

**CMA Performing Arts Series:  
gayageum virtuoso Ji Aeri (Nov. 5)**

by Nicholas Stevens



Kyoungtack Hong's painting *Library-Mt. Everest* (2014) depicts exactly what its title suggests: a few bookshelf cubes and decorative objects cluster around the edge of the canvas, with a photorealistic image of Mount Everest in sunlit glory at the center. The work plays with the conventions of Korean *chaekgeori*, a kind of 19th-century painted screen on which

artists depicted the contents of a scholar's study. The musical experiences offered by Ji Aeri, a virtuoso of the gayageum — a zither-like instrument — and percussionist Kim Woongsik at a recent concert involved a process not unlike that of taking in Hong's painting: as one moves from the outer portions of a work toward its heart, simplicity yields to sublimity.

Both Hong's and Ji's work appeared in the Cleveland Museum of Art recently, under the auspices of the exhibition "Chaekgeori: Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens." November 5 was both the final day to see the painted screens and the date of Ji's performance in Gartner Auditorium. The gayageum, traditionally outfitted with twelve strings, exists in a traditional folk version and a number of modernized concert forms. Ji played three separate instruments at CMA, bringing modern twelve- and seventeen-string iterations onstage for the first half and switching to a lower-tech twelve-string for the second.

Ji and Kim, flawlessly coordinated even as Ji wove complex melodic patterns, opened with three works by the famous gayageum player and composer Hwang Byungki, demonstrating that the lineage of Korean traditional music embraces both the centuries-old and the contemporary. A student of Hwang, Ji brought precision and passion to his compositions.

*Chimhyangmu* (“Dance of the Perfume of Aloes,” 1974) introduced the basic pattern to which many of the pieces on the program would adhere: a slow introductory portion led by incremental accumulations of speed to a more driving, dancelike finale. Each piece, however, offered its own unique textures and charms. *Chimhyangmu* included two beautiful sections marked by sweeping motions across the twelve strings, along with a roll on low strings and *janggu* drum that grew from a whisper to a roar. Downward bends in pitch interrupted the restless activity of *Sound of the Night* (1985), and *Chun Seoul* (“Spring Snow,” 1991) led listeners through a stately, graceful melody before transitioning into a propulsive groove.

The program concluded with a performance of a *Gayageum Sanjo*, a kind of virtuoso showpiece that gives the performer opportunities to improvise within strict, time-honored conventions. Hwang revived the tradition decades ago, and Ji has become a master of the form. Though past performances have stretched to 70 minutes, her *Sanjo* for Cleveland spanned only about 20. In addition to playing the *janggu*, Kim issued several *chiumsae* — brief exclamations, conventional in the genre and meant to both express and elicit excitement. His and Ji’s playing had provided plenty of that already, and by the end of the *Sanjo*, the duo had more than delivered on the promise, issued by CMA Director of Performing Arts Thomas Welsh at the beginning of the concert, that those in attendance would receive a rare gift.

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