

Monthly Interview Gaeksuk

A haegeum player Sooyeon Lyuh, a new experiment in progress.

INTERVIEW

I met with Sooyeon Lyuh, a player, composer, and scholar expanding the possibility of haegeum in America

Sooyeon Lyuh playing her composition “Yessori(Sound from the Past)” with Kronos Quartet

In December of last year, China Philharmonic Orchestra - whose US tour was critically acclaimed - included an Erhu repertoire in their program. Guangdong National Orchestra, which toured the western part of the United States in September of last year, also played Erhu repertoire, which is considered “China’s haegeum,” appears frequently in classical concerts already. Internationally recognized Chinese composers are writing scores that interpret traditional instruments such as Erhu in the language of the western music, and are endeavoring to popularize traditional Chinese instruments by attempting to play famous scores with Erhu.

We have an artist in Korea who is promoting a traditional Korean instrument in America. The artist is Sooyeon Lyuh, a haegeum player. Ms. Lyuh, who was a visiting scholar at The University of Hawaii’s Music Department and at UC Berkeley, played with Kronos Quartet her own composition “Yessori” at New York’s Greene Space on March 7. I met with Ms. Lyuh, who is pursuing her unique path.

How she got her opportunity

Ms. Sooyeon Lyuh met with David Harrington, a violinist of the Kronos Quartet, for the first time last summer. One time during a conversation, Mr. Harrington requested Ms. Sooyeon Lyuh to play haegeum, and she played traditional Korean music to him. After listening to the performance, Mr. Harrington proposed to her to perform with him around 2020. While on a leave of absence from the National Gugak(Korean traditional music) Center’s Contemporary Gugak Orchestra, Ms. Sooyeon Lyuh came back to America, feeling ecstatic that having an opportunity to participate in a concert with Kronos Quartet was a sufficiently valuable experience. Mr. Harrington threw a question at her all of a sudden.

“How about an impromptu performance...?”

Ms. Sooyeon Lyuh held haegeum again and improvised for two minutes. While she was playing, Mr. Harrington recorded her performance with his cellular phone. After the end of her performance, Mr. Harrington replayed her performance, and proposed her to improvise on top

of the recorded performance from just a few minuets back. Over the recording, she played a completely different melody. Right on the spot, Mr. Harrington asked her to play a string quartet score. Just based on her short performance, he could sense that she is an excellent composer. She is an artist with a very unique background in music in her younger days she learned the piano and violin, acquiring western music's grammar, and has the ability to speak the language of traditional Korean music through haegeum, which she has studied since her high school days.

Ms. Sooyeon Lyuh, who was requested to write a piece of music, performed "Yessori," a composition for haegeum and string quartets, in San Francisco for the first time in past February. The composition was performed twice in New York on March 7, and the performance was broadcast live on radio and over the Internet.

As the project with the Kronos Quartet was under way, she changed her original plan to return to Korea. When she decided to remain in America after careful consideration, she was invited by Mills College to work for the college as a Scholar-in-Residence. Upcoming May, she will be touring Spain with UC Berkeley Symphony Orchestra as a haegeum soloist. Good opportunities are coming to her consecutively.

"I think that it will be impossible to conquer haegeum in my lifetime. That is because it becomes harder the more you play the instrument. If haegeum were easy, I would have searched for other interesting things to do after playing the instrument as a member of an orchestra for about 10 years."

Attachment to the instrument, her challenging spirit

Ms. Sooyeon Lyuh came into contact with music for the first time with the piano and violin. Although she was an excellent piano player, she started to lose interest in the piano as time went by, feeling her limitations. Then, she came across haegeum as if by fate. Although it was too late for her to major in the instrument, she decided to face the challenge. Thanks to her hard work, she was accepted by two universities including Seoul National University.

After starting college, Ms. Sooyeon Lyuh, who was born and raised in Daegu, could feel the difference in skill level between her and her classmates. Due to the fact that most of the traditional Korean music majors at Seoul National University are from the Gugak(Traditional Korean music) National High School, her skills were being unfavorably compared to those of her classmates, who had refined their basic skills in their high school days. She hung on to haegeum as if her life depended on it, even taking private lessons to hone her skills. In contrast to the piano, which has 88 keys, she became more attracted to haegeum, which has only two strings, the more she studied the instrument. Afterwards, she performed at the National Gugak Center's Contemporary Gugak Orchestra, taught at her alma mater, and received her Ph. D to boot. Her complex that she is not one of the Gugak National High School graduates, who are implicitly being considered as "the elite," drove her even more to haegeum.

“I would like to look back on my life after only having forged ahead for so long. In 2011, there were so many difficult issues. I submitted an application to the National Gugak Center to have a leave of absence because I had been invited by the University of Hawaii’s music department. While staying in America for about a year, I could see for myself what kind of life a traditional Korean music artist could lead in a foreign country.”

After returning to Korea to resume her work at the National Gugak Center, her mind wavered even more. That is when she had performed at the Contemporary Gugak Orchestra for over 10 years. As her understanding of haegeum started to deepen, she became surer about what road she wanted to take. She once again submitted an application for a leave of absence to the National Gugak Center, believing that it was possible that her application would be denied and she would be forced to quit the center, but luckily her leave of absence application was accepted. In 2015, she boarded an airplane to go to America once again. As a visiting scholar to UC Berkeley, she arrived in America with 10 haegeums. She believed that it would be important to give these instruments to participants at seminars to enable them to experience haegeum directly. She lent the instruments to composers for several months, allowing them to play haegeum and compose music, and even developed new ways to play the instrument by discussing with these composers. The process was interesting in ways that were different from playing already-composed scores passively. The students, composers, and players accepted the unfamiliar instrument and Ms. Lyuh, an unknown haegeum player from Korea, without prejudice. As the one-year period promised by UC Berkeley was about to expire, she decided to stay in America.

Ms. Sooyeon Lyuh disclosed her music plans by talking about an incident that changed her attitude toward life.

“The year before last year, about a month since I had arrived at UC Berkley, my mother visited me. While I was driving on the highway with my mother, my car was attacked by a gunner all of a sudden, and a bullet passed between me and my mother. Although she was not struck by the bullet head on, the bullet went through the car. I went back to Korea promptly and received two operations. Three months later, I returned to America. After this experience, my life has completely changed. Instead of rigorously planning and pioneering my life, I decided to acquiesce to the circumstances and do my best at each moment in life.”

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