

Trio Seoul: warmth and thoughtfulness at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Jan. 14)

by Stephanie Manning



Despite the frigid Wednesday weather dumping snow outside the Cleveland Museum of Art, January 14 almost felt like a pleasant spring day inside Gartner Auditorium. That phenomenon had nothing to do with temperature and everything to do with Trio Seoul, whose warm camaraderie and excellent musicianship brightened the venue considerably.

Pianist Kyu Yeon Kim, cellist Brannon Cho, and violinist Jinjoo Cho — whose ENCORE

Chamber Music Institute co-presented the event — started things off with their sunniest piece, Joseph Haydn's Piano Trio No. 39 in G. The musicians kept the affect light and flowing, centered on the tasteful piano lines from Kim.

The work's common subtitle, "Gypsy," springs from the third-movement Rondo, here played with a tumbling, giddy energy — like a gaggle of schoolchildren just released on summer vacation.

The title of Juri Seo's *July Mountain* initially suggested another summer atmosphere, but this intriguing work proved more nuanced than that first impression. Jinjoo Cho told the audience about the Trio's past collaborations with the "quirky, eccentric" Seo before elaborating on this piece in particular, which the Korean-American composer wrote around the same time as the [2024 Jeju Air disaster](#).

Moments of heaviness and hopefulness weave together in this piece in a very captivating way, mirroring the tangled and sometimes contrasting stages of grief. "Life is full of lightness and darkness," Jinjoo Cho explained. Kim's pounding piano strikes in the first movement eventually eased off until the instrument became a voice of tranquility, hovering over Jinjoo and Brannon Cho's hushed strings.

The brief second movement conjured a melancholic beauty before the Korean folk song influence came to the fore in the third. Here, the players returned to more straightforward

harmonies, but never without that shadow of grief. The breathlessly quiet sustained string notes completed a sort of full-circle moment from the opening.

Franz Liszt's *Tristia* (After *Vallée d'Obermann*) continued this dark and thoughtful mood, especially thanks to Brannon Cho, whose dark tone and lowest notes resonated throughout the entire auditorium. Ultimately, this piece didn't have much to add emotionally to the program that hadn't already been explored in the Seo. But when the notes began to pick up speed, all three players dug into the music, the strands from Jinjoo Cho's updo migrating toward her face from the exertion.

The first movement of Maurice Ravel's Piano Trio quickly established a characteristically lush mood, equal parts tender and determined. The second movement, "Pantoum," finally brought some levity back into the evening.

Like in the Liszt, the trio's middle section felt less strongly connected to the rest of the program. Still, Jinjoo Cho and Brannon Cho had a lovely duet moment together in the third movement before the energy of the finale brought listeners back to the excitement of the opening. Before venturing back out into the blustery cold, we would need all the warmth we could get.

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