

Dami Kim performs at the 2012 Joseph Joachim International Violin Competition Hanover, where she shared first prize



A NATION OF WINNERS

In recent years, string players from South Korea have made headlines as the winners of numerous international competitions. German violinist-composer **Viktoria Elisabeth Kaunzner** speaks to South Korean colleagues and draws on her own teaching experience in the country to examine the phenomenon

Followers of classical music competitions will surely have noticed the very great number of successful competitors from South Korea in the last few years. The undeniable technical prowess and – crucially – musical sophistication of these young and ambitious instrumentalists is quite phenomenal. Indeed, the evidence is more than anecdotal: the World Federation of International Music Competitions (WFIMC), which represents 122 contests in 40 countries, has observed a recent increase in South Korean candidates entering international events. ‘Many are already based in Europe or the USA for post-graduate study,’ says WFIMC secretary general Benjamin Woodroffe. ‘We held our 2014 General Assembly in Tongyeong where we discussed the rise in success and representation of South Koreans across all disciplines.’

Is this a coincidence or can the phenomenon be attributed to certain teaching methods and cultural practices specific to South Korea? In order to understand the situation today, it is useful to look at the origins of the country’s modern veneration of classical music and string playing.

Emeritus professor Joseph Kim of Seoul’s Hanyang University dates the country’s initial encounters with classical

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music to shortly after the Korean War (1950–3). ‘South Korea’s pioneering violin generation listened to music on the radio and copied it by ear,’ he says. ‘Slowly but steadily, classical music has become part of the country’s cultural life. Nowadays, outstanding foreign musicians are invited to perform and teach here. The best Korean violinists, many of whom become laureates of major competitions, are largely educated at European and American universities and are therefore influenced predominantly by the US rather than the Russian violin school. They follow in the tradition of Galamian, Flesch, Ysaÿe, Auer and Joachim.’ Violinist–conductor Jehi Bahk of the University of Suwon, in Hwaseong, adds: ‘Koreans idolise the success story of Kyung Wha Chung, who became the first violin star after the Korean War. The resulting “imitation effect” led to a boom in regimented, dedicated practice, and because their hero was female, classical music became a chiefly female business compared with male-dominated Europe.’

If Koreans are motivated by European musical traditions, they bring to these a number of traits from their own country in a potent blend particularly well suited to instrumental tuition. For Koreans the flow of learning is accelerated by *gibun* (a feeling of social harmony closely aligned to the concept of *nunchi*, the ability to listen to and gauge others’ moods). This is in direct contrast to the dialectic-based thinking of Europe, inspired by the Greek philosophers, in which two different points of view are discussed in order to establish truth through reasoned argument. Although Christianity is increasingly popular in South Korea, combined with Buddhist and shamanic influences, the country still identifies most deeply with Confucianism and its associated principles of benevolence, righteousness, etiquette and intelligence, or, from a social perspective, respect for one’s elders and for the law. ‘Confucian philosophy is opposed to the promotion of individual achievement, so historically Koreans remained modest and self-critical,’ says violinist and professor Dong-Suk Kang of Yonsei University, Seoul.

As such, student musicians are expected to respect their teachers and parents, and parents reciprocate this appreciation with ‘a high level of dedication and involvement in all aspects of the child’s development’, says Seoul National University violin professor and Korean Chamber Orchestra director Min Kim. In the West, violin teachers such as Dorothy DeLay and Ana Chumachenko have imitated the benevolent protection and support of the mother in their relationships with students – a method practised by Nam-Yun Kim, violin professor at the Korean National University of Arts, in Seoul, and known to many as the ‘Korean DeLay’, who sees her students ‘daily throughout the duration of a competition’. This relationship is played out for real by ‘tiger moms’, who videotape lessons and ambitiously review them with their child at home. Some parents of female instrumentalists are working to the agenda of acquiring suitable husbands for their daughters – for just as daughters of the well-to-do in Europe’s patriarchal bourgeoisie societies of the past practised the piano in preparation for becoming accomplished housewives, talented Korean daughters have a better chance of capturing the attention of a ‘good husband’.

But regardless of gender, throughout Korean society there exists a pleasure in hard work (eight hours of daily instrumental



‘KOREANS IDOLISE THE SUCCESS STORY OF KYUNG WHA CHUNG – THE FIRST VIOLIN STAR AFTER THE KOREAN WAR’ – JEHI BAHK, UNIVERSITY OF SUWON, HWASEONG

practice is the standard for those studying music seriously) coupled with the pressure to be successful – and, above all, to achieve the commonly held idea of ‘perfection’, a concept deeply in tune with competition wins. Testing is an important aspect of the education system, with exams taken at the end of every semester. ‘From an early age, students learn to perform under pressure and to become self-disciplined,’ says Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra concertmaster Wayne Lin. In fact, the work ethic throughout Korean society is so strong that the government recently enacted a law to cap ‘workweeks for many employees at 52 hours’, to combat instances of depression and anxiety, according to the *New York Times* (28 July 2018).

A commitment to the performing arts extends far beyond core musical studies to encompass health, nutrition, exercise and beauty. Koreans often bring their own protein-rich food to competitions as it’s thought that Western food, with its higher fat and sugar content, contributes to tiredness. A full night’s sleep is considered paramount. Koreans train their intuitive instincts in martial arts like taekwon do, maintaining physical and mental strength to combat stress and channel nervous >

energy effectively. The traditional Korean spa (*jjimjilbang*) helps players maintain a youthful glow, whereas investing in plastic surgery to attain the ideal beauty of Hollywood stars is common practice for those wanting to impress juries who listen with their eyes as well as their ears.

The flip side of this emphasis on perfection, Bahk believes, is that ‘many Korean students do not aim for depth of feeling in their performances, instead prizing surface flawlessness’. He continues: ‘A truly mature and conscious interpretation can only rise from life experience, yet most competitions set age limits that are far too young. Often it’s the person who is beyond criticism technically but who lacks interpretative insight who wins the top prize. It is therefore unsurprising that aspiring Korean performers sometimes make such playing their goal.’

There is little doubt, however, that a great majority of Korean performers do successfully combine both technical assuredness and musical sincerity. Nam-Yun Kim and her junior colleague Hyuna Kim both believe that parental involvement must be combined with commitment from both student and teacher for success in competitions and to build a musical career. ‘Without this

tripod of support it is very difficult for the student to succeed,’ Nam-Yun Kim explains.

In fact, Korea’s hierarchic society is particularly well equipped to support this team structure. Organisation around competitions, including everything from booking flights to choosing concert clothes, scheduling extra lessons and investing in top instruments, is deemed as important as the student’s regular lessons, their hard work and practice. ‘The Korean mentality is motivated by striving and improving,’ observes Lin. By contrast, the main focus in Europe tends to be more about the end result, so that those who offer support may fade into the background.

Just as most Korean students respect their parents, so too do they respect their teachers – sometimes to the detriment of critical thinking. ‘Many Korean students depend on their teachers and therefore prefer to obey their instructions without question,’ says Seoul National University violin professor Ju-Young Baek. All over the world, not just in South Korea, there are teachers who, like autocratic leaders, believe that enthusiastic students are happiest and learn fastest through submission to a loving authority – but there is potential here for an abuse of power. Moritz Eggert, composition professor at Munich’s University of Music and Performing Arts, says: ‘Students rarely criticise a professor who has achieved some “royal”-like power, as it might influence their degree.’

Nevertheless, this attitude is changing, according to Kang. ‘Students who once lacked individuality in comparison with their more liberated counterparts from the West have begun to question what they are told as the world has become more globalised and integrated,’ he says. ‘In the past, Korea was significantly different from the US, where positivity and the dream of self-fulfilment dominate. But Korean society is evolving and young people are now less inhibited in thought and attitude.’ >

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‘KOREAN SOCIETY IS EVOLVING AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOW LESS INHIBITED IN THOUGHT AND ATTITUDE’ - DONG-SUK KANG, YONSEI UNIVERSITY, SEOUL



At the 2014 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, five of the six finalists were from South Korea



Dong-Hyun Kim, winner of the 2018 Seoul International Music Competition



Viktoria Kaunzner with her Kangnam University students

Teachers such as Baek have welcomed the new way of thinking as a positive thing and encourage creative ideas in lessons. 'Great artists arrive at their fingerings and bowings from years of experience, so I urge students to experiment and discover these for themselves rather than copying from YouTube,' she says, by way of example. Digital dialogue between students and teachers is also encouraged, through online chat rooms. Professor Kyung-Sun Lee of Seoul National University asks students to upload performances of scales and pieces for discussion. And she and her SNU colleague Kang Dschangu, as well as Nam-Yun Kim and Joseph Kim at their respective institutions, have also established chamber orchestras with their students in order to encourage the development of personal accountability within group settings.

I myself make sure that instrumental lessons are supplemented with classes in music theory, analysis, the science of sound colours, acoustics, stylistics and rhetorical figures, alongside mental training and developing an understanding of composers' musical language. Through these classes my students begin to internalise the fundamentals necessary to develop a sophisticated chamber sensibility in their playing – a goal shared by Seoul National University viola professor Eun-Sik Choi, who makes sure students are familiar with orchestral parts when playing their concertos, rather than focusing solely on the solo line.

Creative ideas in performance are combined with the characteristics of the Korean language to wonderful effect. Koreans try not to say 'no' and avoid harsh and abrasive tones; instead, they prefer to keep their language positive and beautiful. Wayne Lin, who is Chinese-American, says, 'Korean consonants are less harsh-sounding than in other languages, with an emphasis on sound quality and cleanliness.' To my ears, the Korean language, with its soft syllabic consonants, unfolds with mesmerising beauty, and its pronunciation might very well affect Korean artists' way of articulating classical pieces.

Beauty of language goes hand in hand with a natural love of and respect for singing which is deeply ingrained in Korean culture. All over South Korea can be found *noraebang* – karaoke-style 'singing rooms'; and Korean singers inject their performances with an acute sense of detail, colour and phrasing. Professor Tong-Hyeon Kim from the Korean National University of Arts, builds on this national pastime 'by instructing my young students to focus on singing notes using solmisation'. The Little Star Music Academy, based in Seoul, which sets out systematically to produce prodigies, is equally diligent about providing strong

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aural training within its Suzuki framework: 'Through classes the academy's students begin to internalise the fundamentals necessary to produce characterful and "singing" performances,' says violin teacher Nam-Suk Jeon.

Of course, at the heart of Korean life is the essential sadness of a people divided – into a communist north and a capitalist south. Coming as I do from formerly divided Germany, I well understand the psyche of a country split in two. In Korea the birds 'cry' rather than 'sing' – and art's origin is always derived from suffering. I have listened to Korean music such as *p'ansori* (traditional song for solo voice and drum, a kind of one-person opera) and been so touched that I nearly cried. This melancholy exists throughout a country that is on the surface modern and outward looking – the Samsung and K-pop nation – and to my mind continues to influence art and performance in all areas.

This capacity for deep emotion is combined with a colourful understanding of Western classical music, which Koreans often see through metaphor and fantasy. Once I asked a student what Hindemith might have envisioned during a forte passage in his Violin Sonata in C major. The answer was, 'an elephant fighting against a dragon'. I wished Hindemith could have been there to hear his musical language described 'Korean style' – filled with oriental mythology, where dragons symbolically represent power.

There is so much richness and depth in Korean cultural life and it stands to reason that this is helping to inform the country's tradition of string playing. These are a people of imaginative and emotional sophistication, who speak a language as logically structured as Latin which prioritises beauty of phrasing, and who value a collaborative approach to learning. When examining the current explosion in young talent there is perhaps a case to be made for old and new ways coming together in just the right way at the right time. Young Korean students continue to respect their teachers and parents and to work hard at all aspects of musical learning; they value success and strive for perfection; but in recent years those same young people have developed a new sense of creativity and self-determination. As such, they are making a significant impact on the classical world stage – and are here to stay. ●



Kaunzner and Nam-Yun Kim at the Korean National University of Arts