

Books



Korean writer and *gayageum* player Kim Hee-sun, in Sunyodo Park, Seoul, wearing a traditional *hanbok* dress

LEE JIN-HWAN

Contemporary Kayagŭm Music in Korea: Tradition, Modernity and Identity

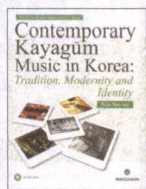
Kim Hee-sun

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★★★★★

Enlightening prose on Korea's ancient instrument



The best-loved of Korea's traditional instruments is the 12-stringed long zither, the *gayageum* (also spelt *kayagŭm*). With a history dating back to maybe the second century, the instrument, sometimes modified and developed, sometimes in its time-honoured ancient form, is also a central instrument in the composition and creation of new music – it is this latter that Kim's book zooms in on.

Many will have heard the instrument and some of the repertoire, and so this book, supplemented by an excellent CD (the author is the performer on several tracks), gives us the needed insight. On the whole, this is easily accessible, well illustrated (with some rare photographs) and sensibly constructed, though it is based on a PhD, so there are occasional overly erudite academic paragraphs. At the core, very thorough historical and contextual sections precede

two chapters foregrounding two great composers: Hwang Byungki (see feature on p36) and Yi Sung-Chun (1936-2003). While Hwang gets a potted survey of life and works, Yi is offered more detailed treatment, with the author singling out key compositions for analysis. These two are the composers who are most frequently performed abroad, but many other composers also get brief mention. With appendices listing key works and key concerts held over the last five decades, a very comprehensive picture of the what and why surrounding the *gayageum* in contemporary national identity is built. The emergence of *gayageum* ensembles and orchestras, and the lively debate they have spawned over what counts as 'traditional' or 'Korean', underpins the penultimate chapter. This is to my mind the most interesting part of the book: Kim tells us why such ensembles routinely play Beatles' songs or Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (but sensibly avoids giving any of this repertoire on the CD) and explores how they signify modernity while appealing to the youth of Korea.

This is certainly an important addition to written resources on Korean music. My only minor niggle is that some of the English has not been adequately proof-read. Available from www.minsokwon.com

Keith Howard ●