

Yeol Eum Son

piano





Yeol Eum Son Critical Acclaim

“Son’s approach to this piano concerto was [one] of joy, but with delicacy, poise, and refinement...She handled the exposed passagework full of scales and arpeggios with clarity and control.... The audience responded enthusiastically with a standing ovation...”

Ludwig Van, Toronto



“...her tonal purity, her limpid elegance (evident in the pristine trills and gossamer glissandos in the first movement), her imaginative dynamics and articulation (listen to the piano jabs in the finale). And the performances are full of interpretative insight, too.”

Gramophone on Son’s recording of Ravel (Naïve, 2025)

“Two elements make the performance of the flightier concerto in G major stand out from the pack: One is the irresistible sense of forward motion during the faster sections; the other, its complement, is the languid loveliness that settles in whenever Ravel’s foot is off the accelerator.”

The Times on Son’s recording of Ravel (Naïve 2025)

“Yeol Eum Son... played with a dazzling range of dynamics, patiently giving each musical idea a semi-improvisatory spontaneity... With the first piece [Ravel’s Valses Nobles et Sentimentales] she took the listener by the collar and never let go, ranging from wispy and mysterious to a murky haze of sound in the smoky final waltz... Her showmanship came to the fore in the final work, Liszt’s “Mephisto Waltz No. 1, played with booming power and devilish ferocity in the cackling multi-trills and gossamer right-hand runs.”

Washington Post

“The final toccata was dazzling, a preface to a simply phenomenal performance of Stravinsky’s Three Pieces from Petrushka. Son thunders the big, roof-raising stuff but interlaces it with crisp chords and single lines that get to the heart beneath the wood of Stravinsky’s tragic puppet.”

Arts Desk

“The last was a dazzling tour de force [Stravinsky Three Movements from Petrushka], Yeol Eum finding that vital emotional connection with the music and physically embracing its raw energy and dynamic extremes with ferocious virtuosity. The encore – Moskowski’s effervescent Etincelles – was just as captivating, just as virtuosic.”

The Scotsman

“Yeol Eum Son was all unruffled coolness, yet how beautifully she detoured her pearl-like passage work into darker terrain, or, using Andras Schiff’s first movement cadenza, modified it to sharpen its dramatic focus...Her encore, the first movement of Mozart’s most famous piano sonata, was imbued with all the musical virtues we had already enjoyed, along with some telling and immaculately articulated ornamentation.”

NZ Herald

“On few occasions in the still short life of this auditorium has it been possible to see and hear such a display of technique, strength, temperament, and piano virtuosity. An extraordinary performance was delivered to the audience by the talented Korean concert pianist, Yeol Eum Son.”

El Español

“Performing Chopin Piano Concerto No.2, Yeol Eum Son had power and passion, fireworks and drama aplenty, but for me the true magic was in the music’s more introverted passages. The opening of the slow movement was exquisite, with both orchestra and pianist seeming to explore the inner reaches of the soul. This movement was all about the joy of the journey, with the arrival almost an afterthought.”

Limelight

“Yeol Eum Son, a model of clarity and fleetness... a winning album all round.”

The Times

“She also brings an unerring taste and sense of poetry with clean lines, deft use of the pedal and tonal clarity. The late works especially are worthy company for some of the best and most respected sets.”

Limelight

“The most apt description is glorious. There is lyricism everywhere, as well as an elegant, poised simplicity.”

dCS Audio



**Yeol Eum Son, Piano
2025-2026 Biography**

Poetic elegance, an innate feeling for expressive nuance and the power to project bold, dramatic contrasts are among the arresting attributes of Yeol Eum Son's pianism. She is known for her refined artistry and breathtaking technical control as well as her strikingly wide-ranging repertoire, from Bach and Mozart to Shchedrin and Kapustin. In high demand around the world as recitalist, concerto soloist and chamber musician, she continues to deepen her artistry through collaborations with many of today's leading conductors, including Antonio Pappano, Roberto González-Monjas, Jonathon Heyward, Ryan Bancroft, Maxim Emelyanychev, Jaime Martin, Andrew Manze, Alexander Shelley and Omer Meir Welber, among others.

Following a very intense 25/26 concert season, in summer 2025, Yeol Eum Son made her New York orchestral debut with the Festival Orchestra of Lincoln Center as part of *Summer for the City*. She also debuted at the Colorado Music Festival following a successful collaboration with the Colorado Symphony earlier in the season. Further highlights of the 2025-2026 season include debut collaborations with the Danish National, Swedish Radio, London Philharmonic, and São Paulo State Symphony. Return collaborations this season include appearances at the Barbican Centre in London with the BBC Symphony (with performances in the UK and South Korea), Scottish Chamber and in Asia with the Singapore Symphony.

Recent highlights of Yeol Eum's numerous orchestral collaborations in North America and Canada include the Los Angeles and Naples Philharmonics; Baltimore, Colorado, Detroit and St. Louis Symphonies; Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and the NAC Orchestra in Ottawa; and Internationally, she has appeared with, among others, the LSO, BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Aurora Orchestra, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Dresden Philharmonic, Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne, Konzerthausorchester Berlin, NDR Radiophilharmonie, Finnish Radio Symphony, Helsinki Philharmonic, and Oslo Philharmonic. Further afield, Yeol Eum's orchestral appearances include frequent collaborations with the Sydney, Melbourne, West Australian, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestras and Auckland Philharmonia. As a recitalist, Yeol Eum's recent appearances include the Edinburgh International Festival in Scotland, International

Chopin Festival at Duszniki-Zdrój in Poland, Mänttä Music Festival in Finland, Rosendal and Risør Chamber Music Festivals in Norway.

Over the past decade Yeol Eum has achieved global acclaim for her interpretations of Mozart's piano concertos. In 2016 she joined the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields and Sir Neville Marriner for a radiant interpretation of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 in what proved to be the conductor's final recording. The YouTube video of her performance of this work at the International Tchaikovsky Competition has been viewed almost 23 million times, thought to be a record figure for any live Mozart work on the platform.

In addition to Yeol Eum's intense performance diary, she has an active recording schedule. Her most recent releases on Naïve records are her albums "Ravel: Piano Concertos – Bach/Wittgenstein," "Love Music" with violinist Svetlin Roussev, and a stunning box set of Mozart's Complete Piano Sonatas. Yeol Eum has also recorded works by Berg, Prokofiev, and Stravinsky and has a disc devoted to the piano music of Nikolai Kapustin. Her complete discography can be explored [here](#).

Born in Wonju, South Korea, in 1986, Yeol Eum Son received her first piano lessons at the age of three-and-a-half. She was among the prize winners at the International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians in 1997 and won the Oberlin International Piano Competition two years later. She attracted international attention when she won second prize and the Best Chamber Music Performance at the 2009 Van Cliburn Competition. She secured her position among the most gifted artists of her generation at the 2011 International Tchaikovsky Competition, where she won the Silver Medal, among other honors. Yeol Eum studied at Korea National University of Arts and continued her training with Professor Arie Vardi at the Hochschule für Musik, Theater und Medien Hannover.

AUGUST 2025. AT THE REQUEST OF THE ARTIST – PLEASE DO NOT

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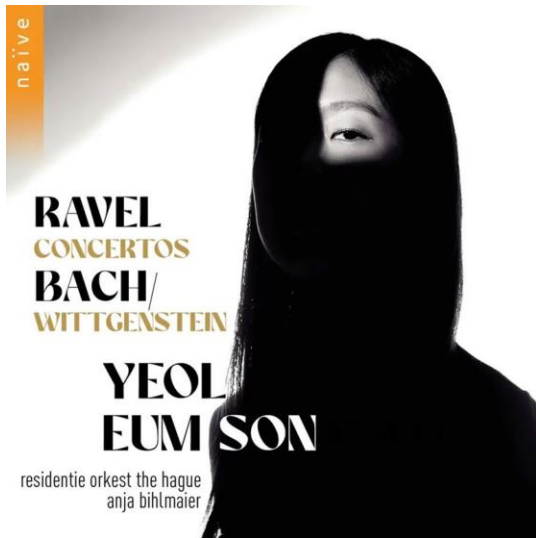
Features

Yeol Eum Son

GRAMOPHONE
THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

May 16, 2025

Top 5 classical releases you need to hear this week



Ravel Piano Concertos
Yeol Eum Son *pf* **Residentie Orkest The Hague / Anja Bihlmaier** (Naïve)
With the next Cliburn International Piano Competition due to get underway on May 21 (Jed Distler will be writing a daily blog following all of the performances at this year's competition on our website) it seems an appropriate time for the 2009 Cliburn silver medalist Yeol Eum Son to release a new recording of Ravel's piano concertos along with several works by Bach arranged for piano left hand by Paul Wittgenstein.



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Yeol Eum Son



April 30, 2025

Pianist Yeol Eum Son on tackling Beethoven with the SCO: 'He tells us a lot about determination'

By David Kettle



South Korean pianist Yeol Eum Son is fast becoming a familiar face in [Scotland](#). She made her debut here – with Ravel's fiendish Left Hand Concerto – alongside the Iceland Symphony Orchestra back in early 2020, in one of the final concerts before Covid locked us all down. She returned to great acclaim at Fife's East Neuk Festival in 2023, and made her [Edinburgh](#) International Festival debut just a few weeks later. She's clearly getting to know the place well: "I love the Scottish landscape – and how foggy it can be!" she laughs.

Yeol Eum is forging her strongest relationship, however, with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. She launched that partnership with Mozart in December 2022, and returns with more Mozart – a duo of contrasting piano concertos, Nos 21 and 24 – in October this year. "They're such a tasteful band," she says. "Everything they do is so organic, stylish, vigorous yet embracing. The last time I played the Mozart Concerto with them, they played Dvořák's Symphony No. 7 in the second half – I was so impressed at how they sounded so

completely but wonderfully different than they did in Mozart."

As we approach the close of the current SCO season, however, Yeol Eum turns to Beethoven, and specifically his powerful Piano Concerto No. 3. She might be famed for her tender touch, her refinement and poetic elegance, but she's just as capable of fiery, muscular playing. "Beethoven's music can be highly assertive and persistent," she explains. "He tells us a lot about determination."

She draws parallels, however, between the two composers whose music she's (so far) performed with the SCO. "Of course Beethoven admired Mozart so much, and the Third Concerto is known to be heavily influenced by Mozart's Concerto in the same key – No. 24 in C minor, K491." Perhaps not coincidentally, that's one of the two Mozart concertos Yeol Eum has planned for her performance with the SCO later this year.

All this talk of Mozart and Beethoven, however, might be doing Yeol Eum a disservice. She takes enormous pride in the breadth of her repertoire, and indeed in her championing of some unfairly overlooked musical figures – from Alkan to Lekeu and Galuppi, and particularly the fascinating Soviet jazz/classical crossover composer Nikolai Kapusin, to whose music she's devoted an entire CD. "Yes, for me it's important to be eclectic in what I play, but only in the sense that I don't only eat Korean food all my life either. I simply love and want the diversity. But it's also true that I do learn a lot about one thing

from another – I'd have a different perspective on Rachmaninov, for example, after playing Bach. And vice versa. Or I'd think differently about playing Chopin after working on a piece by a living composer. I love Mozart and Beethoven, but I need lots of control for them as I'm extremely exposed. I get much more nervous when I'm playing those composers on stage, too."

It's somewhat surprising to hear a musician actually admitting to nerves. But Yeol Eum a disarmingly straightforward, direct figure, and a performer who clearly thinks deeply about the music she plays – and, importantly, about her own relationship with it. Perhaps that honesty and serious-mindedness also contributed to another success in her earlier life – hugely popular monthly columns in one of South Korea's leading Sunday newspapers, which were later collected together into a best-selling book. She still loves writing as a counterpoint to playing, she says – after all, you can quickly change and improve something you've written, whereas a performance happens entirely in the moment. With all that journalistic expertise, however, let's turn the tables. What would she ask herself if she were in my position? "Wow, that's an excellent question!" she laughs. And it elicits another disarmingly honest response. "You know, generally speaking, as I'm a musician myself, I'm not that curious about musicians and their lives any more. There are many pianists and musicians that I adore with all my heart, but I don't particularly want to meet them or interview them. Instead, after listening to them playing, I'd love to point out a few places and ask why they

play those sections as they do. So maybe I would do the same to myself."

Considering that deep thinking, it's perhaps not surprising that Yeol Eum considers herself "generally a shy person", though it's perhaps more eyebrow-raising that she continues: "It sometimes takes me a while to create rapport in making music." How does she manage to balance that with being constantly on the road – or, more accurately, in the air – and perpetually developing new relationships with ensembles and individual musicians around the world? Just this season, for example, she performs right across Europe, tours the USA and Canada, and has a number of recitals in South Korea too. "I actually almost didn't realise, until quite recently, that this lifestyle is an unusual one," she admits. "I can't even say if I enjoy it or dislike it – I think I just accept it. You can always complain about your situation, but in the same way, you can always be happy too. Does that make sense?"

The answer to establishing rapport in an itinerant career, of course, is in return engagements – like those in her fast-developing relationship with the SCO. "I don't think there are many musicians who wouldn't want to play with the SCO, since they're such a superb ensemble," she smiles. But there are other factors, too. "To be honest, since I'm travelling so much, just to be able to picture a city, an airport I already know, a venue whose acoustics I can remember, and an orchestra that sounds a particular way – all that already gives me a big comfort. The location, the venue, the audience, even the piano all play their part in me wanting to come back. And being in the Usher Hall or [Glasgow](#) City Halls together with the SCO is bliss."

Yeol Eum Son



CLASSICAL VOICE

Concerts · Artists · Critical Reviews

April 22, 2025

For Pianist Yeol Eum Son, Expression Is Key

By Victoria Looseleaf



Since taking second prize at the 2009 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, [Yeol Eum Son](#), now 38, has continued to thrill audiences around the world. And [April 25–27](#), she'll be making her debut with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under the baton of Ryan Bancroft at Walt Disney Concert Hall, performing Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24.

Born in Wonju, South Korea, Son started piano lessons at age 3½ and was winning her first music competitions less than a decade later. After graduating from Korea National University of Arts, she pursued further studies in Germany.

Her development as a complete artist — recitalist, concerto soloist, and chamber musician — has wowed critics and audiences alike and earned her alliances with conductors ranging from Antonio Pappano to Jonathon Heyward to Andrew Manze to the late Lorin Maazel. This season alone, Son has debuted with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Vienna's Tonkünstler Orchestra, and the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland.

Her vast repertoire spans classical masterpieces by composers such as J.S. Bach and Mozart to contemporary works by Rodion Shchedrin and Nikolai Kapustin. In addition to her fiendishly busy concert schedule, Son has released nine albums to date, including *Modern*



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Times (2016), a disc devoted to Kapustin (2021), and *Mozart: Complete Piano Sonatas* (2023).

SF Classical Voice spoke with Son over Zoom from Austin, Texas, where she was scheduled to perform with the Austin Symphony Orchestra. She discussed her upcoming LA Phil gig, her love of Mozart, and her unabashed fondness for writing — yes, she's a published author! This conversation has been edited for concision and clarity.

Are you excited about making your debut with the LA Phil in Mozart's Concerto No. 24, and who are some of your favorite Mozart interpreters?

I am excited, yes. The orchestra offered me to play Mozart, and I love this C-Minor Concerto. Of course, [there are] many pianists I adore so much as Mozart players, [such as] Alicia de Larrocha, and [Hungarian-born pianist] Lili Kraus was well known as a Mozart player, too. I can almost call [No. 24] my favorite Mozart concerto. It's very unusual because it's one of the few minor [key] concertos. It's mysterious, and you can't really define what it is. It always goes in some other direction than expected. I especially love the last movement — it wanders so much.

Have you worked with Ryan Bancroft before?

I did once with his BBC National Orchestra of Wales in Cardiff two years ago, playing [Sergei] Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. It's the only concert we've [so far done] together. I'm [also] playing with him in July at the Colorado Music Festival. I'm very much looking forward to playing with him again.

What about rehearsal time? How do you establish a connection with an orchestra — in this case, the LA Phil — when you have so few rehearsals?

Rapport with an orchestra is always a question. Whether we rehearse more or less depends. Sometimes [a piece] requires a lot of rehearsal, [but] when we over-rehearse, it's not very good. With Mozart, we need some spontaneity and improvised ideas onstage. We have

to respond to how [the music] is [in the moment], how the atmosphere works for us.

I'm wondering why you stayed in Korea for your studies until age 20 rather than going abroad earlier. And what were some of the challenges in being both Korean and a woman when you finally did move to Europe?

It was more common for all my friends — they were recognized as talented kids — to go to America or somewhere else. I couldn't because of my family's financial [situation]. Then I met my [first major] teacher when I was 13 and thought by then that I could stay in Korea and study further with him, which worked quite well.

I graduated, then went to Hanover, Germany, and had a teacher I fell in love with, [Israeli pianist] Arie Vardi. He's still a mentor, and I regularly see him, [which is] one of the reasons I've stayed here. The [big] challenge has been that at some points in my life, I've felt like [European audiences] haven't accepted non-European musicians because [we're playing] European music [and so audiences] think it's really theirs. Now it's quite different. People are more open-minded.

What about playing music by Korean composers, such as Unsuk Chin and Isang Yun, and new music in general?

One of the things I used to do a lot when I was a student was premiering almost a different work every week for our composer friends. Then I stopped doing it, [but] I recently started again. I have a few composer friends from Korea [involved in] upcoming projects, but maybe it's too early to speak about.

I'm very much open to working with my contemporaries. I learn so much from them, [including] how to interpret [canonical] composers [better]. It's nice and complementary.

Do you have a preference — performing with an orchestra, a chamber ensemble, or as a recitalist?

This is one of the things that keeps changing. In my 20s, I loved chamber

music so much. My biggest passion was playing chamber music repertory. Now I love doing recitals. Concertos are a lot of fun, making music with a big group of musicians, and some conductors are hugely inspiring. [But] to be alone onstage and to make the show from beginning to end, it's a big privilege. Even singers or violinists, they always have to play with a pianist, so a [solo] recital is a very unique experience.

I understand you were a monthly columnist for a leading South Korean paper, *JoongAng Sunday*, and then compiled the columns into a book, *Letters From Hanover*, which was intended for nonmusicians. I also read that you said you felt addicted to writing — as if you were an author rather than a pianist. Can you please elaborate on that?

Yes, I was working as a columnist, but it's been many, many years. I was doing that from 2010 to 2016, for 6½ years. By then, I really loved doing it. I still love writing; it's another passion in my life.

You can do a lot of things [in writing] that you cannot do in making music. Correcting [what you've done, for example], which you cannot do in a live concert. This is very satisfying, and you can try to be a perfectionist. In music, many things happen that you can't change. [And] music is such an abstract thing — there are many things that you really cannot describe in words. I felt a sort of a thirst [when writing], the way I wanted to express something.

[Writing] was a great experience, but I stopped doing it after I started traveling a lot. I wish to write another book.

Last year, you released an album, *Love Music*, with your husband, violinist Svetlin Roussev, which features works by Franz Waxman, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Fritz Kreisler, and others. How did you decide on the selections?

When we first thought about this album, we weren't even dating. We were [only] duo partners. This repertory, because I'm such a big violin fan, I always

wanted to record it. We [had the idea] a few years ahead of the real recording happening. We wanted to record some of those Austro-German composers like [Richard] Strauss and Kreisler, who is very different from Strauss. They're very charming little pieces, and [the album just] somehow came later than we expected.

And your latest album, which is a live recording with The Hague Residence Orchestra under Chief Conductor Anja Bihlmaier, drops May 16.

Yes, it has the two [Maurice] Ravel concertos, the G-Major Concerto and the Concerto for the Left Hand, [the latter of] which [pianist and World War I veteran] Paul Wittgenstein commissioned. He also arranged the four little solo pieces by Bach [that are on the album]. The [Ravel performances] were from live concerts, and we had had a bit of rehearsal.

Speaking of albums, in 2016 you performed Mozart's Concerto No. 21 with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and Neville Marriner, which proved to be the conductor's final recording. What are your memories of that?

We first played together in 2015, and we loved each other by [the end of] the first meeting. I was a big admirer anyway. He was such a great musician. I still remember how he rehearsed. He was so passionate, even at his age [92]. You might think he was accomplished and [just going] from one place to another, [but] he was passionately rehearsing.

At the same time, he was very open-minded, very encouraging. Whatever I wanted to do, he would always listen to me. I have [had] other experiences working with great maestros who had their own ways, but Neville was not one of them.

You always look very chic on your album covers and in your [Instagram posts](#). What do you, as a fellow pianist, think of Yuja Wang's performance attire, including her stilettos, and what role should clothes play in a performance?

As long as you like what you're wearing — it has to start from that. I can't really picture myself doing the same [because] I don't like wearing minidresses. I love wearing stilettos, high heels, but not platform ones. When I play piano, for me higher heels work better for the pedals. They become support. It just depends on how you're trained.

Shoes aside, where do you see yourself in the next five to 10 years?

It's hard to tell, hard to foresee. The more and more I think about it — it doesn't matter where or how I'm [making a career] — I just want to be original and unique in what I'm doing. I want to create an original path.

.

Reviews

Yeol Eum Son



August 11, 2025

The best classical albums of 2025 so far

By Geoff Brown



Ravel *Naïve*

Yeol Eum Son. She's a South Korean pianist, just turned 39. May I abbreviate her name to YES? It seems appropriate, especially in the context of this artist's latest album, one of numerous releases marking Ravel's 150th birthday. Several other pianists have darted around

the composer's solo piano works, but YES goes for the larger trophies: the two piano concertos from the end of the 1920s, recorded in concert in The Hague with the Residentie Orkest and its energetic conductor, Anja Bihlmaier.

Two elements make the performance of the flightier concerto, in G major, stand out from the pack. One is the irresistible sense of forward motion during the faster sections; the other, its complement, is the languid loveliness that settles in whenever Ravel's foot is off the accelerator. The Residentie Orkest's instrumental quirks and the finale's circus tricks form the icing on the cake.

The account of the darker D major concerto for the left hand (scheduled to be performed at the Proms by a one-handed pianist, Nicholas McCarthy) proves slightly less dazzling, though nothing sabotages its cumulative sense of limpid clarity gaining muscle and strength. YES's four solo extras — Bach snippets transcribed for the left hand by the D major concerto's commissioner Paul Wittgenstein — provide a most calming and satisfying finale.



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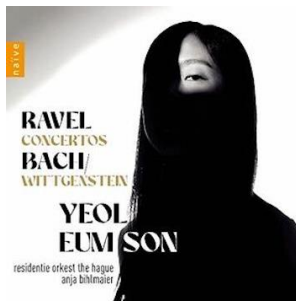
Yeol Eum Son



June 19, 2025

Classical Music Album Review

By Jonathan Blumhofer



Pianist Yeol Eum Son is more than up to the demands of J.S. Bach and Maurice Ravel; violinist Bomsori brings exquisite balances and shimmering sonority to Bruch and Korngold.

J.S. Bach and Maurice Ravel aren't composers one normally finds paired together. Yet pianist Yeol Eum Son has drawn just that connection on her new album, *Ravel/Bach*.

She makes the connection via Paul Wittgenstein, the Austrian pianist who lost his right arm in combat during World War I but continued his career as a left-handed artist. Among his postwar

repertoire were the four arrangements of music by Bach that Son assays here, as well as Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand, which was written for him.

As such, there's nothing really unfamiliar on this short release (the whole thing comes in just over the 50-minute mark). But it's a fascinating concept, all the same, and Wittgenstein's arrangements of the C-major Prelude from Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the C-minor Prelude from the *Suite for Beginners*, "Gigue" from Partita No. 1, and the "Sicilienne" from the Flute and Clavier Sonata are striking for their quiet virtuosity: if you didn't know this was keyboard music played by just one hand, you'd never guess it from listening blind.

On the whole, Son is more than up to their demands — only the whirling "Gigue" feels reined in. Otherwise, both Preludes flow agreeably (the crisp C-minor installment is a particular pleasure to hear) and the "Sicilienne" dances soberly.

The pianist is on similarly firm footing in the Concerto for the Left Hand, which is full of spirit and character. Its opening cadenza thunders with good textural and rhythmic clarity. Meantime, there's a becoming warmth to the way the Andante unfolds and the cheeky Allegro swaggers.

Son's partner in this work (as well as Ravel's G-major Concerto, which fills out the disc) is the Residentie Orkest The Hague under the leadership of Anja Bihlmaier and, in both scores, they're well-attuned to the sheer invention of Ravel's style. Tempos move fluently and the music's kaleidoscopic plays of color are painted with care.

That's especially true in the G-major Concerto, where the outlandishly dreamy transition into the first-movement cadenza feels like it's being made up on the spot. Here, too, exchanges between pianist and orchestra are crisp and balances clear. Best is the pairing's account of the extraordinary Adagio, which unfolds as a weightless, hypnotic dance: pure, pristine, otherworldly.



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Yeol Eum Son



May 30, 2025

The best classical albums of 2025 so far

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Yeol Eum Son

Ravel

Naïve



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Yeol Eum Son



April 30, 2025

From ice to fire with Ryan Bancroft and the Los Angeles Philharmonic

By Lawrence Vittes



Guest conductor [Ryan Bancroft](#) and the Los Angeles Philharmonic began their rare, Saturday afternoon concert with the US premiere of [Anders Hillborg's](#) *Sound Atlas*, perhaps a gesture toward Bancroft's role as Chief Conductor of the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic. Written in 2018, this 20-minute soundscape reflects the composer's curiosity about how synthetic textures can be built using natural, acoustic instruments. The five sections – Crystalline, River of Glass, Vaporised Toy Pianos, Vortex and Hymn – introduce a wide palette of color: a glass harmonica, microtonal string harmonies, eerie pipings and gleaming, blended sonorities that seem to evolve and recombine in slow, tectonic motion. The music progresses according to lines so immaculately constructed that the piece could serve as the soundtrack to an imaginary diorama. Rather than asserting themselves, the musicians and their instruments become part of the sound design, dissolving into the textures they create as they merge into the fabric of the music. One especially

striking outburst of percussion seemed caught between violence, sunlight and deep ice. A series of meditative singing bowls brought the piece to a contemplative close.

Bancroft took Mozart's *Piano Concerto no. 24 in C minor* at a brisk pace, emphasizing its martial rhythms and the striking angularity of the opening theme. [Yeol Eum Son](#) played with poise and technical fluency, even if her interpretation leaned more toward clarity than expressivity; there was less phrasing in relief, but the transparency of her tone was compelling in its own right.

As the performance unfolded, the music began to take on the feel of a symphony with obbligate piano – elegant, fleet and lightly voiced. Son unfolded the cadenza in broad gestures, emotionally reserved but noble in tone, with what sounded like a few chords from *The Magic Flute* folded in. The *Larghetto* was lovely: the pulse relaxed slightly, and Son added delicate, tasteful ornaments that gave the music a touch of bloom. In the finale, she gradually expanded her expressive range with increasingly florid, Hummel-like elaborations, more and more daring with each repetition. If it never felt entirely headlong, it was certainly gaining momentum by the end.

After intermission, Nielsen's Fourth Symphony began with surging physicality and admirable sonic heft. The cello solo's burnished tone on his C and G strings helped set the tone for a

performance that was both generously phrased and alert to detail. Bancroft seemed attuned to the tensions in Nielsen's musical language – the push and pull between late-Romantic richness and stark, modern clarity. One had the impression of hearing the composer sorting through his influences in real time, the orchestra channeling his process as much as his product. As is occasionally the case, a trumpet player inserting earplugs just before the

dueling timpanists launched into action in the finale was a signal that they were going to be very loud, and so they were, although not without a sort of kettledrum poetry. Still, not everything landed. The woodwinds in the *Poco allegretto* were smooth but not rustic enough, and the strings lacked a hair-raising, Hitchcockian thrill in their big *Poco adagio* entry. Overall, the performance had more determination than sweep and glory.

Yeol Eum Son

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Guest soloist and conductor lead thrilling SLSO program

By Chris King

Symphony musicians all learn the same zombie stare for when they are seated onstage but not playing. Like wearing uniform concert blacks, it rightly places emphasis on the music rather than the musicians. At the Friday, November 22 St. Louis Symphony Orchestra performance, concertmaster David Halen broke this form. He could not take his eyes off the piano playing of guest soloist Yeol Eum Son. Not that Halen was emoting or drawing attention to himself, but he had the best seat in the house to watch this sizzling piano performance and he evidently took advantage of the opportunity.

In her SLSO debut, Yeol Eum Son joined the orchestra – led by guest conductor Jonathon Heyward – on Sergei Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 2*. I could see why Halen could not take his eyes off her performance. The conductor played piano at the 1913 premiere (and again at the 1924 premiere of his reconstruction after the original score was destroyed by fire), and Prokofiev said his own piano part wore him out. Son wore me out with her emotionally resonant and physically acrobatic performance. She was not showy, just expressive without restraint, rising off the bench to attack more vigorous parts and ending long piano lines with full arm sweeps away from the keys.

Two vivid physical moments that were entangled in the thrilling musical performance: she was blinded by her own flowing hair during a long, intricate stretch of piano playing with no break to pin it back behind her ears; and she held a stare upward during a pause between workouts, as if summoning strength from the heavens to continue.

Jonathon Heyward, in his second stint leading the orchestra, kept the soloist behind him but just visible with a far left stretch and twist from his young and limber spine. He never presumed to cue the star soloist, but he often swept far left to connect with her and to savor clutch moments. Perhaps, like the concertmaster – and the timpanist, who also peered through the woodwind players to enjoy the piano show – the conductor could not keep himself from watching her performance.

To my ears, the Prokofiev stole the thunder from the marquee closing number, Jean Sibelius' *Symphony No. 5*, which should have been programmed to close the first half, not to follow this monster of a piano concerto. SLSO promoted the concert on social media with Heyward speaking artfully about Sibelius, saying to think of this symphony as a landscape, not a portrait. I wish I could hear their



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attentive, responsive performance of this gorgeous, atmospheric music when Yeol Eum Son and Sergei Prokofiev had not just scorched the concert stage in the shape of a piano. That said, this was a supple and dynamic performance of a symphony that runs white hot, whispery quiet, and just shimmery weird. It makes sense that Bernard Herrmann, who scored *Psycho* (1960) and six other Alfred Hitchcock films, liked to conduct Sibelius. *Symphony No. 5*, which was first performed in 1915 but not perfected until 1919, set the gold standard for building eerie musical tension. At the same time, Sibelius calls for the tiniest of sounds – at times, it's almost an inaudible orchestra. Contemporary composers who write for instruments, especially strings, by squeezing most of the music out of them are following Sibelius by a century.

Most of the audience at the Touhill Performing Arts Center clearly had not been burnt to a crisp by the Prokofiev, because they went wild over the Sibelius, even erupting in spontaneous applause between the movements. David Halen caught my eye again, after bringing down the band to end with a bang, by almost lurching toward the young guest conductor with a big, open grin.

A program themed for Sibelius opened aptly with William Grant Still's *Threnody: In Memory of Jean Sibelius* (1965), an overdue SLSO premiere of an underperformed African-American composer. This delightful piece of ear candy should remain in repertoire. In a seamless ensemble performance of music so fluent you feel like you have heard it before, I savored the harp, trombones, tuba, and snare. Simply

listing the tones that *Threnody* spotlit makes me want to hear something written for just those four instruments, maybe in memory of William Grant Still.

Heyward – a young African-American conductor from South Carolina – introduced Still from the stage as “a fantastic African-American composer from Mississippi” who obviously was inspired by a Finnish composer. Without dragging politics too openly into the concert hall, Heyward suggested that maybe we still need to remember that we can learn from and appreciate people unlike ourselves from other cultures.

A sizable and diverse group of music students from Parkway West High School heard that message. I chatted with some of them during intermission. Many were dressed in concert blacks like they were attending a dress rehearsal. During one frenetic moment as the Sibelius was sawing to a close, I heard what sounded like a couple of strikes on a woodblock coming, on beat, from the crowd. I do not condone selfish disruptions of symphony concerts, but when I think of all the zombie stares that lie ahead in the future of a classical musician, maybe I would forgive a student percussionist who snuck in an instrument, played along with the pros for a moment there, and got away with it.