

Ode to joy

Pianist Soyeon Lee has come a long way in four years, and she can't wait to show the world

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CLIBURN COMPETITION

NEW YORK -- "If I'm getting too deep or weird, just stop me."

Soyeon Lee pauses to sip her tea for a minute, breaking a monologue about music and meaning. In a crowded Manhattan cafe the morning after her CD's release party, the 29-year-old pianist is taking stock of her career. It has been four years since she first stepped onto the Bass Hall stage at the 2005 Van Cliburn piano competition. And now that she's Cliburn-bound again, Lee is determined to do it right this time.

At 1 p.m. today, when she sits down at that Steinway, Lee has something to prove. But it's not the same thing she wanted to prove on that May night four years ago.

Lee didn't advance past the preliminaries in 2005, and she's pretty sure she knows why. Her playing was dead-on back then. Critics and the audience loved her. But there was something missing -- something that has taken her four more years of living to discover. This time around, she's bringing more to the keyboard but demanding less from herself. She doesn't sound too deep or weird. She sounds like she has found peace.

"It will help so much if I do well," Lee says. Of course she wants to advance at the Cliburn, to win. But more than anything, she says, "this time I want to teach myself to be free."

Important differences

In the course of a life, four years isn't all that long, but these were four crucial years for Lee. She finished school. She left New York after 10 years, moving to Princeton, N.J. She married a man who inspires her to think in different ways. And somewhere along the way, she discovered a new way of being in the world.

"I've learned a lot about myself in the last four years," Lee says. And that new self-knowledge, she believes, is reflected in her music.

Last year, Lee married Tom Szaky, the 20-something co-founder and CEO of TerraCycle, an eco-friendly company that sells products made of -- and packaged in -- waste. If you've seen tote bags made of Capri Sun pouches, you've seen TerraCycle's products. The company, created in a Princeton University dorm room, also sells fertilizer packaged in old Coke bottles, pencils made of old newspaper, bulletin boards made of recycled wine corks.

Szaky and his untucked, innovative entrepreneur's life have taken Lee out of her comfortable classical-music circles.

"Tom," Lee says, "is in a completely different world."

And he has made a name for himself in eco-business: The day Lee sat down to discuss the Cliburn, her husband was featured on *Good Morning America* and *Oprah*. His creative products are a "press magnet," she says, and he has taught her how to market herself in creative ways, too.

That's right: Lee has discovered she's not above a good publicity stunt. Last year, for her debut at Carnegie Hall, she decided to make a statement about recycling. So, with sponsorship from TerraCycle and some other companies, Lee commissioned a dress made from more than 5,000 plastic juice pouches. The containers that formerly held Honest Tea Goodness Grapeness juice were sewn together into a strapless concert gown with a dramatic train. Was it comfortable? Not really, but it raised awareness and attracted the attention of *The New York Times*.

To complement her recycled dress, Lee played a program of music of composers' adaptations and transcriptions, music that was all "recycled" in some way. A recording of Lee's performance is on a just-released CD called *Re!nvented* -- and the packaging is, of course, recycled: Each CD case is made from 20 chip bags that have been shredded and fused into a solid.

This is the sort of thing that happens when your husband's career is devoted to remaking trash. Lee has gotten involved in TerraCycle because Szaky tends to bring his work home with him. Literally.

"I have a lot of garbage samples in my home," Lee says. "We're like New Jersey's second landfill."

Szaky will bring home an empty Vaseline jar or a granola bar wrapper and start brainstorming, coming up with ways the trash can be turned into something else.

"He looks at everything in a different way," Lee says. "The way he can be so inventive and so free with it kind of inspires me in a way. I have to look at things differently, too."

Music as solace

In a lot of ways, that means going back to what music has always meant to her.

When Lee was 9, her family moved from Seoul to Morgantown, W.Va., so her dad could study political science at the University of West Virginia. Lee didn't know English. She was the only Asian student, and she was miserable.

"I was made fun of constantly," she says. "I would cry every day. It was such a nightmare."

Friendless and unhappy, she started to miss playing the piano because it was familiar. It felt like home.

"Every day I would come home and I would really crave music, because I had learned it in Korea," she says.

The family didn't have a piano, so Lee asked her parents if they'd take her to the university's music building and let her play a little bit.

During Christmas break, her dad dropped her off at the music building for an hour or two, just so she could relearn the music she'd played before. That's when one of the school's piano teachers discovered her fiddling around on the keyboard. She asked Lee to play something; Lee played a minuet. The teacher gave her free lessons for the next six years.

At 13 she placed third in a contest in Corpus Christi and was recruited by a teacher from the Interlochen Arts Academy. Two years later, when the rest of her family headed back to Korea, Lee moved to Michigan.

Juilliard was next, and Lee spent eight years there, earning three degrees in music. She finished her performing artist's diploma in 2005, just as she came to the Cliburn.

For more than a year after leaving Juilliard, Lee said, she felt lost and she struggled to launch a career on her own.

"I felt that all of a sudden the safety net was gone in a sense, psychologically," she says. Throughout her years in school, doors had always opened for her, pushing her on to the next thing. Now she had to find that next door and push it open on her own.

Eventually, Lee left New York to move to Princeton, where Szaky had started up his company. She started listening to spiritual self-help author Wayne Dyer, reading Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. She started paying attention, taking walks, seeing that everything in nature happens in its own time. And eventually, Lee learned how to slow down.

She has commercial management now and plenty of performances on her calendar. Lee traveled to New York to debut her new CD on the Koch International Classics label. But she's no longer desperate to keep all those trappings of success coming

"I don't feel I have to run right now for the peak," Lee says. "I really have to just allow whatever it is to take its course."

Learning to relax isn't easy -- not in the classical music pressure-cooker of concerts and competitions. But she's spotting a lot of signs lately that it's what she has to do.

Lee's husband is a Rolling Stones fan, so he dragged her to see *Shine a Light*, Martin Scorsese's 2008 documentary on the band.

"I was really not liking it," Lee says, and she has never been able to figure out what makes the Stones such a big deal. But then, watching Mick Jagger and crew perform on the screen, she realized something huge.

"What occurred to me is they looked so happy onstage," Lee says. "They looked like they were having the time of their lives. And I thought to myself: 'Gee. When was the last time I played Carnegie Hall or a big venue and I was having the time of my life?'"

Lee thought about how much worry and fretting went into every performance, how much concern she devoted to not making mistakes, getting good reviews, being perfect.

"I thought to myself: 'Bingo. That's it,'" she says. "I need to start really enjoying myself."

Message to the world

Lee has been moving toward this revelation since 2003. Just weeks before the Cleveland International Piano Competition that summer, she was riding in a car that hydroplaned and went over a cliff.

"I fell off a cliff," Lee says, as if she still can't believe it. "I fell off a cliff." Everything she can remember is still etched in her brain like it just happened.

"I lost consciousness after the first flip," Lee says. "But I thought to myself at that moment, 'I'm dead now. I'm going to die.'"

The car landed upside down, and Lee landed somewhere on the dashboard with her head against the steering wheel. She fumbled for her phone, called 911 and started crying.

Rescue workers pulled her out of the car. She remembers blood, people running around in the emergency room, doctors hovering over her, the hazy fear that she might never move again. She fell asleep and woke to the sound of a doctor's voice.

"They said, 'There must be somebody up there who really loves you,'" Lee says. After an accident that could have left her paralyzed or brain-dead, she didn't even have a broken bone.

"That was when my life actually started to change," Lee says. It started the first morning that she woke up at home.

"I woke up the next morning and I cried looking at the trees," she says. "I know it sounds corny, but at that moment I was so thankful for everything."

She looked around, thanking God for letting her see trees again, letting her breathe. Then she remembered music.

"I went to the piano and played a note," Lee says, eyes filling with fresh tears. "I think I might have played a C. And, and I started crying. Because the sound . . . you know?"

The Cleveland competition was approaching. Lee decided she wanted to compete, even though her wounds were still healing and her doctors advised rest. For the remaining weeks, she

practiced about five minutes at a time, the longest she could sit at the piano without feeling dizzy. And then she went to Cleveland and won the prestigious competition's second prize.

"I played probably more wrong notes than right notes," Lee says now. "But what I remember feeling was just so much gratitude for being able to play. I was in love with the music, in love beyond belief. And I think that spoke to the jury."

It has given her perspective that she tries to remember all the time.

"That's why I know that music is not about the notes," she says. "It's not about perfection. It's about you and your message and your power, really."

And that's what she wants her playing to reflect. Instead of being tense, she's learning how to relax.

"We're not perfect, and we're never going to get there, either," Lee says. "I think we just have to allow ourselves the freedom to say that's OK."

Hello again, Fort Worth

When she didn't advance to the Cliburn semifinals in 2005, Lee thought she wouldn't want to come back this year. But last fall, as the application deadline approached, she reconsidered. She'll turn 30 next month, so this is her last chance for the Cliburn and most other competitions. And she still has something to prove to herself.

"The last time I was there, I was so stressed and overwhelmed," Lee says. "It's something I want to do for myself. I want to just, in a way, test myself."

When she steps onto the stage at Bass Hall, Lee doesn't want to think about the jury, worry about mistakes or focus on herself. This time she wants to share music. If she can do that, she will have proved what she set out to prove.

"I'm going to present it the best I can, in the happiest way that I can, and not really hold onto the outcome," Lee says. "Just concentrate on the moment and enjoy it."

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