

Fall 2015

# Okon Hwang - Interview with Mark Slobin

Okon Hwang

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## Recommended Citation

Hwang, Okon. "Interview with Mark Slobin." Wesleyan Graduate Studies in Music - Oral History of International Graduate Students. (2015) [http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad\\_oralhist/16](http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad_oralhist/16)

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Mark Slobin. So it's Okon Hwang, who came in the, around 96 or something—

Okon Hwang: Right.

MS: And left in—

OH: Four years. After four years. Yeah.

MS: You were very quick.

OH: Yeah.

MS: You were one of the people that really—

OH: Went through determined to finish.

MS: So why did you come to Wesleyan?

OH: Well, um, I wanted to study ethnomusicology in a very systematic way. I think before I became an ethnomusicology Ph.D. student at Wesleyan, I already was semi-active in ethnomusicological circle. I had my DMA in piano from Eastman, but I guess I was not happy with the approaching music from only the “doing” aspect of it. I wanted to think of a social, psychological, philosophical, political, observation of musical phenomena. But I didn't know how to quench that. In fact, that thirst was developed when I was an undergraduate student looking a lot of, facing a lot of political demonstration and experiencing power of music.

As a high school student, only thinking about being a pianist, I was just moving fingers, you know, but didn't even know what music theory was, music history was, it was just playing piano, doing music meant moving your fingers. And then I went to Seoul National University and that was when President Chung-hee was assassinated. The whole political landscape of Korea was in total disarray. Student power is absolutely at its height. And schools closed down quite often because of the political demonstration, et cetera. And I happened to belong to a singing club that supposedly supplied all the demonstration songs, so I saw firsthand what the power of music was. And through the singing club I was exposed to like, Marxist theory.

So, like thinking about music for the first time from a theoretical point of view. And so, as a pianist, even though I was a pianist I was much more interested in sociology and anthropology, et cetera. Anthropology I was exposed to it for the first time through general education program as a college curriculum. So all along, throughout the four years, I wanted to study something that's related to, vaguely termed, “society of music.” Or “social theory of music” or something. At Seoul National University we had nothing like that. We did have musicology program, that was basically dealing with either music history or music theory aspect, not the way I wanted to approach. So as soon as I finished my piano performance degree I thought I was going to apply for graduate school in the United States, or in Europe, dealing with social aspect of music. And so choosing the country, I decided to nix the idea of going to France or Germany because despite the fact that my English was still very pitiful, it was way better than my French or German! [both

laugh] So I came to United States. At first I went to go for a sociology program, but my father, who was a very well-traveled man, didn't want me to go to a metropolitan area because he was sending, my family was sending a young, unmarried daughter to a "heathen land" and at the time herpes was a big thing [Mark laughs], you know, you look at the Time magazine covers, I mean! So I have to commend my parents' courage to send young woman to this unknown land. So they chose this very very safe place, to their mind. Especially my father had a friend who graduated from University of Nebraska-Lincoln. And he vouched that this is a really safe place. [both laugh] So it was kind of a compromise. And also, in the middle of the process, I realized that tackling sociology, especially when my English was such in a dismal shape, I had no sociology coursework. It was, so, and they asked me to repeat two years of undergraduate just to get the basic courses ready for the undergraduate school. Knowing what I know now I'd probably do that now, but back when I was 22 that two years seems like eternity. And I was just want to go to graduate school. So I said, "Ok, no, I'm not going to repeat two years of undergraduate sociology but I'm going to go to music school and then see what I can do." So I went to University of Nebraska-Lincoln, as a master's piano student. And the teacher, Dr. Thomas Fritz was an absolutely wonderful pianist. And wonderful, wonderful teacher. So I kind of regained back my enthusiasm for performance. So I was there for two years, and then as a result I went to Eastman as a DMA in piano performance. But apparently, as my command of English got a little bit better, and I started to observe what's going on in the classrooms in music history and all that things a little better, and realized that I could service OK in this country on my own, that thirst that I used to feel came back, but I didn't know what to do. So first of all I tapped musicology while I was at Eastman. And then I realized that musicology was dealing with only, you know—so that was not it. And then I thought, how about music theory? So I applied for master's program in music program as well, while I was doing my DMA, in piano performance, and the accepted me so I finished my Master's in music theory, and I finished my job, and I think this was in my dissertation in the very prologue, I almost finished my DMA program and I was about to be on the job market and I happened to run into a faculty member in the hallway and I asked one of my friends who the person was, and they said she's Ellen Koskoff, and I said, "What does she do?" and she's an ethnomusicologist. So I said, "What is ethnomusicology?" And so I had a chitchat with Ellen Koskoff, and I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is what I want to do all these years!" but I didn't even know that there's such a discipline existing, you know. But by then I was already on the job market, and so I went to, I got a job, but it was great to be a faculty member because I realized that they fund you to go to these conferences! So instead of going to piano conferences, I started to go to ethnomusicology conferences. And so my first conference for ethnomusicology was the, in Chicago. And I remember the loneliness that I felt. I didn't know anybody because I was a total outsider going to conference with a paper that, I don't know how it got accepted, probably because it was not checked by anybody. But still I got there, and ate by myself, and sat by myself [laughs].

MS: Really!

OH: But still, it was so fascinating, all the papers, oh my gosh there was just such a wonderful world out there. And so I ended up going to SEM conference every year, giving paper almost every year, and through that, because back then the paper on Korean music, anything that had to do with Korea was so rare, and so some of the graduate students came and started seeking me, after I gave a paper on whatever, at that point I usually dealt with Korean popular music. And

then through that I ended up formulating a Korean music study group, and then out of that, a year later, we organized Association for Korean Music Research.

So I'm almost like a godmother to that organization. And so, even if I didn't have any systematic training, I entered the field through backdoor, but in terms of the social positioning among Koreanists, I was a recognizable figure just because I formed this organization. But I always felt very inadequate. So when I got my tenure as a pianist at my current institution—

MS: That's Eastern Connecticut.

OH: Eastern Connecticut State University. I thought, ok, this gives me a freedom to seek out whatever I want to seek out, academically. And so that's when I decided to apply for a Ph.D. program at Wesleyan. And before that, actually, I did apply for visiting scholars program at Wesleyan, so I was a visiting scholar for a year. And that even fueled my desire even more. I wanted to be a part of it.

MS: You were with David McAllester at the beginning.

OH: Yeah, right, right.

MS: The way I remember it is you came in and you said, "I don't understand why I have this job. What am I doing in Connecticut teaching piano? I'm from Korea. Can ethnomusicology help me understand what I'm doing?" Then you sort of got, you know, it's like, "Sure!"

OH: Yeah, so that's how I, and I have to tell you, I still had to teach full-time at my school, and I was a full-time student at Wesleyan, but that's probably one of the happiest times of my life. I would like to go back, to be a student. I mean, maybe this is some sort of a sickness, being a student, enjoying being a student, but it's just a wonderful, wonderful experience. But then kids came along, of course. [laughs] Life is a different story now, but yeah, I really enjoyed the two years of coursework at Wesleyan. It was really fun.

MS: So you, I think you met McAllester first?

OH: Yes, what happened was, I think it was Milwaukee. I used to love to dance. I still love to dance, but now I met a husband who doesn't like to dance and I have no time! So I cannot dance much. But I used to be fairly active with the swing dance and all this stuff. And so, when SEM had some sort of dancing event, I was always there at the very beginning. Not anymore, nowadays I just need to sleep more, but back then. So I went to, I think it was a polka night or something like that. So I went there and there was this person dancing and so I ended up dancing with this person and I didn't know who that person was.

MS: Really!

OH: I ended up dancing with this person. And so that's how we, I asked him who he was and he was telling me, and I thought, "Ohhh! Ok." And by then he was already retired. He was living in Berkshires. But he was willing to help me out, so he decided to have a weekly reading session

with me. He assigned me a book and, so I supposed to read a book, and then he came down from Berkshires and so we discussed the book, and we talked about other things too.

MS: Oh, I see.

OH: So we got together once a week for whole semester.

MS: That's true, because he was retired, but I was thinking that you worked with him then. But that's too late.

OH: Right, right. So this, none of them were official, it was just very unofficial, the personally arranged ones. So I'm really eternally grateful for his generosity. So he came down, so I finished work Fridays, he came down on Friday and then maybe we went out for a restaurant dinner or I made something. I used to live in Middletown then. So I fixed something and we talked about this and that. I mean, you know, he's the type of person who could talk about almost everything. So it was so easy to talk to him. Yeah. And then he stayed overnight, or sometimes I went up to Berkshires, if he couldn't come down. Yeah. So that was the beginning, that was my entryway into ethnomusicology.

MS: So this was '96, you said?

OH: Probably, Milwaukee conference was when I met him, so my independent study, unofficial independent study, started right afterwards. I don't remember the exact date.

MS: Yeah, I didn't know you—

OH: Yeah. So then I think I became a visiting scholar first, at Wesleyan. After the independent study with him. After that I decided to apply for a Ph.D.

MS: So what was it like coming into this program?

OH: It was wonderful. As I said, I'll do it again in a heartbeat. For two reasons. The intellectual stimulation was absolutely thrilling, but also pedagogically it was very nice to be a student again, because by then I had already been teaching for how many years. And so pedagogically it was a wonderful experience to be on the other side of it and then be able to observe what was going on, what works, what doesn't work, et cetera. Mostly what works. And so every, I mean I cannot, I mean it's such a thrilling experience. I remember your course. I'd never heard of a course about movies, you know! I was like, "He's teaching what?" [laughs] And I learned so much in your class! [still laughing] Your approaching subject, I just—and Su Zheng's course, it was just so wonderful.

MS: So who was there then? You studied with me and with Su—

OH: And because of my master's in theory, I didn't have to take one theory course. That was the only course that was waived. I did gamelan. So that was very good. I did African dance. And in

terms of coursework, I didn't study with Eric. I don't think I had any course with Eric. I think I got, Gage Averill was there.

MS: Right, Gage, yeah. So that was the transition from Gage to Eric when you were there. And who were your classmates?

OH: Eric Galm. And then Hankus Netsky.

I remember, another thing that was very impressive. See, even if I've been living in this country for such a long time, but I think I'm still quite, um, how should I say, conservative in terms of approaching social structures. So, everybody has place in their specific spot, you know. And what professors should do, what students should do, et cetera. And Hankus Netsky was teaching this klezmer class, right, so it culminates with concert.

And you're playing violin in the class, and I'm thinking, "He plays violin just like a student!" [laughs] "Wow, look at this!" So that was quite—now I'm doing something fairly similar, so yeah, that was quite impressive. I really liked the class too.

MS: So that's Hankus and Eric, right. Who else was there?

OH: There were several master's students. But I cannot remember any names. There was one girl who went to Illinois, I remember, for her Ph.D. program, but I think in terms of the Ph.D. students, Hankus Netsky, me, and Eric were—

MS: Was Franya there?

OH: Franya was there, yeah, Franya was there. And I think, I'm not quite sure—Robert Lancefield. I'm not sure if I took class with him but he was always around, so he was part of a social network as well. Yeah, Franya was. The guy who's at Yale, what's his name?

MS: Mike Veal.

OH: Yeah, yeah. Oh yes, I was in the, I'm not sure if I took any classes with him but I think we were graduating, we were at the, we supposed to be at the commencement ceremony at the same time. Yeah, but I don't think I took any classes with him.

MS: So did you study outside the department with anybody?

OH: I took anthropology class.

MS: What was that?

OH: Um, I remember, you supposed to read almost a book a week. And so I was very impressed by the rigor of the anthropology. I think it was a survey course. And I don't remember the faculty person's name.

MS: So you learned a lot, well doing gamelan and African you got a different idea about ensemble organization.

OH: Right, right.

MS: So what did that do for you?

OH: Well, and so, right now once in a while I teach Introduction to World Music. And gamelan is of course, I mean that's in every world music program. But in my course, because I know I have gone through it, so that becomes an essential part of my course curriculum as well. Oh, I have to tell you. I want my students to—because a lot of this survey course, even at Eastern, our class size is limited to 40. But still, creating a truly meaningful experiential course content with that many students is still very difficult. Especially since none of them were musicians, you know. They are taking it because of general education requirements. And so, one semester, last time, when I taught that class, I decided to depart from the typical lecture mode, you know, the passive learning mode. And try to change into, incorporate experiential learning. But, you know, how can you create an experiential, you know? [laughs] World music class when you don't have any equipment or anything, right!

And so, but in terms of the composition approach, it cannot be that difficult, but it's just access to material was very—that was the obstacle. So then after thinking about it, I thought, “Hmm, we could still create a gamelan music,” and I realized almost every single one of my students have smartphone by then. And they have this web apps, right, that has, I forgot the name of it, my students were telling me. I was just basically sharing my problem with my students and they said, “What about we use this, there are all these musical apps you can use. You can create piano sound, you can create all—“ so then they came up with an idea. So we had an electronic version using smartphone, creating gamelan! [laughs]

And that was quite successful. And so we had a flash mob with that at the student center, a composition lasting about 12 minutes, you know.

MS: Did they use Indonesian instruments, were they generated sounds?

OH: Generated sounds, so I think what we ended up doing was not using the actual instruments. I thought that we could create a gamelan music utilizing, you know, the Stomp, right? So Stomp uses household items to create sound, like trash bucket, or, you know, anything that can produce sound. So I asked my students to come up with an idea how to create, so create any instrument and sound and explain the compositional structure, so like group of four or five students assigned to one line, cause there are 40 students. And then, some students said, “Ok, I'm gonna bring a children's toy,” you know, and another says, “Ok, this group creates whatever.”

MS: Ok, so a homemade gamelan.

OH: Homemade gamelan, right. And then we ran out of all the possibilities, and that's when we said, smartphone, let's use the app. So they, for a melodic instrument, they used a keyboard, a keyboard app and used that. [laughs] Like a xylophone app or something. [laughs]

MS: Right, that's interesting! Yeah, the first gamelan I think came out of Wesleyan, or was a guy who was at Wesleyan in the '60s. Yeah. So great. It's an old idea, but not with smartphones!

OH: [laughs] Not with smartphones!

MS: So what other kind of influences do you continue in your work?

OH: Huh. Well, when I was at Wesleyan, I didn't know how Wesleyan distinguished, how Wesleyan program is distinguishable compared to other programs. I mean, I just zoom into Wesleyan because of my job proximity, you know.

So unlike other typical graduate school applicants, who may compare this program vs. that program, I didn't do any of it. I mean, I had David McAllester connection already. This is the closest program to me. So I really didn't know what other programs were like. I knew the names of all these programs, but I didn't know—so even while I was at Wesleyan, I didn't know how this program is distinguishable compared to other programs. And then after I left Wesleyan, I paid more attention to how other school students compared different programs. I noticed that the Wesleyan program tries to incorporate hands-on experience as a very integral part of musical learning experience. And I believe in my teaching career, probably that has the most practical benefit. Because I did it, therefore I feel—like gamelan's case. I did it, therefore I feel much more comfortable. Because I don't know about other people, but in my case, if I were to teach world music. Let's say, world music textbook. Some textbook covers like 40 different traditions in one textbook, other may teach only, covers five or six. But still, most of the countries I haven't been to, I have no depth.

Not even, you know, just book-acquired knowledge. And I feel really shallow. Almost like blind person leading another blind person. Whereas having my hands wet in an actual musical tradition, that was probably the most valuable experience in terms of the pedagogical sense.

MS: And then in the research, and you did a very impressive dissertation combining fieldwork in Korea with your own philosophical thinking about the music traditions, Western music traditions. Did that come out of—how did your thinking develop that way?

OH: I think the, basically, it's an identity quest, right? So it's a very navel-gazing—but I start to feel ok about navel-gazing! [laughs]

Because, at first, when I was growing up, the idea of scholastic endeavor was to observe something out there. You know, you are detached from the subject you're supposed to study. And then in the process of Wesleyan training, I feel totally ok looking into my, you know, own identity, and that is a valid quest. So I felt that way all along the way, and I guess that's part of the reason I wanted to study ethnomusicology to begin with. I was always wondering why I was playing Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, which is totally alien form of tradition compared to Korean traditional music or the place I was living, yet it became *ours*, right.

And so I was always interested, but I didn't know how to articulate it properly. But, and so even when I got into ethnomusicology, I do think it was crystallized. I just want to study, it's just all very vague idea, but I want to study society and music! But by going through Wesleyan training, I think I solidified, say, ok, I want to study why this music means to me.

MS: So where did you get the approach, then, this insider approach, how did you develop that or what kind of process was that?

OH: I think the—I forgot the name of the author who studied the New England Conservatory.

MS: Oh, right. Kingsbury.

OH: Right, Kingsbury's book. Right, I didn't know anything about Kingsbury's book before I came to Wesleyan, but throughout the Wesleyan training I was exposed to that, and also reflexivity, is the terminology. I think that was kind of on the rise at the time. So the theoretical courses, Su Zheng's course, and the survey courses, all those things, and we had a faculty member who was a one year person who didn't get the job at Wesleyan but his course, I forgot the name of the course—

MS: Was it Julian?

OH: Julian, right.

MS: Gerstin, right.

OH: So his course was very helpful to me.

MS: Yeah, right. Yeah, we forget about the people that come through and then they influence somebody when they're there, you know. But there's some people that only are around a short time. Yeah, he was a thoughtful colleague. Huh. So, have you continued your research work at all?

OH: Well, my work always have been something about Korea. I entered ethnomusicology with a topic, with a very rudimentary research on Korean popular music. And then during my Wesleyan days it became more focused on the presence of Western art music in Korea. Now, the Korean, study on Korean popular music has been taken over by all of these amazing scholars! [laughs]: For me to put any (unintelligible) into it, I would have to do tons and tons of more work, I feel so inadequate now. And especially since I don't live in Korea and I'm not keeping in touch with that, that close. So write now my main field would be, still what the place of Western art music in Korea, although I'm starting to feel a little, should look for something else. And also, another thing is, at my workplace, I'm still classified as—I mean, I got the job as a pianist.

And then, before I went to Wesleyan, I wanted to make sure that's ok with my school administration. Because, "you already have a doctorate," the school could see in a completely different way than what I intended. So before I decided to apply for, I mean go for, a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology I had to make sure it is ok with the school. And so I met with all the necessary

people and got the clearance and got the blessing and all that. So from school's point of view, I am dual pianist as well as ethnomusicology.

MS: Oh that's nice.

OH: Right. It has pros and cons. Because if I am 100% pianist, then I give concerts, that's going to be my research, creative activity quota. Whereas if I am in ethnomusicology 100% and I just go give papers, publish, that'd be the—but I put my feet in both worlds so I almost always feel like I'm half-baked.

MS: Yeah, I see.

OH: Yeah. So that's the dilemma that I have. And for a long time, ever since I got my tenure, I think I was way more focused on ethnomusicology, I mean, getting a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology and my subsequent activities. But with our new building [laughs] that I just told you about, the ECSU now gave us this brand-new building, state-of-the-art facility that's supposed to feature performance at the forefront.

MS: Oh, ok. Well, they should buy you a gamelan.

OH: [laughs] Well, right!

MS: They're not expensive! Then you bring somebody from Wesleyan—

OH: That's a great idea.

MS: Just get a gamelan! It's way cheaper than a piano.

OH: How much is the set?

MS: I don't know, it's like \$20,000.

OH: \$20,000.

MS: It's cheap.

OH: Well then where would we store it?

MS: Well, you'd have to find a space.

OH: Find a place to store it.

MS: But you could bring somebody from Wesleyan to teach, you know. You'd have to have a little budget.

OH: Right, right. \$20,000.

MS: Then you could run some international program, you know.

OH: Right, right, yeah. And so.

MS: Or African drumming.

OH: Right, I was pushing for steelband, we have a fabulous percussionist, I've been pushing him to explore. But we have, in my department, we have eight full-time faculty members.

MS: Wow.

OH: And so our resources are like stretched to maximum. So I'm trying to make sure that my contribution to this, my job, could be 100%, 110% utilized, and I feel like at this particular juncture of my career, with this new building, probably I have to put more focus on performance.

MS: Yeah, well, bring in some ensemble! Because you have Wesleyan's not far. You don't have any Wesleyan people coming in. For awhile you had Wesleyan people coming. Teaching, yeah, grad students.

OH: Right, right.

MS: You had Dora for a while.

OH: Right, and Richard Jones-Bamman.

MS: He's still there, right.

OH: He's retiring.

MS: Oh, ok, right.

OH: And we hope to be able to find a replacement for him.

MS: Oh, then you can hire a nice ethnomusicologist.

OH: Right, so we will see how it goes. I think we have a job in hire freeze right now, so when he declared his retirement we were unable to secure a position, so we'll see how it goes. We'll work very hard.

MS: Well maybe you could get some adjunct money and then bring a grad student, you know, and they can do an ensemble.

OH: Right. Right, that's what we did with samba.

MS: It's nice that the location—it's possible.

OH: Eric Galm was there doing samba ensemble, which was very successful. And then he got a job at Trinity, et cetera, so. Yeah. Lots of possibilities.

MS: Well, you keep the Wesleyan connection!

OH: Of course.

MS: So, do you have other thoughts about the, you know, experience?

OH: I mean, the Wesleyan is a very content little cosmos! Once you are sucked into that vortex, it's very hard to get out of. You have to have a very strong willpower to get out! [both laugh] You know, cut the umbilical cord and face the cold world out there! It is that comfortable. It's just a wonderful little oasis.

MS: Yeah. [both laugh]

OH: Yeah. So, I think in my case, again, I didn't compare any other graduate programs, I don't know what other programs are like, but in my career as a student, I feel quite blessed. Because when I went to University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I really didn't know how to speak English very well. But it was a very nurturing environment, so being there for two years really gave me the confidence to be able to stand up on my own. So for that reason I am very grateful for my training at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. And then in terms of Wesleyan, I think it did a very similar thing intellectually. It was not a cutthroat type of place, you know, it was very helping, very nurturing. Faculty members, fellow students. So not having any systematic ethnomusicology, even if I was a visiting faculty, I was, you know, I did that independent study with David McAllester and I was already in the field somewhat, but still, I was very very insecure. So, Wesleyan was just such a wonderful place for me.

MS: Great.

OH: I feel very lucky as a, when I look back at my career as a student, I just chose two perfect places. [both laugh]

MS: Oh, that's great. That's really nice to hear about it. And, let's see. Ok.