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Notes on fusion

Korean musician Yu Kyung-hwa speaks about her musical journey across cultures



EXPERIMENTING WITH GENRES Yu Kyung-hwa

Yu Kyung-hwa's mother wanted her to learn dance, and enrolled her in classes at the age of four. "So that I could marry into a wealthy family; and for that, traditional Korean music, which is what I wanted to study, just wouldn't help," the musician winks, clearly delighted at having thwarted the plan.

Now, Yu is one of the leading musicians of Korea, known for her work with traditional instruments, as well the music of shamanistic rites and rituals.

"There are primarily two kinds of music in Korea — one intended for the royals, and one for the public. The music of the kings has a more controlled rhythm, and is not meant to convey joys or sorrows. For the people, you must express as much as possible, all that you can." She began to create a music that blended the two opposing forms, becoming one of the first musicians to do so. Yu has also been composing for the Cheolhyeongeum, the iron-stringed zither, a traditional instrument for which very little music was originally written.

But what of Indian music makes it to Korea? "The ragas," she says. "The music of legends such as Ravishankar."

Yu's life and work is deeply rooted in the traditions of shamanism. "I stopped my course mid-way in college, and left to explore the music of the shamans," she smiles. Now, that thesis is part of the curricula at Seoul National University.

Yu Kyung-hwa, who was in the city for two weeks, arrived as part of a residency programme at Brhadhvani, by the InKo Centre in association with the Korea Arts Management Service and the Ministry for Culture, Sport and Tourism. It was seen as a way to go beyond merely representing the music from different cultures, and move towards collaboration.

But, Yu asserts, it was also the difficulties she faced in her own music that brought her here. "So I came looking for answers." And, has she found them? "Not all of it; but you know what? I've travelled all over the world, experimented with everything from free jazz to modern German music. This is the first time I felt like I was getting somewhere."

And it hasn't come from just the melodies. "All of the philosophy in your music, all of its history. The stories that musicians shared with me, about their journey through music. About the astonishing number of art forms that blend and merge here."

She remembers that her beginnings weren't easy. She had applied to the School of Korean Traditional Arts without telling a soul, and made it through to the auditions. She was determined to go, nary support from home. "And now my daughter is busy attending tuition after tuition, spending glorious amounts of money, because she wants to get into the same college. And I tell her — I did it on my own!"

CHITHIRA VIJAYKUMAR