

Lunchtime with Soh-Hyun Park Altino at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Sept. 29)

by Kevin McLaughlin



It's certainly not something you hear every day: a concert-lecture of Korean traditional music played on the modern violin. Can this kind of thing work? Should it?

It turns out the answer to both questions is absolutely, yes. Born and raised in Korea, and a violin graduate of Peabody Institute and the Cleveland Institute of Music, Soh-Hyun Park Altino was the perfect guide and persuader during her concert at the Cleveland Museum of Art on Friday

afternoon, September 29.

In a fascinating 30-minute slide- and video- presentation before the performance, Altino elucidated sanjo, the art of transmitting Korean spoken language and emotion, called *p'ansori*, through music — via the zither-like instrument called *ajaeng*. She herself was first introduced to sanjo by her composer grandfather's piece *Sanjo for Violin and Piano* (1955). (We got to see a sample page in one of her slides.) If sanjo could be transcribed by her grandfather, she thought, why couldn't she learn to perform it? How hard could it be?

As it turned out, very hard. A single sanjo work contains several connected movements lasting thirty minutes or more. Every detail is learned by rote, including melodic content, ornament, inflection, and form. And like Western music, it needs to be precisely retransmitted with every performance — though interestingly (maybe unfairly), the accompanying drum part is always improvised. It required the greater part of her study, she said, to simply get her bowing right — evidently her Western technique was “too smooth.”

After the talk she and Jeong Junho, a virtuoso of the Korean drum called *jangu*, sat

down to play. According to practice, the violin began with a string of expressive and increasingly dramatic phrases. This particular sanjo (composed by her teacher, Kim Ilgu) was on the somber side. A predetermined scale (mode), and source of somberness, began to present itself with increasing decoration. Non-modal notes (“blue notes”?) occasionally surfaced, but, like unwelcome guests, were quickly banished. The four lengthy movements, performed without pause, increased in speed and intensity and let off only at the very end, giving an impression of understandable exhaustion.

Having at last completed all requirements, the performers, weak but happy, put down their instruments, stood up, and smiled. The audience beamed right back and roared their approval.

In response to audience questions afterward, Altino said she thinks her endeavor of translating sanjo to the modern violin is a unique one. She isn’t aware of any other violinists doing what she does.

“I am trying to use the violin as though it were a traditional Korean instrument. Many have told me that they were able to appreciate the musical content of sanjo...[undistracted] by the unfamiliar timbre of the ajaeng or other traditional Korean instruments.”

The enthusiastic response on Friday might well confirm her achievement.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 5, 2023.

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