

Courting Tradition

Graham Reid meets the master upholding South Korea's rich musical heritage

PHOTOS KUK SOOYONG

In Seoul, the vibrant capital of South Korea, the old and new, the raw and polished, frequently rub together in odd juxtapositions. So a butcher's shop with pig trotters on the wet floor is perhaps to be expected in the suburban street where one of the country's most famous musicians lives.

At 62, Hwang Byungki is the leading player of the *gayageum* – Korea's special plucked zither. As a young man, he learned this wonderfully evocative instrument and almost single-handedly rescued Korean court music and folk songs from being lost after the battering his country took during the long Japanese colonial period, World War II and finally the Korean War of the early 50s. Which might make you think the home of this living legend would be in one of Seoul's more swanky suburbs.

Of course, inside the gates of Hwang's home the atmosphere is very different to the street. Upstairs he enjoys a commanding view across low-rise apartments to the high-rise offices of modern Seoul. Here is a happy clutter of books and paperwork, and shopping bags of CDs (Brazilian guitarist Laurindo Almeida and Western classical albums among them); piled-up texts and manuscripts spill across the massive, low table in the centre of the room. In a side room a dozen *gayageum* stand along the walls.

The Korean *gayageum* – sometimes spelled *kayagum* – is a wooden instrument almost two metres long. It has at least 12 strings (sometimes as many as 21), moveable bridges on the soundboard, and the strings are plucked by the right hand while the left depresses them to create microtones, bends of notes or gentle glides.

Tradition says the *gayageum* evolved from the Chinese *zheng* in the sixth century, but it is unique in North Asia, a point the professor is quick to make. "The *gayageum* is of the zither family," Hwang says as he sits on the floor with one of the instruments resting over his crossed legs. "But it has its own special characteristics

which make it different to the Japanese *koto* or Chinese instruments in the same family. The *koto* is played on the floor and the Chinese instruments are on a table, so they are outside the body of the musician. The *gayageum* is played with the fingernails and we hold it close to the body so it becomes part of the player's flesh. In many ways the *gayageum* is the core of all Oriental string instruments. But, of course, Korean music is the most unknown music in the world," he laughs.

Hwang – of sprightly appearance and dry wit – is unfortunately correct and his observation comes from long experience. Despite touring internationally, he still almost invariably plays to predominantly Korean audiences, even at Carnegie Hall or in Paris. The reason that Korean traditional music is largely unknown outside the country is because the West first experienced Eastern music through its colonial contacts: Britain heard *sitar* music through its empire in the Indian subcontinent; *gamelan* music from Indonesia made its way to Europe through Dutch colonists of the region; Chinese music seeped out through the cultural hotbed of Shanghai and the French discovered the music of Vietnam through their occupation of Indochina. But Korean music got no further than Japan, its colonial occupier: "And it is one of the most difficult musics for Western people. Korean *gayageum* music doesn't use harmony – and there is very little 'crossover music,' as people call it, using Korean instruments."

Whereas Ravi Shankar could take *sitar* music to Western audiences through collaborations with Yehudi Menuhin, Philip Glass and others, *gayageum* music remains on the margins of Western awareness. This is a pity because the restful, earthy tone of the instrument, the dramatic ripple of fingers across the strings, and the stately sound of Korean court music melodies can be quite beguiling. When the heart and ears are open, very little is lost in translation. The fusion-*gugak* movement of the mid-80s brought traditional instruments like the *gayageum* and *changgo* (hourglass drum) together with electric bass, guitar and keyboards – but it is often bland and jazzy saxophone solos or MOR rock guitar and can't disguise the fact that most fusion-*gugak* sounds emotionally empty – not an accusation you could aim at Hwang's intense music. In 1951, when in his late teens and the Korean War was still raging across the peninsula, Hwang began studying *gayageum* in Busan (also written as Pusan). With the encouragement of some master

musicians, he started researching Korean traditional royal court and folk styles. Not an easy undertaking: the Western classical tradition had arrived in the late 19th century and Korean music was no longer taught in elementary schools. Traditional music was associated with ruralism, poverty and the past, so Hwang encountered indifference from audiences more keen to hear Western classical music which was associated with sophistication, modernity and knowledge. "I tried to meet some of the royal court musicians, who were by then in their 50s, and

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Hwang Byungki demonstrates his gayageum playing



found out as much from them as I could, and also found the music they could pass on. The court music was for upper class people and some was written down, but the folk tradition was purely oral. I had to learn it by ear from people who still played it.” At the time Hwang started his studies, the Korean National Assembly passed a bill establishing national music institutions to preserve the traditions of Korean music, and in 1959 the Seoul National University founded a college of music. Hwang’s career ran parallel with these developments: he became a performer, archivist and teacher, wrote music for films and television in the early 60s, toured internationally and, when he was only 26, rather daringly began to compose for gayageum. “In former times there was no concept of a composer or composition. Gayageum music was not ‘owned’ by anyone, so no one put their name to a composition. I am the first who composed for the gayageum by using written manuscripts and Western notation. My colleagues were surprised and probably a little embarrassed,” he notes. His first composition, *Forest*, created a new genre of Korean music, *ch’angjak kukak* or ‘newly-composed Korean traditional music.’ Later he experimented with changes in tuning and used unconventional playing techniques. Today his once-controversial works are part of the standard repertoire for gayageum students. Hwang is considered a living treasure in his homeland although – despite touring internationally, being a visiting lecturer at the University of Washington in 1965 and visiting professor of Korean music at Harvard in 1986 – he and Korean music remain unknown by most Westerners. Yet Hwang is an amusing and articulate advocate for this meditative, restful and often sublime music.

Korean gayageum music may not be familiar in the way Japanese koto, Indian *raga* or Javanese gamelan music have become, but Hwang is an acclaimed master – and a local hero to gayageum makers. “When I began to learn gayageum in 1950,” he says, his eyes glittering as he anticipates his punchline, “there were only about a dozen gayageum sold in a year. There are 10,000 nowadays.” And, at that, professor Hwang Byungki allows himself a very broad smile. ●

REVIEW Hwang Byungki’s album *The Best of Korean Gayageum* is reviewed in the Asia section this issue

CD ‘*Chahyangije 2 (A Poem On The Fragrance Of Tea)*’ is featured on the covermount CD

