



A Young Conductor Makes Waves

Shi-Yeon Sung Joins the Boston Symphony Orchestra | AN INTERVIEW BY ALITA BYRD

Last year, Shi-Yeon Sung became the first woman to be named assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Working under the renowned James Levine, the thirty-two-year-old South Korean is making the most of her two-year opportunity to work with some of the world's best musicians and conductors.

In 2006, Sung won the prestigious Sir Georg Solti International Conductors' Competition in Frankfurt, Germany—the first woman to ever take home the top prize. She was given €15,000 in prize money and concerts with the Frankfurt Museum Orchestra and the Frankfurt Radio Symphony.

In February 2007, she took second prize at the Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition in Bamberg, Germany—another top honor. (None of the twelve competitors earned first prize.) A *London Times* reviewer said Sung “conducted with impressive discipline but coolness.” English conductor Jonathan Nott, who conducts the world-class symphony orchestra in Bamberg and is one of the judges in the conducting competition, said: “I hope Shi-Yeon can go on to prove that we should have given her first prize.”

Shi-Yeon Sung is certainly a rising star in the classical music world, and she has packed in an impressive array of performances and accolades since her conducting debut in 2002, when she conducted Mozart's *Magic Flute* in Berlin.

Shi-Yeon Sung is also an Adventist, and since she moved to Boston for her new job this season, she has been attending the Boston Korean

Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Sung gives God the credit for her success. “I believe that God has led me to where I am today,” she says.

“I do not know why [I was chosen for the Boston Symphony orchestra position]. But I think God has a plan for me here in Boston and I am waiting to find out what it is.”

Sung was born in an Adventist hospital in Pusan, South Korea.





When Sung was five years old, her mother became an Adventist and began taking her daughter with her to church every week. Later, while living in Germany, Sung was baptized.

Sung says it can be difficult to balance her work in the professional music world with her religion, "but I decided to conduct music to praise God," she says, so she believes the two do not conflict.

The Beginning

Sung started taking piano lessons when she was four years old, living with her parents and older brother in Seoul, South Korea. "One day I came home after playing with some friends," Sung says. "I asked my mother to get me piano lessons. I don't remember why. I just wanted

to be a professional musician."

Sung's earliest memory of music is of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 playing at home. "I felt really comfortable and at ease when the music surrounded the entire room," she says.

Sung practiced her piano diligently, but she also liked to go out and spend time with her friends. For a while, she tried her hand at the violin, but decided it was not for her. She enjoyed going to hear orchestras play, and watching the conductors made a deep and lasting impression.

When she was eighteen, Sung left home to study piano and music in Switzerland, and then Germany. She studied under well-known teachers in Zurich and Berlin, and in 2001 earned a master's degree in

piano performance from the Berlin University of the Arts.

Then Sung decided to take up conducting. "I wanted to try something new besides piano," she says. "I remembered watching orchestras as a little kid and I wanted to switch to conducting."

After her conducting debut in 2002, Sung worked with various German orchestras, and eventually orchestras around the world, including the Rotterdam Philharmonic, Bamberg Symphony, Heidelberg Philharmonic, Royal Opera Orchestra Stockholm, Helsingborg Symphony, Seoul Philharmonic, and many others.

Sung also won various conducting competitions, including the Solingen Conducting Competition for women.



Questions and Answers

Spectrum asked Shi-Yeon Sung some questions about her work and her inspiration.

Spectrum: What music do you most enjoy conducting?

Shi-Yeon Sung: Gustav Mahler and other German classical and romantic music.

Q: What preparation do you do before conducting a piece of music?

A: First I study the background of the music, and how it came to be composed. Then I read through the score once. Then I try to play it on the piano. While I play it, I imagine what it would sound like with an orchestra performing it.

Then I rehearse with an orchestra. And I pray.

Q: How do you feel is the most effective way to communicate with an orchestra?

A: Just be yourself on the podium and be honest all the time. Instead of requesting musicians to create sound in a certain way, I try to incorporate the unique sound each member makes and react to create a harmony.

Q: What do you find to be the most difficult thing about being a conductor?

A: To be a great conductor, not only do you need good knowledge and techniques, but you also need to create a good working relationship with musicians. One of the most impor-

tant assets of a good conductor is his or her unique personality. But you are born with it and it is difficult to change who you are.

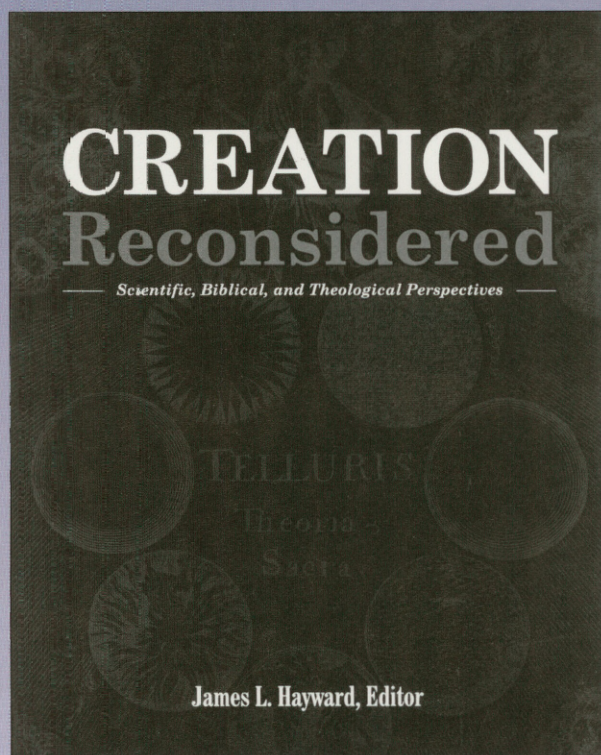
Q: Aren't you very young for a conductor?

A: In the past, I would have been a young conductor. But today, there are lots of young conductors who have great careers in music.

Q: Where do you think classical music is going? How has the classical music world changed in the time you have been a part of it?

A: Compared to classical music performance in the past, today music has become more technical. Instead of deep interpretation, music these

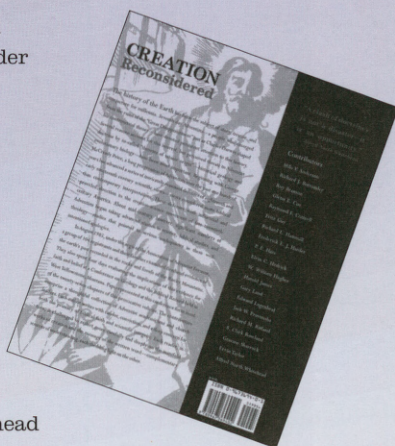
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Q: How does Adventism influence your career? Does your career impact your Adventism?



A: I try to represent Adventists in the music world.

Q: Where do you see your career going in the future?

A: I do not know for sure at this moment. No matter how I plan it, I believe it is God who has led me till now. So I will wait and see where he will take me next.

Q: What do you do when you are not making music?

A: I exercise whenever I have free time because it is important to have good stamina. Conducting is a very demanding job. I also watch movies, read books, and spend time with my friends.

Q: How often do you see your family? What do they think of your success?

A: My family is still in South Korea. I see them once every year. They are really happy about my success. My parents pray a lot for me. They know God is the reason behind my success.

Q: What advice would you have for young Adventists who are hoping to become professional musicians?

A: Without effort, God will not grant your wish. Therefore, do your best and never give up. Continue to pray as you pursue your dream. ■

Alita Byrd is a member of *Spectrum's* editorial board and helps edit *Spectrum's* Web site. She writes from Dublin, Ireland. This interview was first published on *Spectrum's* Web site <www.spectrummagazine.org>.