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Jin Hi Kim and Gerry Hemingway: A different sensitivity



Jin Hi Kim - Gerry Hemingway

When Korean komungo player Jin Hi Kim looked for a partner trained in the Western style of music to collaborate with, she took her time, just like she does with her music.

Music created by playing komungo, a fourth century traditional Korean zither, differs greatly from rigidly timed music originating from the Western musical tradition, Kim explained. Her instrument, initially only used by male Confucius scholars to meditate, allows for a more relaxed flow of rhythm, compared to Western music. A different sensitivity in approaching music is thus required, she added.

Yet she found it in acclaimed drummer Gerry Hemingway. The two have been collaborating since 2003, performing Kim's vision of cross-cultural music compositions for her komungo/electronic komungo solo works.

New York-based Kim, currently a composer in residence with the New Haven Symphony Orchestra, and Hemingway, now based in Switzerland, are currently visiting Jakarta for the Salihara Festival.

Kim is slated to perform her solo recital "Digital Buddha" accompanied by Hemingway at the theater tonight.

The two Guggenheim fellowship recipients — Hemingway in 2000 and Kim this year — talked with The Jakarta Post on Tuesday about their collaboration.

The two were in tune with each other's vision of music, adding and commenting on each other's thoughts on music.

"I like how he [Hemingway] describes his drumming as painting the sound. I like that kind of sensitivity because in Western musical tradition, time is always measured like this," Kim said while mimicking tempo gestures with her hand. "But in Asian music, the flow of music is more relaxed".

“It’s breath oriented,” Hemingway added.

A New Haven, Connecticut native, Hemingway said he had immersed himself in world music from a very young age. He had “digested a fair amount of traditional komungo” before working with Kim. “But I didn’t have any direct experience until I worked with Jin,” he said. “Intuitively, I understood something about this music that made sense to me. I can’t really explain why. But it did,” he said.

Listening to Kim’s komungo playing, with the strange twanging sounds of the silk strings plucked by her bamboo stick, will stir up a deep seated poignant inner calm, which differs from the expressive emotions of joy, sadness or anger typical of Western music. The music is deeply rooted in Korean shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

“It’s inner meditation. Western music is more expressive. But Asian music is muted. There some kind of energy coming out of the inside,” she said.

Hemingway added: “It implies more than it states”.

Kim and Hemingway’s 70-minute performance at Salihara will be a multimedia collaboration. Kim will play her world’s only electronic komungo, which she co-engineered. Using a MAX/MSP technology, Kim’s komungo’s sound will be processed to a computer triggered by a foot pedal.

Kim explained her and Hemingway would improvise as they listened to and interacted with each other.

“This music in particular is a lot about listening. Listening happens between us [on stage]. It has a lot to do with how well we hear and participate with each other. The audience is part of the music as a witness.

They experience being in the room where the stuff was created. As we make the music, they process what’s happening,” Hemingway said.

“A listener need only open his ears and see what will happen,” he added.

For Kim, being on the stage is a gorgeous moment as her mind will be completely attuned to the instrument. Being in a completely protected space enables her mind to be focused on creating music.

“That’s completely one of the joys of life. Because daily life is not like that,” she said.

Kim, who introduced the komungo to the Western contemporary music scene, said her goal was to bring Western and Eastern music on an equal footing.

The 53-year-old grew up in Korea, studying the komungo at a time where Western music was revered as superior to traditional Korean music. The situation is better now, she noted, but during her time, traditional music was treated as second class. “So then, you can imagine. I was a teenager walking around with my komungo, and people would look down on me because it wasn’t a violin.”

When she graduated from Seoul National University in Korean traditional music, she found she had nowhere to go in Korea. Given she was a young woman playing a traditional instrument reserved for males in an environment where seniority was favored, she set out for America to learn composition and Western music, in her early 20s.

Composer-philosopher John Cage, who told her every sound was music, had a huge influence on her. “That opened my mind,” Kim said, adding that Cage’s words helped her to become surer of her music.