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Uncommon Chords

Making music with the power to unite, Sung Jin Hong '97 and his One World Symphony offer something different to New York City's crowded cultural scene.

Story by **GARY E. FRANK**

Outside, it is a sun-kissed autumn afternoon. Inside the cavernous sanctuary of Anshe Chesed Synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Sung Jin Hong '97 is generating his own kind of light. Turning from his conductor's podium, he faces the audience to lead them in a rehearsal of their part of the upcoming concert program, singing the final eight bars of Coldplay's rousing rock anthem "Fix You."

"We can do better than that, people," Hong gently chastises. "It's not a sad song; it's supposed to be uplifting."

"Lights will guiiiide you home, And igniiite your bones and I will tryyy to fix you." Voices from the audience now merge more confidently with the orchestra's winds, strings, and chorus and the pop hymn to a different kind of sanctuary fills the synagogue with a warm and hopeful sound.



Sung Jin Hong -- Portrait Photo by Kenson Noel Photography

Such moments epitomize what Hong has sought to do since founding One World Symphony (OWS) six years ago. Breaking down barriers between performers and spectators, classical and new music, art and daily life, Hong invites you to join him in a communal process of creative healing — if not to be “fixed,” at least to feel uplifted, even in the face of uncertainty and suffering.

Hong's artistic philosophy was put to the test when terrorists struck the World Trade Center in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001. At that time, OWS was only a few months old. Scheduled to give a concert just days after the attacks, Hong and his collaborators decided to scrap their planned program and instead performed Requiem Mass in D minor, Mozart's final piece before his death, as a benefit concert for families of firefighters who died in the Twin Towers.

"It was such a healing event," Hong later

told music reviewer H. Michael Jahilil. “All the performers and audience members felt something beyond the music; we really connected with what Mozart wrote.”

Generating such feelings is what keeps One World Symphony vibrantly alive — although that life is lived mostly on a shoestring. A non-profit organization, OWS sells tickets for a fraction of the price of what New York concert halls typically charge and also sponsors inner-city students and their parents who would otherwise not be in a position to afford classical concerts. The symphony depends on donations to cover much of its production costs, and offers musicians, at most, a small honorarium (most work for free) and a buffet-style spread. But there is no shortage of instrumentalists and vocalists who want to add their talents to the One World mix.

“It’s a small miracle, by New York standards,” says Adrienne Metzinger-Hong, the maestro’s wife and One World Symphony’s managing and marketing director.

A miracle? Perhaps, but certainly no mystery to those who work with Hong.

“He [has] an infectious spirit and he’s a generous man,” says Rod Gomez, a professional baritone who is also OWS’s artistic advisor and stage manager. “He brings that to his performances and to his workings with colleagues.

“He’s a passionate music maker,” Gomez adds. “And everybody loves the opportunity to make great music.”

A day before the concert at the Anshe Chesed Synagogue, Hong is seated in a sushi restaurant a few blocks away, discussing the symphony’s 2006-07 season, the theme of which is “Heroes, Anti-Heroes, and Femmes Fatales.” Five different programs will carry this theme, highlighted by a one-night-only appearance Sunday, March 11, in Manhattan’s venerable Town Hall. All the other concerts are held on Fridays at a Brooklyn Heights church, followed by a Sunday performance at the Anshe Chesed temple. “We have a very loyal following in Brooklyn, much more so than in Manhattan,” Hong explains between bites of General Tso’s shrimp.

The season’s opening concert in Brooklyn Heights, which drew nearly 300 people, was designed as a “9/11 Tribute to Our Heroes.” Interwoven between a performance of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3, better known as *Eroica*, were new or lesser known works by modern composers, as well as the symphonic arrangement of “Fix You.”

The concert program, which was repeated on Sunday, featured nearly 100 musicians, including the 40-piece orchestra, another 40 in the chorus, and 15 guest singers from New York City’s Special Music School, the first public school in America set up specifically for musically gifted youngsters.

Hong, who is the symphony’s artistic director as well as its conductor, chose *Eroica* as the season opener because it “epitomizes heroism.” (“*Eroica*” is Italian for “heroic.”)

“Beethoven may have been inspired to compose *Eroica* because he originally saw Napoleon as a heroic figure,” says Hong. “He was also inspired by democratic ideals. *Eroica* portrays the character of a hero in all its manifestations: battles, struggles, grief, resignation over loss, and redemption.”

Hong has long been attracted to the musical expression of such themes. An early influence was John Williams’ sweeping, heroic score for the original *Star Wars* movie trilogy.

“I loved *Star Wars*, even before I could speak English,” says Hong, whose family emigrated to the United States from Seoul, South Korea, in the mid-1980s. “It had everything. It was romantic, there was good versus evil, and it reflected a great measure of Eastern philosophy.”

Music was an abiding presence in Hong’s life from childhood. Among his earliest memories are of hearing his mother singing psalms in Korean while working in the family garden during the evening.

When the Hongs first arrived in America they lived near family in California before moving to Peoria, Ill., where more relatives had settled. Their arrival in the Midwest began a process of assimilation that Hong often found frustrating. At the urging of family members, his parents gave their two children Western names, with Sung Jin being dubbed “David” and his sister, Jahee, “Juliette.” A few years ago, Hong decided to take back his given name.

“If a Westerner moved to Korea and actually lived there, would he consider adopting a Korean name? Probably not,” he says.

While Hong’s adjustment to living in the Midwest tended to be restless, he feels he thrived academically, if not always socially, at Illinois Wesleyan. A music major who finished one class shy of a second major in religion, Hong considers David Vayo, professor of composition and theory, as especially influential.

“Professor Vayo was always incredibly generous and supportive. He emphasized that if you’re to succeed in any field you need to have a strong grounding in the fundamentals,” says Hong.

Vayo vividly recalls his former student. “His work in my classes was first-rate, and he participated in class more frequently than any other student. (Sung Jin) enhanced his formal education by reading and studying a great deal on his own, and reached out to his fellow students through a popular series of listening sessions.”



A photo taken during Hong’s studies at the Konservatorium der Stadt Wien (above) reveals his growing passion for the art of conducting.

The first time Hong participated in the new-music concert series at IWU, Vayo recalls, he conducted the premiere of a work by Carleton Macy, professor of composition and theory at Macalester College. “(Sung Jin) rose to the occasion beautifully, and his subsequent performances on the series were always highlights.

“Even when he was an undergraduate, his conducting eloquently showed his attentiveness to both fine nuance and large-scale form,” continues Vayo. “He was deeply involved at all times in bringing out the emotional expression of the music, and succeeded admirably in moving performers to do the same.”

Hong believes the “strong grounding in fundamentals” Vayo taught compares favorably with lessons imparted by successful athletic coaches.

“A good conductor needs to be a good coach no less than someone like Dean Smith or Mike Krzyzewski,” says Hong, referring to two college basketball legends. “You’re teaching constantly and looking for the best ways to get the best out of people — to get them to do things they didn’t think they could do.”

Hong honed his conducting skills with a year of study at the famed Konservatorium der Stadt Wien in Vienna, Austria, during his senior year of college. There, he earned an artist’s diploma and won the institution’s Maria Theresia Silver Medal Award. After returning to the U.S., Hong continued his studies, earning a master’s degree in conducting at Bard College. But perhaps the biggest “breakthrough” experience, he says, was when New York Philharmonic conductor emeritus maestro Kurt Masur personally chose Hong to conduct in public masterclass and a concert with him at the Manhattan School of Music Symphony.

“In front of a public audience,” Hong recalls, “Maestro Masur said that ‘you’ve got “it” — you’ve got what it takes.’ He gave me the freedom to convey any conducting gestures to make music with my fellow musicians in the orchestra. His generous spirit encouraged me to only focus on the music and inspire the musicians to make music together.”

Hong honed the lessons he learned in college and graduate school while working for several years as a conductor and music director of the Peoria Sinfonietta and Peoria Players Theatre Company. In 1999, he made the decision to move to New York City. The early years weren’t easy; Hong’s first home was a Harlem youth hostel. He played violin and piano in cafes, tended bar, and worked as a caterer.



Hong leads an intense performance of Beethoven’s *Eroica* (above). A composer himself and a strong advocate of new music, Hong mixes One World’s programs to represent a variety of genres, eras, and geographic origins. Photo by Philip Greenberg.

The genesis of One World Symphony happened one year later. Over coffee, he and some musician friends — including his future wife, Adrienne — decided to combine their talents to present a holiday concert centered around performances of *The Nutcracker Suite* and composer Benjamin Britten’s *Ceremony of Carols*.

Hong realized that New York City was fertile ground for a symphony that would give new artists a chance to collaborate in a welcoming environment. For himself, Hong says, it was an opportunity to “conduct and play some of the greatest symphonies, operas, oratorios, and chamber music with some of the most caring, talented professional musicians and generous people from all over the world.”

“He manages to pull off these performances in a city like New York, where you can hear some of the greatest musicians performing almost everything,” says Stanley Grill, one of the symphony’s two composers-in-residence. “Somehow his performances come off. You walk away thinking, ‘Hey, I just heard something really unusual and wonderful. You can go to the Met or to the New York Philharmonic and not come away with that feeling.”

“He knows the score in excruciating detail, he knows his players, he’ll say this will work better with this particular group of musicians,” says Grill. “It becomes a collaborative experience rather than just playing notes ... as if they were somehow sacrosanct.”

The artistic and philanthropic ascent of One World Symphony has been marked by several milestones. In January 2005, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz even declared a One World Symphony Tsunami Relief Day to recognize OSW’s benefit concert for disaster victims.

But it was the symphony's performance last March at Town Hall that heralded its true arrival on the city's music scene.

Music legends from Louis Armstrong to Leonard Bernstein have performed at Town Hall, which has been an integral part of New York's cultural history for more than 80 years. Larry Zucker, Town Hall's artistic and executive director, says that inviting One World Symphony to perform there wasn't a hard decision.

"Sung Jin and the One World Symphony were an up-and-coming, fine, young group of musicians that had already garnered several accolades," says Zucker. "We were impressed by their professionalism, their polished, tight sound, their youthful energy, and their willingness to take on new approaches of the classical music genre. ... We received tremendous acclaim from that concert and did not hesitate to invite them back."

At the March Town Hall performance, a sell-out audience of 1,500 heard a crowd-pleasing program of "American Favorites" that included Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*. As usual, Hong made certain his listeners had a chance to participate.

"It was quite stirring to hear 1,500 people shouting 'Mambo!'" Hong recalls with laugh.



In a photo taken at their wedding rehearsal, Hong and his bride, Adrienne Metzinger, wore traditional Korean hanboks. Says Metzinger, "Even though we had a 'white wedding,' we made an effort to embrace Sung Jin's Korean culture."

After a final standing ovation, the conductor motioned for silence. With his parents, sister, and future in-laws in the audience, Hong dropped to one knee and proposed to a thoroughly surprised Metzinger, who was seated in the balcony. She was then escorted down to the stage, where Hong once again got down on his knee and placed the ring on her finger.

"Whether the concert went well or not, it didn't matter," Hong says. "I was going to propose."

"The audience, needless to say, went wild."

When One World Symphony returns to Town Hall this March, Hong will likely have a few more surprises up his formal black sleeve. To those who know him, however, his program choices will

come as no surprise: a selection of famous film scores that includes John Williams' *Star Wars Suite*.

So close to Hong's heart is Williams' music that he even requested that "Anakin's Theme" from *Star Wars, The Phantom Menace: Episode I*, be performed by OWS musicians at his wedding to Adrienne on Oct. 21, 2006. In the wedding program, Hong wrote that the theme, foreshadowing Anakin's "ultimate sacrifice, tragedy, and redemption," was dedicated to his own parents. "Similar to many Korean immigrants, my parents have a strong sense of sacrifice so that my sister and I may be prosperous. They sold many of their personal belongings to immigrate to the 'free' world, even their wedding bands."

Finishing his meal at the sushi restaurant, Hong ordered delivery of assorted appetizers and main dishes to serve the musicians playing at Ansche Chesed the next day.

"There are more than 70 musicians volunteering tomorrow. There are concerts going on every weekend in New York City, and some of them could have taken paying jobs but decided to play with One World," he says. "Since everyone is volunteering, I'm never sure if everyone is going to show up."

But show up they do. Joan Dawidziak, a former nurse and the symphony's principal oboist, hasn't missed a concert in five years.

"What he has done is nearly impossible in this economy because there's not much money for the arts unless something is already built," says Dawidziak. "I would never have had the chance to play in an orchestra like this because I was told I was too old to play oboe."

Vayo is not surprised at his former student's achievements with One World Symphony, given the reaction generated by Hong's conducting while he attended Illinois Wesleyan.

“(Sung Jin) has the strongest leadership qualities of any young musician I have ever known. His listening sessions, and a student orchestra he organized, created a great deal of buzz and enthusiasm — so much so that the music faculty decided to curtail the activities of the orchestra because it was pulling too much of the music students’ time and energy away from their curricular musical activities,” Vayo recalls.

While gaining a sponsor like Town Hall was a significant milestone for One World Symphony, the ensemble is still a long way from considering itself established in the sense of the New York Philharmonic or other major orchestras. Among Hong’s aspirations is that his symphony will have a permanent home someday.

In the meantime, Hong (who also teaches music at a private school in Harlem) continues to devote as much as 60 hours each week to One World Symphony. It doesn’t tire him, he says, “because I am living my dream.”



Hong prepares One World Symphony for performance. As a conductor, he tries to encourage a spirit of collaboration among his fellow musicians. Photo by Philip Greenberg.

And how does Hong manage to keep his dream alive, when others might become discouraged and walk away? His wife and longtime collaborator, Adrienne Metzinger-Hong, offers this insight: “What I have come to realize about Sung Jin is that he has almost no fear. ... Sung Jin doesn’t seem to be afraid to try anything, do anything, ask anything. The idea of failure is always at the back of his mind, like a question ... but it never prevents him from going forward with something. ... That’s why he, we, and One World have grown.”

Or, as one of *Star Wars*’ heroic characters said, “Try not. Do or do not, there is no try.”