

elaine kwon



Elaine Kwon did not grow up wealthy. The 'decadent' world of concert halls and galas, a world she would dominate in the years to come, was not bred into her from an early age. Instead she grew up the daughter of poor immigrant parents in eastern Washington, taught to work hard on account of being "female, Asian, with no connections."

"My parents were really strict about practicing and achieving," she relates. "They wanted me to set myself apart as a talent."

Starting at the age of 4, Kwon began her studies in piano, diving headfirst into her craft to combat boredom and create an identity. One of few Asian children in a rural community, Kwon already stood out, but for all the wrong reasons. She wanted to be special, not different, and her hometown was nothing but endless fields, rolling stretches of the same thing. It wasn't until at the age of 12 when she started entering competitions that Kwon began to see a whole new world open up.

"Being a pianist had become my identity, and I felt lost with out," she explains. When it came time to choose a career she defied her parent's suggestion to choose a "practical" profession, instead financing her entire education on her own. This gamble, in turn, paid off in spades, her career skyrocketing after graduation.

"My greatest accomplishment is that I'm living my life doing what I love. I'm thankful for this every single day."

It's hard now to connect these two women in your mind, the confident, sexy pianist headlining Carnegie Hall starting off as the shy, ostracized teen. But for Kwon the transformation is vital, giving her a strength and humbleness to nail the giant career milestones that come her way.

How else could she have played Lincoln Center had she not practiced for hours on end as a child? Would she have soloed as well with the Toronto Philharmonic had her parents not pushed her so hard? For Kwon, her trajectory to the top of her field is one continuous road, not two separate lives, and her connection with all of her many parts is evident, highlighted by her heavy practice in martial arts.

"I train in Shaolin Kung Fu, which helps me channel emotions through Action Meditation -- building chi, life energy," she explains. "It's helped me develop physical strength, endurance, flexibility, mental clarity."

For a life as chaotic as Kwon's, the connection with her physical and spiritual center has been essential in making it work. Citing the two passions as complimentary, she seems to have struck a balance between the subtlety of piano and ferocity of martial arts, using both as outlets of expression.

It's this inner peace that has enabled her to actively reach outside of herself, giving back to organizations that need a helping hand. Currently Kwon headlines and curates an annual event at Carnegie Hall benefitting Best Buddies, a charity that pairs the intellectually and developmentally disabled with friends and jobs.

"It's incredible... The most fun and fortunate part of being a performer is that occasionally you get to help people just by doing what you love."

She also curates the Savor Your Senses series, a program that mixes classical music with food and wine. Pairing symphonies with Sauvignon Blancs, the series sponsors the Guiding Eyes for the Blind organization, a Seeing Eye dog training facility.

"The arts make philanthropy more interesting for everyone involved," she admits, citing her continued work in the field.

But despite the good intentions and charitable demeanor, Kwon is still a force to be reckoned with. Part musician, part martial artist, she could kick your ass without missing a beat.

"I got into a fight on stage," she explains, recalling a particularly noteworthy concert. "I was performing a solo Rachmaninoff piece and a guy's cell phone kept ringing repeatedly. I stopped playing in the middle of the piece, stood up to confront him, and ended up knocking him out."

To be fair, the whole ordeal was staged beforehand, but that didn't stop the Washington beauty from causing a scene.

"You don't see a lot of that in classical music."