

## Sunday Conversation: Igudesman & Joo

The classically trained musicians use comedy to bring music to a wider audience.



Hyung-ki Joo and Aleksey Igudesman. (Julia Wesely / handout)

By Irene Lacher, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Classical musicians and YouTube sensations Igudesman and Joo come to the Broad Stage on Saturday for the L.A.-area debut of "A Little Nightmare Music," their show blending violin and piano virtuosity with humor and invention. The London-based pair Skyped in their interview from Europe.

**Where are you guys calling me from?**

**Aleksey Igudesman:** I am presently in London and Hyung-ki is presently in Vienna.

**How many languages do you speak?**

**Igudesman:** We've done the show in Russian, in Korean, even. Of course, we're doing it in French and German and Italian, which is a lot of fun for us and also a lot of fun for the audience trying to decipher what it is we're actually saying.

**Hyung-ki Joo:** The show has very little language in it. The humor and the theatricality is international. It's clear enough.

**And yet do audiences around the world respond in quite the same way to the same musical jokes?**

**Igudesman:** Audiences respond in entirely different ways. One thing is unanimous — music binds us altogether. People love the music, and people love to laugh. But they laugh at different points for different reasons at different jokes. So it has a different energy in different places.

Maybe the best public is the USA because you have a very wide understanding of what we're doing somehow. I feel the audience gets us on many different levels. But some countries like the physical humor more, other countries respond more to word puns and some countries just love to see us slip on banana peels.

**Joo:** I think the USA and North America have such a great tradition of comedy on so many levels, you could say it's just part of the culture. As a non-American, one of the most charming and attractive things about Americans is their good humor. Just going into a store, people are very talkative and making jokes.

**That's interesting since you guys are really European and you performed there for many years before you came here.**

**Igudesman:** The USA has it all somehow. You have the mean comedians, you have the sweet comedians, you have the people who like to fall over for no reason at all, other people like to play with words. And we like to do all of those things and combine it with beautiful music, because essentially for us it's about the music.

**Joo:** A very important distinction for us is that we're not making fun of music. We're having fun with the music. We're classical musicians, we are very passionate and serious about classical music.

### **What comedians inspire you?**

**Igudesman:** Obviously Victor Borge — he's the godfather of music and comedy. But you'd be surprised at some of the [musicians] who do comedy, someone like Glenn Gould, the legendary Canadian pianist actually dabbled in comedy and did skits for Canadian radio and television, and that was an inspiration. And, of course, Dudley Moore, definitely a big inspiration for us.

**Joo:** Now we're limiting this endless list to comedians who are also musicians, but even this list is endless because there's Danny Kaye, there's PDQ Bach, there's Spike Jones, etc., etc.

**Igudesman:** And also Matt Stone and Trey Parker of "South Park." They are definitely two people we'd love to meet because they're a big inspiration. I have the feeling we think along the same lines because they have a wicked sense of humor combined with a love of music and a passion for perfection in some ways. Even when they do really outrageous things, they do it to such a high level.

### **Have you guys performed in L.A. before?**

**Joo:** With the exception of a few living rooms, no.

**Igudesman:** It's very special for us. I've done quite a lot of work in Los Angeles, and I'm working presently with Hans Zimmer, the [Oscar-winning film] composer. I'm co-writing some things and recording. I worked a lot on the "Sherlock Holmes" movies, now the second one and the first one I was recording most of the violin things and arranging and writing extra music for it.

### **Your performance borrows heavily from pop culture.**

**Igudesman:** It might sound typical for us to say there are no borders, but we really mean it. We went to the Yehudi Menuhin School founded by the great violinist in England. And he was a very open-minded person.

**Joo:** He was one of the first serious legends in the classical music world that — and I hate to use this term — crossed over. He performed with people like Ravi Shankar and Stéphane Grappelli and Duke Ellington. And I think that openness rubbed off on us.

**Igudesman:** As children we loved Prokofiev and Stravinsky, but then the next moment, we would put on Queen or Pink Floyd or folk music from different countries. We really didn't see any distinctions. All the music is based on the same harmonic structures and the same sentiments. It's fun to show off those points which we do in a number you can see on YouTube called "I Will Survive," where we mix all these different styles but all are based on exactly the same harmonic pattern. The title "I Will Survive" for us is a hint that classical music or all music will survive.

**Joo:** So much music and so many artists defy categorization. But [different kinds of] music really live happily side by side. Our show, "A Little Nightmare Music," is accessible to everyone in the same concert hall. We've had everybody from kids to people who've never even heard of classical music before. We always try to write on at least two levels, so if we can't stop ourselves from writing an inside joke that only the few connoisseurs would know, we always make sure there is a simultaneous gag running, so that people who wouldn't get the inside joke would at least have a laugh.

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