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06-12-2008 17:45



Making Music and Sustaining Tradition

By Dan Margolies

Music may not make the world go round, but it certainly does connect people and cultures with an immediacy and sense of fun that few other things do. Though it may sound like a cliché from a song, it is through music-making that true international understanding can be established. Perhaps the best analogy of the value of music in linking people and cultures is to sharing a good meal with friends and family, it is an event to be cherished and celebrated as often as possible.

In this globalized age when popular and commercialized music saturates and homogenizes so many experiences, it is always compelling to find how traditional music can be preserved and transferred for each new generation. Music must be kept vibrant and diverse along with language, distinctive food, and the natural environment so it can be bequeathed to the next generation. Maintaining unique and rich national folk musical traditions in the era of modern globalization is an essential task if cultural diversity is to be safeguarded as well as shared and appreciated.

Korea is an ideal place to explore how music plays a unique role in global cultures in part because it has such a deservedly proud tradition and a strongly developed sense of the importance and vitality of traditional music making. The decision to showcase and promote traditional musical culture precisely at the moment that Korea stands as one of the principal economies in the global system is both instructive and impressive.

Though no stranger to the headlong rush to modernity, Korea is a model of a country that is both actively preserving and, more importantly, promoting its traditional music culture to foreign audiences and participants. The important political decisions have been made to highlight and promote traditional culture, its values, and its techniques. This effort is an encouraging and welcome sign of Korea's ongoing contribution to the world cultural heritage.

Korea's emphasis on preserving national traditions is immediately apparent upon visiting the Seoul Arts Center, which is an expansive complex of buildings anchored on each end by two strikingly beautiful but notably separate facilities for culture. One, shaped like a traditional Korean hat, enshrines the globally exported Western classical tradition (the expected "high" culture) and the other is the truly remarkable National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts (NCKTPA), which makes a vital claim for elevating folk culture to the status as high culture. It is built to maintain and promote the unique musical, dance, and folk cultural traditions of Korea and, importantly, to make them accessible not just to Koreans but to foreigners. The Center features a wide array of concerts, including a weekly survey of musical styles every Saturday evening.

This musical center has no direct counterpart in the United States. While high culture is funded and celebrated in innumerable public institutions, traditional music has not been granted the same position or funded opportunities. And it is not directly taught to foreigners as an introduction to the national heritage. The United States would do well to follow Korea's example.

On Saturday I will join dozens of other expatriates in a remarkable concert performance of Korean traditional music held at the NCKTPA. This "completion presentation" marks the end of the spring session of low-cost instruction especially for foreigners in some of the core Korean instruments like janggu, beginning and intermediate gayageum, danso, and samulnori. This performance of each class does more than highlight newly learned techniques on these instruments. It serves as a way for all of the participants to experience the complexity and beauty of Korean music in the best way possible: making music themselves.

I have taken the two gayageum classes, and at the center I have met other people from Canada, Brazil, South Africa, Japan and the United States. The concept of the lessons is to promote traditional Korean music, of course, but in fascinating and important ways they are also creating the kind of transnational connections that are really only accessible to people through music making.

Inviting expatriates to engage in Korean music making is an important step in both preserving and globalizing Korean cultural traditions. Certainly language study is the only other means of producing such instantaneous connections between people, though I think most would argue that music making is a lot more fun than verb

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These classes have triggered what is sure to be a lifelong commitment in me and my classmates to learning the complexities and subtleties of playing Korean traditional music. My only complaint is that I will not be in Seoul in the fall to resume the classes. Looks like I will have to find a gayageum teacher in the United States so I can continue to keep this marvelous tradition alive in the best way I can by playing it.



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The writer is Batten Associate Professor of History at Virginia Wesleyan College in Norfolk, Virginia, USA, and is currently Fulbright Senior Scholar/Lecturer in the History Department at Sogang University. He can be reached at dmargolies@vwc.edu.

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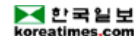
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