," and wrote arrangements

of 17 TV themes and combined them into titled medleys that segued into classical or classical-jazz pieces paired with the same narrative.

It was a fun way to combine the different influences from my MIT commute, Savor Your Senses concepts, classical and pop culture worlds.

**EPN:** What is the rationale behind your

performance series "Savor Your Senses?"

**Elaine:** The thinking is that more people enjoy music and understand it when it engages all the senses. More people savor and understand the

music when it's paired with other things they enjoy, like wine or food that is chosen based on similar characteristics or creatively matched together. We want to create an experience that is better than a concert, better than a wine tasting, and even better than those two elements put together.

In that way, it ties in with my philosophy around LifeChord™.

Savor Your Senses® is a music pairing performance series I co-founded in 2009 with my husband, when I was preparing for a Carnegie Hall concert. It's an immersive pairing experience that combines music performances with wine, food, spirits and other sensory arts.

There's also conversation and Q & A with the experts between each pairing. We've done dozens of events over the years, in all kinds of venues, pairing with Masters of Wine, chefs, brewmasters and more. I absolutely love doing this format. It's fun, friendly and interactive. I've been working on it off and on, whenever I can, and it's slowly grown and developed, primarily through word-of-mouth. Now we're gearing up to officially launch and bring it to a wider audience.

By thoughtfully pairing music with wine, food and other sensory arts, we're creating an experience that's more impactful, memorable and enjoyable. Each event is unique since we're connecting everyone in the room in a very human way - the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Savor is also a creative platform for showcasing excellence. For musicians, it's a way to interact with the audience and allow people to experience live music "up close and personal" where they can see the sweat and feel the effort. For expert artisans, it's a way to highlight their craft and tell their stories. The idea is that some people



will be attracted by the music, but will learn about wine or food in the process, and vice-versa. I see some people that love wine, food, spirits, beer, etc. Those people will come for the tastings and be drawn in to love the music. That makes me happy.

Ever since I was a kid, I've loved pairing and mixing surprising things together. Years later, I realize I'm still doing it —through LifeChord and Savor Your Senses.

**EPN:** Who has been your greatest inspiration? Why?

**Elaine:** I admire people who have made something of their lives far beyond what should have been possible given their original circumstances. People with champion spirits and perpetually positive outlooks. One of them is my mom.

But to explain just one person of inspiration, it would have to be my father. He came from a family of 10 with nothing, had no money, literally grew up on a dirt floor, survived unspeakable hardships but somehow worked his way up to become a diplomat for Korea. He sacrificed his dreams to emigrate and raise 3 kids in the US. He taught us to be strong as steel and work hard, and even

though he didn't approve of or support my music, that opposition fueled and forced me to find my own path, to find creative ways to try to make my dreams come true by myself. I'm much stronger because of this. He passed away 2 years ago, but I'm forever grateful for the grit and spirit he passed on to us.

**EPN:** Do you consider yourself a perfectionist why or why not?

**Elaine:** I would say that I'm a recovering perfectionist. If it's an important task or performance, I can be obsessively detail-oriented and exacting. But in other things, like keeping an orderly apartment...let's just say that my mom is always slightly horrified whenever she sees my place. As I've gotten older, I've become tired of stressing out so much to make things exactly right, and that critical voice inside my head has relaxed, just a little. Now I kind of love a bit of chaos and disarray. So maybe I'm really a closet imperfectionist, I don't know.

**EPN:** Becoming a skilled pianist is not easy. What are some advice you would give a struggling pianist on the verge of giving up?

**Elaine:** Becoming truly skilled or excellent at anything is just plain hard.

It takes talent for sure, but I think more importantly it takes determination, consistency, and steadfast work. And struggling is part of that process. Sometimes struggle can propel you further than those who never suffer in that way, because your capacity for pain or discomfort grows and you can keep moving forward when others lack that endurance.

But everyone eventually has a limit, and if you're a pianist on the verge of giving up, I would tell you to take a step back and strategically think about how to make the struggling less, but still accomplish happiness and personal satisfaction. To figure out what specifically and uniquely makes you valuable as a pianist or musician, and then to shift focus and work on developing that particular angle of potential. It's a cliché, but a true one - every person has something special to offer, and the sooner you can hone in on what your individual gift is in any field, then you can get to work creating your very own, fresh, irreplaceable version of skill. You want to make sure that any struggle is toward growing your authentic skill, and not someone else's idea of it. So shift your focus if needed, and don't ever give up.

