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**Classical karaoke**

by Dale Bridges

The first time I saw Tom Kim he was standing in front of a small crowd at a Mexican restaurant. His eyes were closed and his head was tilted back as he belted out a rather fearless, campy version of Elton John's "Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me." In the back of the room, people stood on top of chairs to get a better view. Women screamed his name.

"I first started going to karaoke bars when I was about 8 years old," says Tom, a barrel-chested Korean-American man with caramel skin and a broad, serene face punctuated by a pair of squareish glasses. When he smiles — which is often — he looks like a hip, metrosexual incarnation of the Buddha. "I grew up in New York City, and my mother used to take me to these karaoke bars in Korea Town. They were so small that you could only fit eight or nine people in the room at one time. I loved it."

But Kim didn't start taking karaoke seriously until about five years ago, when he was set up on a blind date at a place called Champs Sports Bar in Park Meadows. The date was a no-show, but Tom didn't let that bother him.

"I saw that the bar was having a karaoke night, so I signed up to sing a few songs. The next day someone called and said that I had won \$200. I didn't even know it was a contest. I went on to the next round, which I won, and I made it all the way to the finals. I said to myself, 'You know, this is pretty cool.'"

Kim first moved to Boulder eight years ago to attend CU, where he is currently working on his PhD in classical music conducting. His dissertation is on Witold Lutoslawski, a Polish composer who was banned by the Stalinists following World War II. One of Lutoslawski's most famous arrangements is a choral band piece dedicated to Henri Michaux, a poet who is best known for writing about his experiences on mescaline.

But when he's not studying classical interpretations of dudes on psychedelic drugs, Tom prefers music of a different ilk.

"The '80s was the best decade for pop music in my opinion: Elton John, Billy Joel, Frankie Goes to Hollywood... It was the decade of hooks. You don't necessarily have to have the best voice to sing that kind of music. Part of karaoke is just losing yourself in the moment. It's becoming a pop star."

What's the difference between classical singers and pop singers?

"In school, classical singers are trained to get the maximum beauty out of their instrument — but 'beauty,' quite frankly, is not the most important thing about being a pop star."

What is the most important thing?

"Personality. And I mean that both in a good and bad way."

Do you think your classical training has influenced your karaoke singing?

"I think I have a better idea of what I'm trying to get across to my audience because of my training. But it's very different."

Why?

"Well, as an entertainer, you want your performances to be in the moment, to have a sense of realness, of joy. I think that's one of the reasons people who are classically trained musicians have a hard time with karaoke. In classical music, you have to plan everything out. It's almost like gymnastics: you have these skill elements that you constantly have to plan throughout an aria while trying to make the whole thing seamless. That's a very different skill set than just belting something out in a feel-good kind of way."

What are some important personality traits for a classical music conductor to possess?

"Confidence. Timing. The ability to lead. You have to lay out a vision for the musicians, not only technically but emotionally. You're trying to translate ink splashes on a piece of paper into music. That is one of the most abstract things you can imagine, so there has to be some amount of interpretation."

And that skill helps you interpret pop songs when you're singing karaoke, right?

"No, not really."

So what is the connection between classical music and karaoke?

"I'm not sure there is one. You might be over-thinking this. Classical music is much more difficult in an intellectual way. Some people compare it to physics or high-level mathematics. Karaoke is all about emotion. Some of the worst singers are the best at karaoke because they're having fun. They talk through their songs, they try to get the crowd involved. They connect with the audience on a personal level. That's just not something everyone can do."

Tom Kim sings karaoke at 9 p.m. every Wednesday night at Juanita's Mexican Restaurant, 1043 Pearl St., Boulder, 303-449-5273.

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