

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on February 15, 2000,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Earl Kim
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

EARL KIM

BORN: January 6, 1920
DIED: November 19, 1998

“I am reducing everything to its maximum.” This was Earl Kim’s way of describing his own music and the compositional processes and aesthetic which assured its distinctive, individual character. Spare, elegant, refined, elusive, beautiful and profound are terms repeatedly used by commentators in attempts to describe the music and evoke its spirit. It inhabits a sound-world which indeed is sparse but never desolate; elegant though tough; refined yet bold; elusive but precise; beautiful in its complexity; profound in its simplicity. Stripped of conventional musical rhetoric, the melodic, harmonic, timbral and rhythmic dimensions of Kim’s music cohere with an uncanny visionary rightness. It is unique.

Earl Kim was born in Dinuba, Calif., on January 6, 1920, into a family of Korean immigrants. His musical propensities were revealed and nurtured early and led to studies at the University of California: with Arnold Schoenberg at U.C.L.A. and with Ernst Bloch and Roger Sessions at Berkeley. Though Kim, at this early stage of his career, was surrounded by major figures whose compositional practices differed fundamentally from those prompted by his own instincts, he was able to assimilate and absorb the influences he needed to nourish his own emerging artistic vision. Kim generously acknowledged his indebtedness to his teachers even as he mimicked their personal and musical mannerisms in hilarious impersonations. He was a good actor!

Earl was a very special person who, even among musicians of great talent, was in a class by himself. It was all of a piece — his quiet humor, his ear for sound and silence, his innate feeling for the human in everything. Kim never lost sight of nor wavered along his chosen artistic path. His genuine modesty belied an inner conviction about his own artistic vision. He knew who he was and trusted his formidable intelligence and sensitive intuition. Once asked in a public forum what were the sources of his creative energies he replied “I am an American composer who happens to be Korean.”

The composer Kim embraced a kindred spirit in Samuel Beckett, whose works were a constant source of inspiration. He found in Beckett’s writings analogs and parallels to his

own musical aims. The author's deployment, juxtaposition, repetition and transformation of sculptured, finely polished, critically selected, aphoristic modules of language — brightly active with meaning and dense with shadowed implication, continually redefined by context, seemed to mirror and propel the composer's search for a music — minimal and delicate of utterance, yet forceful and maximal in impact; labyrinthine in its myriad relationships but clear in its path. Every sound reduced to its maximum function and connected by poignant silence.

The principal works based on Beckett texts are "Exercises en Route," "Footfalls," "Eh Joe," "Lessness," "Earthlight," "Watt solo," and "Melodrama 1 & 2." The features of Kim's music cited above were not confined to his settings of Beckett texts but were fundamental underpinnings of his style whether he engaged texts by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Keats, Coleridge, Rilke or Anne Sexton — or in whatever music genre or performance medium he employed.

Actress Irene Worth, who gave the premiere performance and many subsequent performances of "Eh Joe" recalling her first meeting with Kim, relates that after "exquisite social small talk, my knees gently weakened as I melted under his considerable charm... He then played a bad, rather jumpy tape of 'Earthlight.' It had hardly begun when I knew instantly that I was in the presence of a master and a unique musical imagination. It was shattering and glorious . . . and, I had the rare chance of hearing him play the piano. What a revelation!"

This aspect of his musicianship — his extraordinary ability as a pianist — was also spare, elegant, refined and somehow beautiful and profound. More than that, he had the capacity, as do some composer-pianists, to create an analysis in sound — to reveal the logic of a work quite unpretentiously, at the same time revealing his loving wonder at the beauty of sound. One composer colleague, invited by Earl to participate in his Harvard seminar, wished at one juncture to illustrate a point by playing a Chopin Mazurka but, being a clarinetist himself, did not feel up to the task. "I asked Earl to read through the piece. As he played I thought 'What else is there to say?'"

Harvard colleague and close friend Professor Reinhold Brinkmann recalls Kim's mission to Berlin to select and purchase for the Harvard Music Department several new grand pianos. "The next two days were spent at the Bechstein piano factory amidst ten grands, going from one to the other, playing, listening, comparing, excluding, selecting until we arrived at three or four beautifully sounding instruments. It was there that I learned what a musical ear can be. Earl was incredible, sensitive, precise, critical, never satisfied, insisting that small changes needed to be made where nobody heard the differences; that sound or action could still be improved and the improvements could indeed be heard! During the second day, the top Bechstein technician spent more than ten hours with Earl at two of the pianos - adjusting, readjusting, finding the technical solutions for Earl's musical requests."

The undersigned all knew Earl intimately over many years — from Princeton days (where he spent fifteen years as a faculty member) to Harvard. (He was my close friend and colleague at both Princeton and Harvard for over forty years.) We were privileged, uplifted and inspired by that relationship as were our colleagues and hundreds of students. His modesty, coupled with his artistic conviction made him a formidable composer – pianist – teacher – throughout his life. He would brook no compromise when it came to matters of human compassion and musical relevance. In both, his sense of honesty and moral integrity prevailed.

On hearing of his death, violinist Itzhak Perlman (for whom Earl composed two of his major works) wrote in the *New York Times* — “composer, devoted teacher, musician extraordinaire. Earl brought to music colors we only dreamed existed but had never before heard. Creative and imaginative, he was truly inspired.”

Earl had a spontaneous tendency to reconciliation and we were all disarmed by his handsome, ever-youthful face, his warm smile and twinkling eyes.

He is survived by his wife, Martha Potter Kim, and two daughters, Eva Kim and Shawna Kim Kent.

Respectfully submitted,

Elliott Forbes
Lewis Lockwood
Donald Martino
Bernard Rands, Chair