

New Graduate Overcame Tone Deafness to Win Lamont Solo Honors Competition by Miles Canaday



Chris Kim began playing piano at a very young age, but quit after only a year or two. After trying several majors in college, his friend's mother—a famous pianist from Korea—encouraged him to study piano again with her. At 23 years of age, Kim was 20 years behind most concert pianists his age, but that did not deter him.

“I came late to the piano, so I started practicing 12 hours a day. It hurt my hands at the time, but I was fine in the long-run,” said Kim, who will graduate in June from the Lamont School of Music with an artist diploma in piano performance.

Prior to joining Lamont, Kim had earned a master's degree at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University. This was no small achievement considering Kim has dysmelodia, or tone deafness, and is unable to distinguish between musical notes. He is able to read and perform music at the piano, but memorizing is almost impossible. Memorization of performance repertoire, however, is a critical step for concert pianists.

“Pieces that take three to four months for most people to memorize take me a year,” said Kim, an accomplished sight reader who sight reads everything he plays, even if he has been working on a piece for several months. When asked if he could just perform with the music in front of him, he shook his head, “That's just not an option.” He has quit piano several times, only to return to it again and again.

In spite of these obstacles, Kim's talent continues to earn him praises. In January, he won the DU Solo Honors Competition, open to DU students each year in January. The runners-up perform at one of the Winter Quarter Lamont Convocations in front of the Lamont student and faculty body, and the winner performs his or her concerto in March with the Lamont Symphony Orchestra. Kim won the competition with Camille Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor.

Playing in front of an audience often makes Kim nervous, which exacerbates his issues with memory. Yet, he is at peace with his disability.

“A few days before competitions and performances, I realize if I miss notes, then so what? If I'm creating music, then it's worth it.” A few weeks before the DU Solo Honors Competition, he was very nervous; “When I finally memorized a certain tricky part, I cried I was so relieved.” He said he had never played as well in his life as he did for the competition.

“I became vulnerable to the music—I let myself become invisible. It's not like ‘I play so well, so I want to show off’—it's more that this music is so beautiful that I love it and want to let it speak for itself,” he said.

Working with Lamont piano Professor Steven Mayer has been a huge benefit to Kim.

“Professor Mayer knows that when I get nervous playing in piano class, I'm like a different pianist. He's been very warm and supportive.” Mayer told Kim of a Juilliard faculty member who has a similar problem; this helped him “play at peace and accept it,” Kim said. Because he experienced many technical problems from starting piano late, Kim has a patient approach to teaching piano and explaining technique issues to his pupils.

Following graduation in June, Kim will pursue a certificate in piano performance from Lamont, and will continue to teach. Ultimately, he plans to perform at prestigious venues and teach at the collegiate level. "I would like my students to express music as another language to express their thoughts that they cannot put into words," he said.