

Press release

March 18, 2026

In the Music and Opera category

The Frontiers of Knowledge Award goes to Unsuik Chin for developing a personal voice that has achieved global resonance in contemporary music by virtue of its innovative virtuosity and vivid sonic imagination

- **The South Korean composer has developed a “unique and formidable technique”** characterized by “her refined command of sound and masterful ability to transform it into a play of illusions and metamorphoses, marking her out as one of the great innovators in contemporary music,” said the committee in its citation
- **The artist taught herself to compose and play piano** in her native Korea, at a time when economic hardship placed a musical training beyond most people’s reach
- **A grant from the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) enabled her to study in Germany with the composer György Ligeti**, who instilled in her a self-discipline and desire for excellence that led her to develop a distinctive musical voice, universal and cosmopolitan, in which all that matters is the score, unfettered by national identities or any other concern beyond the music itself
- **Her musical approach draws on philosophical and scientific concepts**, while taking inspiration from surrealist literature and the visual arts. This is patent in her operas *Alice in Wonderland* and *Die dunkle Seite des Mondes*, where, the citation says, she “expands the use of the voice through extended techniques, fragmented writing, and abrupt contrasts between sung and spoken text”
- **Chin’s scores have found a place on the stands of the world’s foremost ensembles and performers**, with particular mention for her close relationship with the Berliner Philharmoniker, especially during the tenure of Sir Simon Rattle, and orchestras and opera houses in Montreal, Munich and Hamburg, under conductor Kent Nagano

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The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Music and Opera category has gone in this 18th edition to the South Korean composer Unsuk Chin for developing a “distinctive voice,” in the words of the committee, that has resonated throughout the contemporary music world, distinguished by its “instrumental virtuosity” and a “boundless imagination” with the power to evoke “symbolic worlds of great expressive depth.”

Chin’s “singular technique” – the citation continues – “creates ever-shifting soundscapes, where color and texture play a central role,” birthing an aesthetic style that is without parallel in today’s music scene. The committee also described her work as drawing on “philosophical and scientific concepts” along with “surrealist literature and the visual arts.” From her prolific catalogue, they singled out her concertos and her operas, hailed for “expanding the use of the voice through extended techniques, fragmented writing, and abrupt contrasts between sung and spoken text.” The result is a vocal music that is “highly expressive and sinuous” building a “kaleidoscope of moods.” Her work, in sum, “is characterized by her refined command of sound and masterful ability to transform it into a play of illusions and metamorphoses, marking her out as one of the great innovators in contemporary music,” whose music “has found a place on the stands of the world’s foremost orchestras and performers.”

For committee chair Gabriela Ortiz, Professor of Composition at the National Autonomous University of Mexico “Chin is a masterful orchestrator, with an extensive catalogue that ranges from chamber music to orchestral and opera works. She shows great concern for the technical crafting of her music, which is always impeccably written, displaying both consummate skill and a unique sonic imagination.”

“She is a leading figure in the contemporary music world, and undoubtedly one of the artists with the most distinctive style – her music is recognizable the moment you hear it,” adds committee secretary Víctor García de Gomar, Artistic Director of the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona. “Drawing from a dreamlike world brimming with fantasy, her scores stand out for their distinctive timbre and palette, with incredibly rich, sumptuous orchestrations that mix different planes in a way that is startlingly original.”

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Santiago Serrate, conductor and teacher of concertation and conducting techniques at the Reina Sofía Music School believes one key to her success is “having her music championed by some of the world’s leading conductors,” notably Sir Simon Rattle in his tenure as music director of the Berliner Philharmoniker, whose record label released an album devoted to their collaboration of almost 20 years (2005-2022), and Kent Nagano, who conducted works by Chin on almost 50 occasions during his time with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. Indeed it was Nagano, who this September will take over as principal conductor of the Spanish National Orchestra (ONE) and artistic director of the Spanish National Orchestra and Chorus (OCNE), that commissioned Chin’s two operas, when serving as music director in the opera theaters of Munich (2007) and Hamburg (2025).

From pianist to composition student in post-war Korea

It all started when Unsuk Chin’s father, a Presbyterian minister, bought a piano for the church where he was preaching. Chin was just two-and-a-half years old, but remembers being fascinated at how the sound vibrated as she pressed the keys. “Soon after, I began playing piano. My father could read music, and he taught me a little. But basically, I was self-taught until I started at university. My childhood dream was to become a pianist – playing piano is still one of my passions – but, like most people in the South Korea of the 1960s, my family was quite poor, and certainly did not have the means to send me to lessons,” recalls the composer in an interview shortly after hearing of the award.

When she was 12, her school music teacher, a composer himself, suggested she try her hand at composition. “I had no idea what it involved, but thought maybe becoming a composer was cheaper than becoming a pianist,” she says jokingly. The artist still remembers how hard it was to find sheet music or records in the Korea of the post-war years. But despite having to take a paid job while at high school to bring money into the house, Chin managed, after two refusals, to get into Seoul National University: “I was very lucky; I got accepted at the third try because there were not enough applicants!”

The composer looks back on her university years in South Korea as difficult but ultimately highly rewarding: “We had serious political problems because we were living under a military dictatorship. But I discovered lots of different music when I studied there. In my second year, the Korean composer Sukhi Kang returned from Germany to teach in my faculty, bringing lots of information about European contemporary music. And I became his student number one.” The

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influences she encountered through Kang inspired her decision to pursue a career as a composer in Europe.

A disciple of György Ligeti's: the hard path to finding a personal voice

In 1985, Chin received an academic exchange grant from the German government. She wrote a letter to Hungarian composer György Ligeti, then living in Hamburg, asking if he would accept her as a student. "I still have that letter. I wrote to him as Fräulein Chin, as if I was a little girl. Anyway, he said he would admit me if I passed the entrance exam for the Hamburg University of Music and Drama, and I passed."

Working with Ligeti was not easy. His stature as a world-renowned artist with a body of great works created a gulf between him and his students, six young composers with little experience; a gulf only widened by his strictness as a teacher. "I was a little scared. I spent three years studying with him and his lessons were really tough. Perhaps it was not his fault. He had had a tough life as a Jewish survivor of the Second World War, and some of his family members were murdered by the Nazis. He had a very personal vision as a composer and expected us all to understand it, so we would go on to develop our own style. He put us under severe psychological pressure that was very hard to withstand, but, at the same time, I learned everything I needed as a composer. I think he was the best teacher I ever had, and studying with him was the best thing that ever happened to me. Because I'm still learning from his music and from what he said to us back then." Chin believes particularly that the high standards and critical rigor she learned from Ligeti – for whom the only thing that mattered was the quality of the score, to the exclusion of all else – have been essential to her finding her own identity and voice as a composer.

The composer relates that the culture shock she experienced on arriving in a Germany still divided into East and West, and the problems she encountered in getting her work heard, made these first years in Europe a particularly trying time: "Now the country and the people are far more open, but back then there was a lot of political pressure. As a young foreign composer, I found it really hard to get my music played there, while in Paris or London, and even America, it was being performed at concerts." On completing her studies with Ligeti, she moved to Berlin, where she has lived ever since, to work as a freelance composer at an electronic music studio within the Technical University of Berlin.

Her own voice was already coming through in *Die Troerinnen* ("Trojan Women," 1986), based on the Euripides play, for three female singers, female chorus and orchestra, with music that was

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modern in style but lyrical and irreverent in its expressiveness. But it was not until the 1990s that she wrote the work which would mark a before and after in her artistic life: *Akrostichon-Wortspiel* ("Acrostic-Wordplay," 1991-1993) for solo soprano and ensemble. "When writing this piece I drew on surrealism. I took a lot of texts but then didn't use them directly because I didn't want to impose a semantic meaning on my music, but rather to use the text as a tool for singing. So I deconstructed the texts and made an artificial language from them. It was premiered in London, to really good reviews," recalls the artist. This work, her international breakthrough, has since been performed in over 20 countries.

A musical approach that draws on dreams, science, and literature

Chin, says the committee, has developed a style that is without parallel in the contemporary music scene, "rich in references to the fantastical." She agrees that dreams in particular have been a constant source of inspiration: "As a child, almost every night I had wonderful dreams of a starry universe filled with colors and natural phenomena. And if you have this kind of nighttime imagination, you get much more energy to go through life; the tough, hard life of the daytime hours. My dreams are important in all my music." This oneiric universe finds vivid reflection in works such as *Xi* (1998), a piece for ensemble and electronics whose Korean title translates as "origin", "core" or "the smallest unit of things." It is structured around a series of musical units with more and more sounds folded in as the score progresses. The awardee also takes inspiration from the visual arts, as in *Rocaná* (2008), her first orchestral commission – from Montreal Symphony Orchestra, during the tenure of Kent Nagano – for which she drew on the lights and bright colors of an Ólafur Eliasson installation at a time when she felt creatively drained after completing her first opera work.

Science, particularly physics and astronomy, is another big influence in her writing. "At times in my life when I have felt stressed or frustrated, I'd sit down at the end of the day and read a book about the universe or the Big Bang, and then my sorrows would pass and I could sleep peacefully. In those books, I came across some interesting ideas and materials that found their way into works like my *Double Concerto* (2002), where I try to capture the physical idea of gravity in music," she explains.

The awardee also talks about the deep impression made on her by the correspondence between Austrian physicist Wolfgang Pauli and the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung: "They had a very special connection. I find Pauli a fascinating character. He was a genius scientist, but at the same

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time a kind of crazy artist, with crazy dreams, lots of personal problems with women, and with alcohol and maybe other drugs. He had a kind of Jekyll and Hyde life. By day, a professor, by night, partying in Hamburg. His story and his relationship with Jung were the inspiration behind my latest opera, *Die dunkle Seite des Mondes* ("The Dark Side of the Moon," premiered at the Staatsoper Hamburg in 2025 with Kent Nagano conducting), which I wrote myself in German, a long tough process that I got through all alone. Similar influences are at work in her concerto for orchestra *Spira* (2019), which takes its title from the logarithmic spiral *spira mirabilis* ("the marvelous spiral"), so named by the 17th century mathematician Jacob Bernoulli, and in *Alaraph 'Ritus des Herzschrags'* ("Alaraph 'Ritual of the Heartbeat,'" 2022), where she explores the notion of the fluidity of time.

A composer testing the boundaries of what is musically possible

Unsuk Chin's first opera *Alice in Wonderland* (2007) brings together all of her obsessions. Starting from the title character's dream, it adds philosophy and science to the oneiric plane, mirroring the features of this classic of world literature. "I wrote my first opera 20 years ago. When I was studying with Ligeti, he often spoke about the book, which on the surface is very simple, like a fairy tale. But if you go deeper, you can find intimate connections with other fields, including mathematics. I was initially reluctant to make an opera out of it, because there were rumors that Ligeti was planning to use it. So we looked into it, and found that by that time, 2002-2003, he had dropped the idea for reasons of age and ill health."

The opera premiered in 2007 at the **Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich**, with Kent Nagano at the helm and production design by Achim Freyer. For Chin, it was an unforgettable experience, involving six weeks of rehearsals. Next year, she notes, it will be staged in Nice in a French translation. In *Alice*, Chin expands the use of the voice with extended techniques and explosive shifts between the sung and the spoken text. She views her works for voice as fairly traditional, but acknowledges that they could be considered innovative in their scant reliance on special effects, something rare among contemporary creators: "I always try to push the limits of what can be sung. In contemporary opera you can do all sorts of things. A singer can speak and make strange noises or scream. They can do anything. So the options for how to use the voice are much greater, and you can choose from a whole broad spectrum."

The composer admits to entering a kind of trace state when she is writing, which starts with the first note and lasts through to the end, without interruption. Known for pushing her soloists to the

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limit in her concerts, she is adamant that, just as she strives to push past her own limits when composing, she expects a similar effort from the performers: “I demand a lot of myself, and expect the same from the musicians, which is why many of them hate me!” These exacting standards trace back to her lessons with Ligeti, who never held back in his, at times, harsh judgments of his own work and others’ work.

Unsk Chin is still pursuing her individual voice, a goal instilled in her by her mentor. Rather than accepting the label of “South Korean composer” some sought to impose on her when she first came to Europe, she has preferred to pursue a purely musical and at the same time “cosmopolitan” artistic style that transcends her place of birth and the time she happens to live in. Despite her initial struggles to make a name for herself on the German music scene, the Berlin-based artist is now – as the Frontiers of Knowledge committee remarks – a singular, recognized and fixed star in the composition firmament.

Nominators

A total of 46 nominations were received in this edition, comprising 42 candidates. The awardee artist was nominated by Uzong Choe and Sebastian Claren, both professors of composition at Seoul National University (South Korea).

Music and Opera committee and evaluation support panel

The committee in this category was chaired by **Gabriela Ortiz Torres**, composer and Professor of Composition at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), with **Víctor García de Gomar**, Artistic Director of the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona (Spain), acting as secretary.

Remaining members were **Mauro Bucarelli**, Artistic Administrator of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome (Italy); **Silvia Colasanti**, composer (Italy); **Raquel García Tomás**, composer (Spain); **Pedro Halffter Caro**, conductor and composer (Spain); **Joan Matabosch**, Artistic Director of the Teatro Real (Spain); **Fabián Panisello**, Artistic Director of PluralEnsemble and Chair of Composition at the Reina Sofía School of Music (Spain); and **Santiago Serrate**, conductor and teacher of concertation and conducting techniques at the Reina Sofía School of Music (Spain).

The CSIC evaluation support panel was coordinated by **Elena Cartea**, Deputy Vice-President for

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Scientific-Technical Areas at the Spanish National Research Council and **Luis Calvo Calvo**, CSIC Delegate in Catalonia and Director of the Mila i Fontanals Institution for Research in the Humanities (IMF, CSIC) and formed by: **Mariano Gómez Aranda**, Scientific Researcher at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East (ILC-CCHS, CSIC); **Luis Antonio González Marin**, Tenured Scientist at the Mila i Fontanals Institution for Research in the Humanities (IMF, CSIC); **David Irving**, ICREA Professor at the Mila i Fontanals Institution for Research in the Humanities (IMF, CSIC); and **Laura Touriñan Morandeira**, postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of History (IH-CCHS, CSIC).

About the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards

The BBVA Foundation centers its activity on the promotion of world-class scientific research and cultural creation, and its transmission to society, along with the recognition of talent through families of awards organized alone or in conjunction with scientific societies and the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC).

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards, funded with 400,000 euros in each of their eight categories, recognize and reward contributions of singular impact in basic sciences, biomedicine, environmental sciences and climate change, social sciences, economics, the humanities and music. The goal of the awards, established in 2008, is to celebrate and promote the value of knowledge as a global public good, the best tool at our command to confront the defining challenges of our time and expand individual worldviews. Their eight categories are congruent with the knowledge map of the 21st century.

A total of 34 Frontiers of Knowledge laureates in the 17 editions held to date have gone on to win the Nobel Prize.

The BBVA Foundation is partnered in these awards by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the country's premier public research organization. CSIC appoints evaluation support panels made up of leading experts in the corresponding knowledge area, who are charged with undertaking an initial assessment of candidates and drawing up a reasoned shortlist for the consideration of the award committees. CSIC is also responsible for designating each committee's chair across the eight prize categories and participates in the selection of remaining members, helping to ensure objectivity in the recognition of those who have achieved particularly significant advances in science and in music. The presidency of CSIC also has a prominent role in the awards ceremony held each year in Bilbao, the permanent home of the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards.

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