

Eunice Kim: A soloist's survival guide

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Violinist **Eunice Kim** is no stranger to being a soloist. Before joining the SPCO in 2016, she made her solo debut at the young age of seven with the Korean Broadcasting Symphony Orchestra, continuing to solo frequently throughout her successful career. She has earned awards and honors from the California International Violin Competition, the Pacific Music Society Competition, the Korea Times String Competition and the Youth Excellence Scholarship for the Arts.

Being a soloist, and concert musician in general, comes with its own responsibilities, challenges, and excitement. Eunice, the featured soloist on Saint-Saëns' Introduction and Rondo capriccioso for the SPCO's **most recent series of concerts**, took time during the first month of the orchestra's 61st season to reflect on her experience and offer insights, compiled in this *Soloist's Survival Guide*:

It's about the quality time, not the quantity

It's a no-brainer that, as a musician, you need to practice, practice, practice. But being thoughtful about *what* you're doing during your practice sessions can make all the difference. Don't just play — study, learn, and do so wholeheartedly.

"It's important to learn the language of the composer by studying the score and listening to recordings of their other works. Since we get limited time to rehearse with the orchestra, it's essential to have a plan and general idea of the piece. If I'm performing a piece that I'm revisiting, I may not need as much time, but I would **try to 'relearn' the piece instead of relying on previous ideas and habits,**" Eunice says. "Also, I wholeheartedly believe in practicing efficiently with 100% focus for one hour rather than a whole afternoon of distracted work while repeating bad habits. Sometimes, time management gets difficult while juggling many different projects and traveling, so **if thirty minutes is all I can fit in that day, I make sure it's a fruitful thirty minutes of practice.**"

Don't become too reliant on material things

Sometimes we tend to find strength in objects and set routines, which can be helpful in grounding ourselves. Other times, we can become too reliant on those material things, forgetting our own power. She instead suggested to find healthy tactics that work for you — remembering to get plenty of sleep, eat well, and exercise.

“A few years ago, I used to try to take a short nap on the day of the concert and always ate a banana before going on stage (many performers swear by bananas as it’s high in potassium which can help calm nerves). I stopped having this sort of ‘ritual’ because I’m simply incapable of taking naps, and if I forgot to bring a banana, I would panic and think that I had no control over nerves. **I wanted to be able to perform to the best of my ability without depending on an item or routine, so now I just listen to what my body needs and go from there.**”

Get to know yourself and plan ahead

Eunice advocates for self-care and shows that it can take on many forms. When a new, unfamiliar situation confronts you, sometimes anxiety and stress sets in with full force. Paying attention to yourself and responding kindly to yourself is healthier than forcing yourself into a certain mood. It takes practice and patience to understand yourself in different contexts, but being prepared for these scenarios and planning for what you need can help decrease fear and stress.

“Nerves are inevitable for any performer, and there will always be some sort of adrenaline ranging from excitement to serious performance anxiety. **For me, it’s mostly a battle of mind control.** I might be extremely prepared, but if I suddenly have doubts about my next shift or memorization, that moment of lacking confidence will win. If my mind is calm, I feel calm. Holding a few yoga poses and doing breathing exercises at the same time help me clear my head and focus on being present. At times, the venue will be freezing cold, or it’ll feel like steam room with too much humidity and heat. These are conditions that one might have not prepared for, which leads to anxiety. **It’s helpful to try to have a plan if these circumstances really affect one’s performance.** For me, I cannot function with cold hands, so I carry hand warmers in my case during winters and have exercises that help warm up my body before going on stage.”

She continued, “If I’m feeling low on energy on concert days, I usually do a light workout to get my blood flowing. Also, this is pretty embarrassing, but if I’m driving to a concert and feeling tired, I put on some cheesy songs by popular bands from the 2000’s and belt songs out to get ‘pumped up.’ A great way to unwind is to soak in a bath with a good book and maybe a beer or a glass of wine.”

Embrace the unspoken support

For many, being a soloist can mean going through a continuous cycle of readjusting to new ensembles, time zones, and different schedules. Some even feel like they are going through it all alone. Reminding yourself about the passions for music and performing that you share with others can help ease these feelings by finding a common thread that connects everyone.

Eunice explained that “soloing can definitely become lonely, especially if you’re traveling to new cities, staying at hotels, and playing with orchestras where you don’t know anyone in the group and don’t have a ton of time to hang out. However, I have never experienced feeling lonely on stage while performing solos. **Sure, there might be more pressure knowing that you’re in the spotlight, but there’s always an unspoken energy of support and respect amongst musicians on and off stage.**”

Don’t lose sight of the *Why*

It’s easy to get caught up in the most minute details, so, when focusing at the small-scale, it is crucial to take a step back to gain perspective on *why* you’re doing it and the impacts your work has.

“Whenever I play with one of my mentors, Peter Wiley, he frequently stops and smiles after a beautiful musical phrase to say, ‘Aren’t we so lucky? We are so fortunate.’ I really started to appreciate hearing this amidst days of endless rehearsing, practicing, stressful deadlines, criticism, and obsessing over minuscule details. It’s easy to lose sight of why you’re doing what you’re doing, and it’s easy to forget how lucky we are to dedicate our lives to being fully immersed in what we are truly passionate about. **It’s great to be goal oriented and to set high expectations of yourself, but constantly remind yourself why you’re doing it and what it means to you.**”

Turn disappointment into positive energy

Being at the center of a performance, making a mistake can feel like the world is crashing down around you. Allow yourself to process these emotions while also turning them into energy to help humble yourself and propel forward. Remember, there will always be another opportunity!

“I’ve had several, *several* performances that didn’t go the way I wanted it to. **I have come to terms that I am simply a human, which means no performance will ever be perfect.** Rather than spending all my energy being disappointed because I didn’t play my best, I

try to put myself in the listener's shoes. Personally, I want my audience to be taken away from our fast paced world while they're sitting in the concert hall, and if they can be fully present and emotionally engaged at any point during my performance, I've done something right. **Also, being able to laugh at yourself is very crucial if you're going to put yourself out there.** I have a group text message chat where my friends and I share our latest bloopers from our concert recordings, and it's seriously a hoot."

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