



Introduction: A Rising Scale in Relative Minor

[At Juilliard Pre-College], I got so much stimulation from just being around highly motivated, talented musicians. Of course, there were many Asians. When I started attending Juilliard—I mean, right now, at Juilliard, it's like all Asian. Have you been to the Saturday school [Juilliard Pre-College]? It's unbelievable. But even back then [in the 1970s], the tide was turning. Eastern European and Jewish students were diminishing and Asians were just coming up. And I remember one time I had an ear-training class. There were fourteen of us, and we were all Asians. They all had perfect pitch, and they all wore glasses [laughs]. We were all nerdy Asian kids. It was very nice, because in South Carolina [where he lived at the time], there were so few Asians there, so it was very stimulating and comforting to be with lots of other Asian kids. It was like going to Korean church on Sundays; it's comforting because everyone else is Asian.

—DAVID KIM, concertmaster, Philadelphia Orchestra

[Moving from Maui to New York to attend Juilliard and dealing with a huge culture shock], being around people that played music helped. That was . . . you know what, there's something that bonds people that play music together . . . it really is amazing. There's a connection. And it goes through all cultures. And I think that's the most amazing thing. Because we can have different opinions politically, we can have different opinions culturally . . . when it comes to the way we feel about music it's very similar, and there's this common bond that brings people together really easily. That's the thing I love the most.

—KURT MUROKI, double bassist

Yo-Yo Ma. Seiji Ozawa. Zubin Mehta. Midori. Sarah Chang. Tan Dun. Lang Lang. These musicians are well known not only among classical music fans but also in America's cultural landscape at large. In addition to the star status of these solo performers, conductors, and composers, Asian musicians have gained visibility as members of professional orchestras across the United States. Six of the nine new musicians who joined the New York Philharmonic in 2006 were Asian (all but one of those six were female string players); as a result, approximately one-fifth of the members of the New York Philharmonic are now Asian. Xian Zhang, its associate conductor since 2005, is a Chinese woman. Some of the other top-level American orchestras, such as the Philadelphia Orchestra and Chicago Symphony Orchestra, as well as several regional orchestras, have Asian concertmasters or associate concertmasters. In addition, a large number of Asian professional musicians work as teachers, chamber musicians, accompanists, and freelance performers.

Young musicians from Japan, China, Taiwan, and Korea as well as Asian Americans are regularly among the winners of major international competitions. In the 2002 International Tchaikovsky Competition, well over half of the fifty-five piano contestants and nearly half of the forty-six violin contestants were Asian.¹ Ayako Uehara became the first woman (as well as the first Asian) in the history of this competition to win first prize for the piano; although there was no first prize awarded for the violin, Tamaki Kawakubo of Japan and Chen Xi of China both won second prize. In the 2005 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, nearly half of the thirty-five contestants were Asian or Asian American.² The first prize went to Russian Alexander Kobrin, but nineteen-year-old Joyce Yang of South Korea won the silver medal and two extra jury awards, and Sa Chen of China placed third. The notable number of Asian contestants and winners drew much attention from the media, generating newspaper articles with such headlines as "In the Key of China," "The Now Dynasty," and "Asians Strong Players in Cliburn Competition."³ The media have captured as well the larger trend of Asians' remarkable success in classical music in recent decades.⁴

Asians comprise less than 5 percent of the total population of the United States, but at prestigious music conservatories, such as Juilliard, Eastman, Curtis, and the New England Conservatory, they make up a disproportionately high percentage of the student body. At the Juilliard School, in the

2003–04 academic year, approximately 30 percent of the 834 students were Asian.⁵ Among these Asians, East Asians clearly dominated: both among international students and non-citizen permanent U.S. residents, the largest contingent came from Korea, Canada, Taiwan, China, and Japan, followed by those from Israel and Russia.⁶ At the Eastman School of Music, between 70 and 80 percent of the school’s piano students are Asians.⁷ At the Curtis Institute of Music—a conservatory with one of the most competitive admission processes because it offers full funding to all its students—of the fifteen piano students in 2004–05, nine were from China and one was from South Korea.⁸ These figures indicate that Asians—and specifically East Asians—constitute a considerable presence in a world in which other non-European groups remain largely invisible.⁹

The success of East Asians in classical music might seem unremarkable in the context of their general socioeconomic attainment in the United States. After all, their overrepresentation in higher education and in many professional fields has given them the designation as the “model minority” in the postwar decades. Yet, consider that classical music is usually regarded as a form of quintessential white European culture and that Asians’ exposure to Western music and musical instruments began barely a century ago. Although some Asians studied music in Europe in the prewar decades, it was only in the 1960s that a significant number of Asians came to the United States to study music. Within a single generation, musicians from Japan, followed by those from South Korea, mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, as well as second- and third-generation Asian Americans, quickly made their presence known to American—and world—audiences. The great majority of Asian musicians play what are often considered to be the most “prestigious” instruments—piano, violin, and cello, as well as voice—that offer opportunities for solo careers; there are far fewer Asian woodwind, brass, or percussion players.

Often hailed as icons of Asian and Asian American success, these classical musicians occupy a particular space in the racial and cultural map of contemporary America. Because classical music is associated with Western high culture and because the performance of classical music requires many years of disciplined training, Asians’ success in this field is often thought to exemplify their assimilation into Euroamerican culture. Through their industrious commitment to years of rigorous training and their families’ investment of time and money, these musicians become part of the model

minority: those who rise in the existing social structure through hard work and attain success in Western culture without posing a direct challenge to the economic and political status quo. Because they embrace and excel at what is seen as a form of European high culture, Asian and Asian American musicians are not seen as part of a collective movement based on their race or ethnicity. In this sense, classical music functions differently from such musical genres as jazz, blues, folk, or hip hop that immediately evoke racial or class meanings.

Although the prominence of Asian classical musicians is thus often seen as a reflection of their successful transcendence of racial and cultural boundaries, Asian musicians are racially marked in ways that white musicians are not. For instance, many people who have some familiarity with the world of classical music have the perception that Asians comprise a much higher percentage of musicians in America than they actually do. Almost all the people whom I have talked with about this project have made comments such as, “Oh, yes, the majority of students at Juilliard are Asian,” or “Asians are taking over American orchestras.” Yet in fact the percentage of Asians at Juilliard is roughly 30 percent, far from comprising the majority; according to the 2003–04 Orchestra Statistical Report, “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders” comprised approximately 5 percent of all musicians, a figure that is roughly consistent with their proportion of the overall population of the United States.¹⁰ The percentage of Asians with decision-making power in the world of music—conductors/music directors of orchestras, administrators of orchestras and other music organizations, faculty and administrators in conservatories, and staff and executives in management agencies—is far lower. According to the 2004 Compensation Survey conducted by the American Symphony Orchestra League, approximately 2 percent of employees of participating orchestras were Asian.¹¹ The vast majority of trustees on the boards of prestigious arts institutions are non-Hispanic white men and women, most of whom are wealthy donors to the organizations they serve, and they are likely to recruit other members of their social circle onto the board.¹² A 2004 *New York Times* article reported the shockingly small number of minorities, including Asians, on the boards of directors of New York City’s world-famous cultural institutions, such as Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.¹³ Therefore, although Asians’ success in classical music is certainly undeniable, they are hardly dominating or taking over the world of classical music. Such an exaggerated perception

of Asian dominance in classical music suggests that Asian musicians are racially marked.

Even today, the media almost always use an ethnic or racial category to refer to Asian musicians, as in “Korean violinist,” “young Chinese pianist,” or “Asian soprano.”¹⁴ The very coverage of the wave of “Asian” musicians itself indicates the significance of their race to the discussion. However, even a cursory look at several of the most prominent Asians in classical music today—Yo-Yo Ma, Seiji Ozawa, Mitsuko Uchida, Kyung-Wha Chung, Tan Dun, Midori, Sarah Chang, Lang Lang, and Kent Nagano, to name a few—shows a great diversity not only in their ethnicity and nationality but also their upbringing, cultural identity, and respective relationship to Asia, the United States, and Europe. Although they all have Asian ancestry, the meanings of their Asian-ness vary greatly from one musician to another. Lumping these musicians under the rubric Asian has less to do with their origins, upbringings, or sense of identity than with the perception of mainstream Euroamerican society, which has historically ignored the differences among diverse Asian peoples as well as the difference between Asian nationals and Asians in diaspora.

Moreover, whether praising or criticizing Asians in classical music, often a connection is drawn between their Asian upbringing and their performance of classical music. On the one hand, the success of Asian classical musicians is often attributed to the work ethic, commitment to education, family values, and other traits that are presumably specific to Asian culture. There is little objective basis for such claims, however. Not only is it impossible to quantify such values and compare them across racial or ethnic lines, but also in the United States, so much of one’s educational, cultural, and economic attainment is conditioned by the availability of opportunities and resources, which are unevenly distributed across class and racial lines. Attributing Asian and Asian American success in classical music to Asian culture or values reduces the issue to the matter of fixed cultural essence presumably shared by a racial group while eliding issues of history and social structure.

On the other hand, the notion that “music is universal” only seems to go so far in describing Asians’ relationship to classical music. As I discuss in detail in Chapter 5, some musicians and critics—both Asian and non-Asian—believe that Westerners and Asians perform and relate to Western music in different ways: that there is something essentially Germanic about

Beethoven, French about Debussy, or Russian about Rachmaninoff that a Chinese pianist has difficulty capturing on some “innate” level. The debates and experiences around issues of cultural authenticity suggest that the concept of the universality of music needs to be analyzed with more nuance and scrutiny.

This book is a historical, cultural, and ethnographic study of Asians and Asian Americans who pursue Western classical music in the United States. How did Asians come to form such a presence in the world of classical music, especially in the United States? How are the experiences of Asian musicians different from those of other musicians? In what ways is—or is not—racial and cultural identity relevant to music-making? To what extent does music really transcend racial, national, and cultural boundaries? By exploring these questions, the book makes four main points.

First, Asians’ ascendancy in classical music was shaped by the history of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century, the push for modernization in East Asia from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, and the process of globalization in the late twentieth century. Precisely because of its Western origin and its association with modernity and high culture, classical music has served an important social and cultural function for Asians. Classical music training has become a form of cultural capital that promises upward social mobility and a place in the Western and global world. Although the economic realities of classical music generally betray such promises, the lure of entry into the realm of high culture and upper-middle class society has led many Asian and Asian American families to make an enormous investment in their children’s pursuit of classical music.

Second, the flow of classical music was by no means a unidirectional one from West to East. Rather, Asian governments, elite intellectuals, and individual musicians and their audiences created their own meanings out of Western music and used it for their own, often conflicting goals. In the process, classical music has come to mean far more than a musical form that is specifically European or Western. Asians have created meanings of classical music in ways that could not have been predicted by those who originally introduced it to East Asia in the nineteenth century.

Third, although the association with class and Western modernity has driven Asians’ investment in Western music, another set of values independent of material concerns has been an equally, if not more, important part of the field of classical music. Classical musicians, Asians or not, continue to

proudly cherish their anti-commercialist, anti-materialist, art-for-art's-sake ideals; their embrace of universal humanism; and their faith in the transcendent power of art. In many ways it is the sense of group identity based on those shared universalist values that has enabled the crossing of racial and ethnic boundaries and the entry and ascendancy of Asians in the field.

Finally, for Asian and Asian American musicians, classical music is the medium through which they experience the social meanings of their racial, gender, sexual, or class identities. In other words, the musicians come to understand what it means to be who they are *through* their pursuit of classical music. Sometimes the practice of classical music reinforces existing stereotypical notions—including the musicians' own ideas—about social categories, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. At other times, the pursuit of classical music enables the musicians to rethink and redefine those categories, allowing them to live beyond the identities prescribed by dominant society.

It is important here to comment on my use of the terms “Asian” and “Asian American” in this book. I often use the term “Asian” when discussing specifically East Asian experiences, not because I equate the two but because both the reality and perception support such an equation in the field of classical music. Indeed, the vast majority of Asians in classical music are East Asians: those who are ethnically Japanese, Chinese, or Korean. Although the ethnic Chinese musicians I interviewed for this book included those from Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as mainland China, my discussion of Korea does not include North Korean experiences because of a scarcity of information sources, and all my Korean informants are of South Korean origin. Although a few stories of Southeast Asians appear in this book, I did not interview any South Asian musicians for this study. In sum, the overwhelming majority of my informants are East Asians. As Chapter 1 discusses, the dominance of East Asians in classical music is a result of the particular ways in which Western music was introduced to China, Japan, and Korea and the specific history of colonial dynamics in East Asia.

The ethnic origins of my informants are thus rather specific, yet those Asians are quite diverse in other ways. The musicians discussed in this book include Asian Americans who were born and raised in the United States; Asian-born musicians who came to the United States specifically to study music; professional Asian musicians who came to the United States to advance their careers; children of Asian parents whose careers and lives cross

national boundaries; Asian musicians who have lived in parts of the world other than Asia and the United States, such as Oceania, Europe, or Latin America, and thus have multiple cultural identities; and those of mixed, part-Asian ethnic heritage. Chapter 2 discusses in detail the important distinctions in the paths through which these musicians came to the United States and in their sense of ethnic, national, and cultural identity.

Let me comment here on another issue of terminology. Although I specify “Asian” or “Asian American” when the distinction is important to the particular discussion, in many places I simply use the word “Asian.” I do so not because I subsume Asian Americans under the category Asian but because it is often the musicians’ *perceived* racial identity as Asians that shapes their experience, rather than the particularities of their ethnic, national, or cultural identification.

The book opens with a historical review of the place of Western music in Japan, China, and Korea. I explain why so many Asians have invested so much in mastering Western music and discuss how Asians have used the music for their own goals. Tracing the beginnings of the “reverse flow” of Asian musicians to the West, I also examine the remarkable success of the Suzuki Method—a program for music instruction designed by Japanese violinist and pedagogue Shinichi Suzuki—in the United States.

Against this historical background, the remainder of the book presents an account of the lives, works, and ideas of these Asian musicians in America based on my ethnographic fieldwork. Over fourteen months in 2003–04, I conducted in-depth interviews with approximately seventy musicians in and around New York City, including professional performers working as soloists, orchestra members, university and conservatory faculty, and freelance performers, as well as composers working on commissions. I tried to talk with a wide array of musicians in different types of jobs and playing different instruments. I also interviewed undergraduate and graduate students at the Juilliard School, Manhattan School of Music, Mannes School of Music, and New York University. In addition, I had informal conversations with teachers, managers, and scholars. As engaging and revealing as every interview was, I could not include all of the stories. I selected the informants and stories to illustrate the diversity of the musicians’ backgrounds, situations, and ideas rather than to represent typical points of view.

As valuable as interviews are, they are also limited as ethnographic data in that they are isolated from the informants’ everyday lives and are

inevitably shaped by the setting and dynamics of the interview. To gain a broader understanding of the lives of classical musicians, I also conducted other forms of ethnographic research. I attended master classes in which my informants performed. I observed private lessons and coaching sessions in which my informants were students and teachers. I sat in on rehearsals for auditions and performances. I watched musicians practice. I observed a recording session for a commercially released CD. I attended approximately one hundred concerts in which my informants performed, in venues ranging from Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall to a black church in Harlem and a concert for an audience of ten in a private home in New Jersey. And probably most extensively and most importantly, I hung out with many of the musicians—in bars and cafés on the Upper West Side, restaurants in Chinatown or St. Mark's Place, concert halls in Midtown, practice rooms on the fourth floor of Juilliard, musicians' apartments on the Upper West Side or Washington Heights, and taxis, cars, and subways between these sites. In this process, I developed close personal relationships with many musicians, who became not only my valuable informants but also my precious friends and confidants.

In an attempt at participant observation, I also practiced quite a bit of music myself. I took a piano performance class at the Juilliard evening division, and in addition to playing in the class every week, I performed in several concerts. I took private lessons from one of my informants for a period of time, and I took lessons and master classes from a few others. I also entered (and completely bombed) an amateur piano competition. Although I do not compare my relationship to music to that of the professional musicians in this study, I believe that my knowledge and practice of classical music have shaped my thinking in crucial ways.

New York is in many ways America's cultural capital. It draws many talented and ambitious musicians from around the world, and it is where top-level classical music activities are most concentrated. The uniqueness of New York—the diversity of its population, its cosmopolitan culture, the large number of musicians and musical events in town—distinguishes the experiences of Asian musicians in this city from those of the majority of Asian musicians living in other parts of the United States. Therefore, I tried to obtain a more balanced view of America's musical and cultural scene by conducting telephone interviews with musicians in other parts of the country or in-person interviews with musicians who came to Hawai'i where I

currently live. I have also conducted ethnographic research in Hawai‘i and Japan—interviewing musicians, observing lessons, attending workshops, going to performances, and, again, hanging out with musicians. I have continued my own piano playing as well, taking lessons regularly with a pianist who is also my informant and friend and occasionally performing at home for a group of friends.

Drawing on this fieldwork, the chapters address different dimensions of Asian and Asian American musicians’ lives, work, and identity. Chapter 2 explores the meaning of Asian identity for Asian and Asian American classical musicians. It first gives an overview of the roots and routes of Asian musicians in the United States—where they come from, how they came to the United States, and how they became musicians—which reveals the great diversity of Asian musicians. The chapter then analyzes the various meanings of Asian identity in the musicians’ lives and how the pursuit of classical music helps them live through and beyond those prescribed identities. Chapter 3 examines the gender and sexual dynamics in the field of classical music and their impact on Asian musicians. It both analyzes the dominant gender and sexual norms that shape and constrain musicians’ sense of identity in Asia and the United States and shows how Asian musicians—men and women—navigate these dynamics as they pursue their artistic goals. Chapter 4 examines the socioeconomic aspects of classical music by analyzing the class origins of Asian musicians and the economic conditions of the classical music profession. It also discusses the ways in which the musicians themselves make sense of the meaning of their “class” as musicians. Chapter 5 explores how racial and/or cultural identity is relevant—or not—to musical understanding and expression. I examine the diverse ways in which Asian and Asian American musicians think about that relevance and discuss the significance of their ideas to the concept of authenticity. The chapter thus addresses the question, “Is classical music universal?”

Two sets of “Voices,” which are excerpts of selected interviews with my informants, are found in this book. These interviews relate loosely to the themes discussed in the chapters that precede or follow them; I present these excerpts to give a tactile sense of the musicians’ lives and ideas and my interaction with them without forcing them into the specific arguments I make in the chapters. I hope that they convey the rich and diverse tones, colors, rhythms, and phrases of the musicians’ voices.