

The Music of the Future, Joy All Along

An Interview with Pulitzer and Grammy Award-winning Composer Kevin Puts

On a misty, rain-dimmed afternoon in New York, amid the restless current of the city, one of the greatest living composers of the 21st century—Grammy and Pulitzer Prize winner Kevin Puts—sits quietly in a small, elegant café, awaiting our conversation.

“What is your philosophy of life?” I ask.

Kevin lowers his gaze. For a long moment, a sliver of silver light from the rain-slicked street glances across his face. He remains silent, thinking. Then he answers, softly:

“I don’t really know.”

In an age where science, education, and economics surge forward at relentless speed, music is expected to keep pace—to innovate, to constantly redefine itself. That expectation has long weighed on Kevin. Beneath the pressure to stay at the cutting edge, a deeper question has quietly taken root within him: *What kind of creation truly matters?* For a composer of his stature, this is not merely a question of style. It is a reckoning of identity, purpose, and belief—a quiet but urgent confrontation with what it means to create in our time.

Walking into the Music

During the long stretch of isolation in 2020–2021, like much of the world, Kevin Puts spent his days at home. But he never stopped composing. Music could not stop—or rather, he knew *he* could not stop. He began collecting every idea, every fragile thread of inspiration, attempting to weave them into something more than just music—something that might become a bridge between people in a time of profound separation.

Through countless days and nights linked only by digital threads, Kevin sat at the piano on one side of the world’s time zones, while Charles Yang of *Time for Three* played the violin—and sang—on the other side of a glowing screen.

“Kevin,” Charles would say, “what if we added this section here? What if this part turned into pizzicato?”

Across the invisible space between them, across silence and signal and sleep-deprived hours, the four collaborators shaped what would become a landmark of contemporary music. At the time, none of them imagined the piece would travel to the farthest corners of the world—or that two years later, it would win the 2023 Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Classical Composition. They hadn’t set out to create a beacon for the next generation of composers.

This stood in stark contrast to Kevin’s original intention.

“How do I even answer a question like, ‘Did you expect to win an award?’” he said. “And how could I possibly predict how audiences would receive the piece? I’m not the kind of composer who often thinks much about competitions or recognition. What I care about is writing something that truly responds to the performers—something they can play with hope and energy, not just the way I envision it, but in a way that feels right to them.”

Composing this concerto drew Kevin into unfamiliar territory—anxieties, uncertainties, questions he had never faced before. How could he seamlessly weave the intimacy of a trio into the vast fabric of a full orchestra? He wrote draft after draft, sketch upon sketch. Each attempt to bridge instinct and idea blurred and sharpened in turn—like microscopic organisms shifting under a lens, slowly revealing the intricate architecture of a living cell. At the heart of it all were the performers—their voices, their presence, their resonance. Nothing mattered more. In the isolating world of the pandemic, human connection had become the rarest and most precious element of all. So many had lost the chance to meet, to part, to return. Kevin thought: *This piece needs a new name*. It is not merely a concerto. It is something more elemental. It is *Contact*.

And for Kevin, that is one of humanity’s most essential needs.

Music, for him, must always begin—and end—with human connection.

In 2023, *Contact* received one of the highest honors in the music world—a Grammy Award. Kevin reflects on what that moment meant. “A lot of composers have these big ambitions,” he says. “They want to write harder music, push larger challenges, fulfill the unfinished dreams of the Romantic masters. I don’t have that kind of ambition. My ambition is simply this: How can I make people feel joy? How can I celebrate the most beautiful things about being human?” He pauses. Then adds, gently: “And it’s not a mission. It’s just what naturally comes to mind.” Like Du Fu, Chinese Tang Dynasty poets, who embraced the vastness of all rivers, delved into the harsh realities of life, cared deeply for the people’s well-being, and ignited the transformative power of existence—this consummate poet of a thousand years ago distilled the loftiest ideals of Confucianism into verse¹. In a similar spirit, Kevin’s music grapples with everything we, as fragile and fleeting beings, long to reach: mutual

¹ Ye Jiaying, *Studies in DuFu’s poetry*. China Library 2018. pp. 11-13.

understanding and inclusive empathy—transcending boundaries of culture, race, gender, and religion. This, he believes, is the true purpose of music—and the ultimate aim of his creative pursuit.

“I always find myself thinking—today, people can so easily click on a track and just as quickly stop it. Music has become disposable in that way. But notes shouldn’t simply stop. Music shouldn’t end just because the medium is paused. It should linger in the air, echo in the mind. So how do we create music that doesn’t stop being heard? How do we make people keep listening?”

So Kevin paused—his hands lifted from both pen and piano.

In that suspended moment, as if time itself had faltered, he turned inward and asked: *Who is playing my music? Who is listening? And how can music be made to never truly end?* For him, the answer lies in stepping fully into the music—walking inside it— not just as a composer, but as a human being. To ask, with honesty: *What do we love? What do we long for, at our core?* Kevin has spent years searching for his truest self through sound. To him, music is not merely a craft, nor a career, but one of humanity’s most vital emotional pursuits. And within that endless pursuit, he believes the endpoint—if there is one—is this: To write not for the sake of music, but for the sake of people.

Frei aber einsam

“Being a composer is hard,” Kevin said softly. “We’re always doubting ourselves. I’m always doubting myself. Strangely, some of the negative comments have even helped me regain confidence,” he reflects. “Sometimes I wonder if I can still bring joy to others—but maybe it’s at least that I can bring joy to myself.”

At the forefront of modern technological advancement, Kevin believes that, as a contemporary composer, he too should be leading the evolution of music. But how does music truly progress? This question haunts him. In his view, the fundamental logic of music must never be compromised—music cannot experiment merely for the sake of innovation. He reads every review of his performed works, even though criticism often stings, leaving him disheartened. Still, this modern composer tries to tune out the negativity, choosing instead to remain steadfast in his own vision, committed to the pursuit of inner truth.

In 2011, he turned toward opera. The result was *Silent Night*, which won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Music. Set in the trenches of war, the opera tells of soldiers from opposing nations who, recognizing their mirrored humanity, choose to lay down their weapons for a night of peace. It is a story not only of shared suffering, but of shared hope.

Behind the acclaim, beyond the prize, Kevin found something far more enduring: a quiet return of faith—drawn not from critics, but from the hearts of those who listened.

He began to speak more about those fleeting moments in music—the ones that, he believed, still had the power to reach people. Moments that held the quiet possibility of connection. He was certain that somewhere, someone would feel what he was trying to say: the shared ground of human experience. Someone would receive it, lean in, and ask—*what happens next* in this wordless conversation between composer and listener? In those moments, Kevin

knew—he was not alone. What carried him forward was always the work itself, and the quiet revelation that some moments... were never isolated after all.

In the 21st century, artificial intelligence seems to have opened a new tunnel through time and space. We now chase faster, simpler lives, guided by the invisible hand of algorithms. With just a few keystrokes, answers arrive instantly—effortlessly—until even in literature, philosophy, and art, the slow and sacred processes of exploration and contemplation begin to fade.

Milan Kundera departed in 2023. In his final years, he questioned the very purpose of the modern novel, arriving at a paradox: that true modernism is, in essence, anti-modern.² Some may have called him outdated—just as they might Beethoven. And yet, Kundera saw in Beethoven’s final works a kind of miracle: the freedom of an artist no longer striving to break ground or to be understood, but one who had reached an island of Beethoven's own—a place beyond the need for justification.³ What role does contemporary music play in modern society? Living in an era defined by freedom and rapid progress, Kevin often finds himself questioning the future of classical music and art. He feels a responsibility to be at the forefront of music—to evolve it alongside the ever-advancing world and its technologies. And yet, he finds himself unable to do so. For a long time, he has been caught in a labyrinth of uncertainty, not unlike Milan Kundera’s reflections on the meaning and purpose of the modern novel. Music is not a machine. Kevin cannot compose melodies that betray his inner

² Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 19-20: *Once upon a time I too thought that the future was the only competent judge of our works and actions. Later on I understood that chasing after the future is the worst conformism of all, a craven flattery of the mighty. For the future is always mightier than the present. It will pass judgment on us, of course. And without any competence.*

³ Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda (New York: HarperCollins, 2006, p. 114: *During his last ten years, he has nothing more to expect from Vienna, from its aristocracy, from its musicians who honor him but no longer listen to him; nor does he listen to them, actually, if only because he is deaf; he is at the peak of his art; his sonatas and quartets are like nothing else; in the complexity of their construction they are far from classicism yet do not come close to the facile spontaneity of the young Romantics; in the evolution of music he has gone off in a direction where no one has followed; without disciples, without successors, the work from his vesperal freedom is a miracle, an island.*

truth. This leaves him often feeling isolated—his deeply personal musical language cannot stop the world from moving forward, nor can it fully keep pace with it. And yet, there is also a sense of freedom: the freedom to remain faithful to his own logic, his own beliefs. The music in his heart refuses to be silenced. It is simple and pure—an embodiment of beauty and joy. And for Kevin, those are the very things most worthy of celebration in being human.

Classical music has always bridged the distance between happiness and sorrow, between freedom and solitude. And behind these emotions lies another distance—the one between composer and audience. Kevin’s musical faith lies in closing that space. Wang Guowei, *in Remarks on Lyrics in the Human World*, once wrote that immortal words allow readers to see themselves within them⁴—as if every phrase speaks precisely what they feel, yet could never say aloud. This, too, is what Kevin believes immortal music can do.

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In 2025, Kevin found himself immersed in the agonizing process of writing a new violin concerto. He wanted it to be exceptional—not for prestige, but for the performers and the audience who awaited it with anticipation. And yet, he chose to start over.

In truth, he had always been starting over.

When asked by Ganlan: which composer he admired most, Kevin answered without hesitation: Mozart.

Mozart's music is simple, pure, and capable of evoking happiness in listeners. Years passed, many works were born, but Kevin's original intention never wavered. For Kevin, to begin

⁴ Wang Guowei, *in Remarks on Lyrics in the Human World*. P. 82

again was not an admission of failure—it was a return to joy, a quiet recommitment to beauty. Striving to improve was only a metaphor for bridging the distance between people and reigniting empathy. He knew he couldn't stop or give up halfway, so he convinced himself: the music still exists, and he must press on.

The piece *Contact* became a tremendous success. *Time for Three* carried *Contact* to wider audiences with their conviction, energy, and passion—amplifying Kevin's quiet call to one of humanity's oldest longings. Hearing their belief in the music, they reinforced each other's resolve to walk this path. If Kevin had contributed anything to contemporary music, this—collaborating with performers, reaching more ears, letting people feel the energy—was what he considered most meaningful and fulfilling.

In his final years, Leo Tolstoy chose to leave home, spending his last three months writing a diary in search of his original self, returning to the essence of literature.⁵ Kevin also spoke of Rachmaninoff in his final years—how he, too, longed to break new ground, only to return, inevitably, to the music of his heart. Because that music, springing from the soul, speaks to our most primal emotional need. No composer escapes this.

AI cannot replace music, because there is one question it cannot answer: *What is the most beautiful thing about being human?* The answer, surely, is trust, understanding, respect, and connection. During the pandemic, upon hearing *Time for Three's* vocal recording, Kevin immediately changed the opening chords to human voices—a call to these very emotions and a celebration of contemporary music going back to the pure music in that moment.

Time for Three titled the album *Letters for the Future*. No one can predict how the world, music, or humanity will evolve. But on that quiet New York afternoon, the writer believes: there will always be a composer whose philosophical questions require no answers—

⁵ Leo Tolstoy, *Last Diaries*, G.P.Putnam Capricorn Books, January 1, 1960.

because at the edge of all philosophy, he offers something else entirely: a fragile purity, a simple soul, and the echo of joy from the deepest well of human longing.