



A Fitness Swimmer in

Four Movements

BY JIM W. HARPER

Her moment to perform is here. The crowd is silent. She's practiced volumes, and she's ready. With an inhalation and a short pulse of movement, she begins.

This challenge is not about time or victory; instead, it seeks timelessness and beauty. It's about creating music, but it shares many parallels with swimming. Musicians and other performing artists know the feeling of stepping up, being exposed in front of a waiting crowd, and diving in.

Yet for classical pianist Jeeyoon Kim, who is comfortable on stage but not on the blocks, there was no dive. She showed up at the 2013 Spring Nationals without having practiced that part.

Movement 1: The Staccato Plunge

When Spring Nationals came to Indianapolis this year and was hosted by her club, Kim's teammates cajoled her into entering. It would be her first meet. Kim spends most of her time practicing and teaching piano, and she had never really thought about competition. Signing up in a rush, probably while thinking about music instead of swimming, she entered the first event on the first day with an imaginary time.

"I never thought I would enter that kind of event. They were encouraging everyone, so I thought, well, why not," she says. "I entered the 1000 free, but maybe I should have done the 50."

With the meet's slowest entry time of 30:30.00, Kim was seeded in the early heats with swimmers nearly three times her age. But there was no turning back. As the official ushered the swimmers onto the blocks, the 32-year-old slid into the water.

"I started from the wall," she says. As she swam, she heard a concerto and the rhythmic splashing of water, and she beat her entry time by 13 minutes. "I finished in 17 minutes, and I was so happy to finish. I definitely feel like I pushed the comfort zone."

Choosing a distance event at Nationals for the first meet of your life is certainly pushing into new territory, and it makes for a good "first time" story. You might compare it to a novice

singer who decides to audition at the Metropolitan Opera; not exactly the most comfortable place to start.

Many adult swimmers float in the same boat as Kim—people so highly accomplished and driven outside of the pool that when they get to the pool, they just want to relax. They don't equate swimming with competition. They equate it with a place of exercise and escape.

Movement 2: Practice, Practice, Practice

Raised in South Korea, Kim moved to the United States in her 20s to attend Indiana University, where she earned a master's degree in 2005, and a doctorate in piano performance in 2009. When not practicing for concerts, she teaches at Butler University in Indianapolis. She is a member of Indy Aquatic Masters.

Kim discovered Masters swimming in 2011 while working at Butler. She noticed a group of swimmers using the same pool in which she swam on her own, and coach Mel Goldstein invited her to join them. After one practice, she was hooked.

Kim trains about three mornings a week at the university's pool, and afterward she goes directly to practice piano. Daily, she logs about three hours at the piano. She appreciates how swimming practice complements her piano practice.

As an instrument, the piano demands use of the full body even more than one might think. As in swimming, both arms are engaged. Posture is very important, as it directly affects the sound produced by the arms and fingers. The legs support the player's posture and press the pedals. When passionate players perform, head and upper body often sway as the music washes over them, while they remain extremely centered. The entire body and mind is focused.

Swimming "kind of relaxes my arms and back," Kim says. "Playing piano uses a lot of fine muscles, like the fingers, and swimming before practicing piano reminds me to relax the back muscles."

She says that strong core muscles are also important for the performer. "That's where my energy is coming from. If I have that good posture, I will send that energy into my fingers. That weight of shoulders and arms coming down is really helpful for playing the piano." She appreciates how swimming can condition the shoulders and allow her upper body to feel more expansive.



“I want to feel that the piano is part of my body,” she says.

For Kim, swim practice also becomes mental piano practice. She says that she constantly hears music, even when none is playing.

“I have an iPod in my head,” she says. “Which song should I play this time? Sometimes I try to practice a tune I heard the day before.” Her preferred mental piano music for swim practice has a medium tempo, because an up-tempo piece may force her legs into a frantic kick.

Because sprinting does not allow much time for mental rehearsals, Kim goes the other way. “I like distance swimming, finding my rhythm. Then I can get to play music in my head. That mental practicing is a huge part of my routine,” she says.

Although an hour without stopping would be best, Kim has found a happy medium. “Most pieces are an hour long, but I can do one movement in 15 minutes, and it’s perfect.” When the music does not end in synchronicity with the set, the set has to be adjusted. “Sometimes I have to do a little more to finish my song in my head.”

(Psst, coaches: The lesson here is to be patient with distance swimmers who have trouble stopping. Don’t stop them in the middle of a crescendo.)

Movement 3: Life, Appassionato
Jeeyoon Kim, D.Mus., grew up in the city of Pusan on the southern coast of South Korea, which she likens to the Korean version of Florida. She loved swimming in the ocean, but she never had any formal lessons or coaching until joining USMS in her 30s.

Since age 4, she knew that music was her destiny. She debuted at age 18 as a concert performer and graduated in 2002 with top honors from Busan National University. Moving to the United States, she pursued advanced degrees at Indiana University, and recorded her debut CD in 2007.

Kim’s career combines teaching and performance, and she has performed across the United States and at Europe’s Mozarteum Festival.

Coming to the United States revealed an unknown world of swimming. “I didn’t know that that kind of Masters team existed. This is

great to share the same interests. It’s like having a concert,” she muses. “When I get to the stage, I share that music with the audience. When

we swim with other swimmers, I feel that we are sharing that moment together.” In her mind, the pool becomes a watery concert hall.

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Left photo: Christopher Padgett and Rachel Reinders. Right photo: Craig Bauer

Some of her teammates have attended her concerts, and they were amazed last year to hear her performance of tangos. “The day after I performed it, I came to swim, and other swimmers said ‘I cannot believe it. Are you going through that fiery music in your head?’”

Her teammates are invited this fall to a performance of a Schumann concerto with the youth symphony orchestra at the Hilbert Circle Theatre in Indianapolis. She also hopes to perform in South Florida, a place she discovered through swimming.

Last year Kim traveled to Fort Lauderdale with her teammates for what she calls a “swimcation” of both pool and ocean swimming. Swimmers helped her find a piano for practicing within walking distance of the pool. The connections available through Masters swimming were not lost on her. “There’s a great network of

Masters swimmers. I can find a piano anywhere!”

“It was really my kind of vacation. I never swam like that in my whole life. It’s like going to piano camp,” she says. She would love to do it again and toss in a performance as well.

Even when on vacation Kim is thinking about the piano. She does have a passion for swimming, but it is not in the same league as her passion for music. Still, the two have complementary aspects that inspire her.

Movement 4: Blending Water and Music

The recent passing of Hollywood’s most legendary synchronized swimmer, Esther Williams, reminded the world of the direct link between water, music, and magic. There are also countless compositions about the ocean and water (if only a few directly about swimming).

Water Music

Music for a classical workout, curated by Jeeyoon Kim

Warm-up

- Ondine from Gaspard de la Nuit, by Maurice Ravel
- Un Sospiro, by Franz Liszt

Main Sets

- Jeux d’eau, by Maurice Ravel
- Gardens in the Rain, by Claude Debussy
- Beside a Spring, by Franz Liszt
- The Fountains of the Villa d’Este, by Franz Liszt
- Etude Op. 25 No. 1, by Frederic Chopin
- Etude Op. 25 No. 12 “Ocean,” by Frederic Chopin



Warm-down

- Arabesque No. 1, by Claude Debussy
- Reflections in the Water, by Claude Debussy



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Both swimming and calming music can evoke a sense of meditation, and Kim uses the time underwater to mentally connect with both. With her body distracted and her ears plugged, her mind is able to focus on music.

Listen to one of the piano pieces that she has recommended in the accompanying Music for a Classical Workout. You might feel the inspiration, too.

Piano is a highly solitary endeavor, and swimming can be as well. Kim tries to preach that swimming is the best exercise for musicians, but she finds that many professional musicians agree with her only in theory. They may be discouraged by a lack of technical skills in swimming or the time necessary to develop as a swimmer.

Passion is another connection between swimming and music. The majority of people who swim or play music do so for the love of it rather than the prospect of getting rich.

“Ask musicians this question: Do you love what you do? Yes, I absolutely love what I do. That’s really fortunate. What we do is what we love,” says Kim. “I think most swimmers have passion for what we do. Nonswimmers think we are crazy.”

Kim’s philosophy of life doesn’t sound crazy. “Take things one day at a time, one note at a time, and definitely one stroke at a time,” she advises.



Now the time has come to perform. She puts on her best black suit. The arena quiets down as her mind narrows its focus into one place. She has practiced and practiced for this moment, and she is ready.

The pool deck transforms into a concert hall, and the black lines in the pool morph into giant keys on a piano. She dives in.

And she plays. **s**

Online Concert

Watch online at Jeeyoon Kim’s website:
jeeyoonkim.com/?media/videos

- Schubert: Impromptu Op. 90 D.899 No. 3 in G-flat major (encore) Allegro
- Chopin: Sonata Op. 58 No. 2 in B minor (Part 2)

iTunes album:

Jeeyoon Kim, Piano (select Preview All)

- Mozart: Sonata in E-flat Major, K. 282
- Debussy: “Images,” Book I
- Liszt: Sonata in B Minor



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