

1-12-2016

Stephanie Choi - Interview with Mark Slobin

Stephanie Choi

Follow this and additional works at: http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad_oralhist

Recommended Citation

Choi, Stephanie. "Interview with Mark Slobin." Wesleyan Graduate Studies in Music - Oral History of International Graduate Students. (January 12, 2016) http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad_oralhist/19

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the World Music Archives at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wesleyan Graduate Studies in Music – Oral History of International Graduate Students by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.

Mark Slobin: Hello, oh, hi Stephanie! Well, you're looking good there, you've got all your books piled up!

Stephanie Choi: [Laughs] I just had qualifying exams, so—

MS: Oh! No wonder you're smiling, right. The last test you'll ever have to take, right.

SC: Right.

MS: That's a nice phase. So things are going well at UCSB? That's nice.

SC: I already took the exam last June so it's been awhile but since then I was preparing for my fieldwork and chapters.

MS: Oh, okay, okay. So you're advanced in the work. So I've been talking to all these people all over the world about their experience at Wesleyan. It's been so nice to make contact with so many people from different generations and different countries and all. So, let's just have like a little chat about your time at Wesleyan. How did you find out about Wesleyan? How did you get there in the first place?

SC: At the time I came to the States, there weren't many Koreans who attended ethnomusicology programs and I think there was only like two or three teachers I could ask about the program. And then they recommended me Wesleyan, I think it was because of Song Bang-Song, one of the Korean graduates.

MS: Right, he was one of my students a long time ago!

SC: Right, he also graduated long time ago, but there were only few ethnomusicologists I think, that was why. Nowadays there are quite a lot of Korean students.

MS: What happened to Song Bang-Song, by the way? I haven't heard about him in a long time.

SC: He was a professor in Korean music program in Korea, I think he retired. Yeah, a few years ago.

MS: Oh, he's still there. I should probably, I don't know how I could find him— Maybe you could get me his email somehow. Because probably I should talk to him. So what year was that?

SC: That was 2009.

MS: Ok, so '09. And there were still not that many Korean connections.

SC: Right, I started preparing to come to the States from 2006-7. So that's already like, 9-10 years ago!

MS: Okay! So why did you want to do that?

SC: Um [laughs], that's a long story! I was a performance major, I played kayagum. There were lots of dramas. In short I injured my hand and eventually lost interest in performing music. Then my mom told me that there's a program called ethnomusicology. She recommended it to me because every time I watched music performances, I loved writing about it. I also loved observing people, so I didn't know how my mom found it out but she recommended me the program. She just told me that you study people who perform music if I study ethnomusicology. I thought it would be fun. Otherwise, I didn't know anything about it actually, but I thought it would be better for me to change my major.

MS: Uh huh. So then you wrote to Wesleyan and applied?

SC: And then I applied to several universities based on my teacher's recommendations. Those were mostly programs with East Asian music professors, like Pittsburgh and Hawaii, and Wesleyan was one of them.

MS: So how did you decide on Wesleyan?

SC: I think, well [laughs], one of the biggest reasons was fellowship.

MS: Right, yeah.

SC: And, um, I think I also got admission from Hawaii but then, I wanted to study with a professor who was not Korean. I just wanted to have more of, quote unquote, "American experience" [laughs].

MS: Ok, so, you hadn't been to America before, right?

SC: I stayed a year in Wisconsin when I was 7. My dad was a visiting professor during his sabbatical years. And then I stayed in Indiana when I was 13.

MS: Oh, ok, so you were around, and you knew America.

SC: Right. There were many reasons, but one of the reasons was that there was a limited mobility for a woman, especially when you're in the Korean traditional music circle. There were lots of discriminations against women in the circle, so it was really frustrating for me. So it was really fun for me to study, to actually study about my situation in the Korean music circle. My M.A. thesis was the answer to my questions that I had back in Korea, about how individual musicians deal with national identity or nationalism imposed by the government, because many Korean traditional musicians get financial support from the government, but they have to perform things that are required by the government too. So it was fun to study my own situation at that time.

MS: Yeah, yeah, it gave you a different perspective on your own society. So when you first got to Middletown, what struck you? Was it surprising?

SC: It was surprising a lot! First of all, I came from a big city. Seoul is a really crowded metropolis. Every time I woke up, I was looking outside the window, telling myself, “I can’t live here!” [both laugh] There was basically nothing in Middletown in terms of entertainment. I didn’t think about anything else but studying, so I knew that Wesleyan was a good school, and that was the only consideration when I applied to the program. But then I slowly realized that, you know, living environment is also important! That was one of the reasons why I moved to California. Other things? I was a lot impressed by the discussions I had with, not just with my colleagues and professors, but also with undergraduates. I really enjoyed discussions a lot, though back then I wasn’t good at English so I couldn’t join the discussions a lot. But I really learned a lot from them.

MS: From the Wesleyan students.

SC: Right, right.

MS: What did you think of them? They were pretty unusual for you, I suppose.

SC: Right, I don’t know, I think I was lucky to meet students who are quite liberal compared to people from other parts of the States. I realized that only after I left Wesleyan. But I think I was lucky to be in that kind of environment.

MS: Yeah. So who were your fellow students when you came?

SC: Andrew Colwell, Yun Fan, Sie Ai Ng, Min Yang— who else— Maho Ishiguro, Po-wei Wong—

MS: A very diverse group! Very East Asian. So what was it like talking to all these East Asian people in Connecticut?

SC: That also helped me getting adapted at Wesleyan, because I just came from Korea and I experienced some sort of culture shock, but then—it was nice to have lots of East Asian students for me because they helped me a lot. Now, coming to Santa Barbara, I only have, UC accepts only US citizens, so [laughs]—

MS: Oh, really!

SC: I mean, that shouldn’t be the reason but now I only have white or black colleagues. But then, back at Wesleyan, in terms of diversity, we had much more international students and Asian American students.

MS: I suppose it’s because of Su Zheng. When Su came we started attracting many more people from East Asia. Before that, it was pretty rare. I mean, there was Bang-Song in 1974 or something, but, and a few students from China—a couple from from Japan. But it just increased so much after Su came. I think people felt more comfortable, in a way. So, what did you think of the seminar structure, and the way the classes went? It must have been strange, too.

SC: It wasn't strange, but I was a lot intimidated in the beginning because I intentionally avoided classes with discussions during my undergrad years. But at Wesleyan, it was all about discussion from the beginning!

MS: [Both laugh] Yeah!

SC: Seminars were all about discussions, so I was a lot intimidated in the beginning because I wasn't good at English. Also I never—I was a performance major during my undergrad years, so I never wrote any academic papers. So everything was a challenge (laughs).

MS: Yeah, it was hard!

SC: So back then, just every single thing was a challenge to me. It took almost an hour for me to read one page of a book [laughs]. So in the beginning I didn't really talk that much. I felt like I would say something stupid during the discussion. But eventually I regretted when other students talk the exact same thing I was thinking and when professors were impressed about it. So I tried to get adjusted to that kind of environment. Also Su helped me a lot. I still appreciate her so much. When I was writing the very first chapter of my thesis, she spent three hours a week, every week she spent three hours to tell me how to actually write a thesis. So I spent the first semester with her like that, and then she told me to write the second chapter on my own, so that's how I started writing my thesis. I got enormous help from Su.

MS: Well, that's good to hear. Who else did you study with? What did you take?

SC: So I took a lot of classes like Modernity and Gender classes with her. And then there were ethnomusicology core seminars that I took with you, then I took lots of classes with Eric, those were mostly about popular music, like popular music industry class. So now I'm working on K-pop, Korean pop. Back then I was already interested in popular music so I took lots of popular music classes with Eric.

MS: We just had a thesis on K-pop in Peru.

SC: Oh, really!

MS: I don't know if you ever met, another Stephanie, Stephanie Ho, who actually grew up a lot in Peru, although she's not Korean, she's from Taiwan, she grew up a lot in Peru and ended up writing about K-pop fans in Peru.

SC: That's awesome! Yeah, K-pop is everywhere now.

MS: Yeah, it's amazing. I mean, you get these Wesleyan undergrads doing papers on it, everybody knows what it is now. But it was pretty obscure a few years ago, right.

SC: Right, right. I also took a lot of ensembles.

MS: Ok.

SC: I loved gamelan ensemble, I think I took the class for more than a year. I was impressed to see such a diverse, you know, range of ensembles.

MS: What else did you do besides gamelan?

SC: Other than gamelan, what did I do? I can't remember right now! Oh, I took Chinese ensemble too.

MS: Yeah, I thought so.

SC: I took it for more than a year, maybe two years I think— I learned erhu. I think Po-wei and Joy were the directors and they wanted me to play zheng because I played kayagum, but I wanted to learn something from a professional musician— Nobody taught zheng at that time, so I chose erhu to learn it from Joy.

MS: Oh, ok, sure, good idea.

SC: So that was really fun.

MS: Yeah, yeah! Did you take any classes outside the department? We usually require one, I think, at least.

SC: Right— I think, I remember I took Israeli cinema class, because the professor was an invited lecturer who was an actual filmmaker. Back then I was already interested in popular media stuff, so that was one reason I took that class. I think it was after taking your film music class. That was a lot exciting to study. Wesleyan also had some kind of Israeli film festival. It was during that period.

MS: Well they do it every year still.

SC: Oh, still? It was really fun to watch Israeli films every week.

MS: Yeah, they're pretty interesting movies. Well, that was good background in something completely different!

SC: Right, I learned a lot about Israeli-Palestinian relationship and the history.

MS: So then you decided to do a doctoral program, you looked around and decided to go to California.

SC: There were many reasons. One thing was that my Korean teachers recommended me to do Ph.D. in a different school so that I could extend my connection with people in the academia. I wanted to have a different pool of academics by attending another school. Also, Wesleyan was the first American academic experience for me, so I learned a lot there but at the same time I was also intimidated by the environment. So I wanted to start over again from a new environment,

just to refresh myself. Also, I don't know this is important to others, but weather was so important for me! It affected my health a lot. So I applied to a lot of UC schools just to go to California. So in terms of health issues I wanted to move to a warm place. Also I was looking for professors who would work more on popular music in East Asian countries. Right now I'm working with Dr. David Novak.

MS: Yeah, David of course is great. He was one of our students too.

SC: Right, he knows a lot about East Asian cultures so he helps me a lot with my study. That was another reason. I think it's also good for me to study in California because there are lots of Korean-American immigrants in LA and there are lots of K-pop events going on there.

MS: Oh, sure, great for fieldwork. Yeah.

SC: So the fieldwork environment was another reason.

MS: Scott Marcus started out at Wesleyan too, you go somewhere and run into these Wesleyan people anyway! [both laugh] So how are you, are you using stuff that you started at Wesleyan to continue on your work now?. Are you still in touch with any of the fellow students?

SC: I do a lot, we're friends on Facebook! So I occasionally talk with Sie Ai, Joy, Andrew, Maho, Min, I also met some of them, I met Huan Li and Min Yang in Korea when they came to do the workshop held by the Korean Traditional Performing Center. I also occasionally meet them at conferences.

MS: That's nice that there's a network there.

SC: Right, right. I also met Su, I think it's the first time after I graduate, I met Su at SEM last month.

MS: That was nice, to see you two together in the hallway. Well, are there any other things that come to your mind about the experience, looking back?

SC: I don't know, I think I can write to you later if I have something in mind! Right now I can only say that I learned a lot from Wesleyan. Sometimes I miss the rigorous discussions we had. We had excellent colloquiums there. I miss that.

MS: Oh, that's fine! That's the basic ideas of what it was like for you. It was great having you, and it's nice you're going on this way, directly into another program, it's very nice. And you'll just see what you do after that, right. So you're almost done, actually, right.

SC: I just finished my coursework. I got a field research fellowship from the Korea Foundation so I'm leaving for Korea next month. I'm going to do the fieldwork for 10 months in Korea, then come back and write my dissertation.

MS: Oh, right, so it'll be a couple more years. But you're on the track, you've qualified yourself and everything! So that's great. It's really good to talk, and probably run into you at another convention or whatever!

SC: It was a great opportunity for me to take your classes.

MS: Yeah, well it was very enjoyable getting to know you too. So good luck with everything!

SC: Thank you!

MS: We'll run into you later! Ok Steph, take care!

SC: Bye!

MS: Bye!