

# Hwang Byung-ki

Song Hye-jin

Music critic and researcher at the Korean Traditional Performing Arts Center

**H**WANG BYUNG-KI is recognized as one of the leading performers and composers of music for the *kayagŭm* (12-stringed zither) in Korea today.

This recognition comes not only for his musical skill and devotion to preserving and transmitting the *sanjo* (folk instrumental improvised solo) tradition, which took firm root in the latter part of the Chosŏn period, but also for his efforts to develop a modern music idiom rooted in tradition, a task he has devoted himself to since an early age. In this respect, one could say Hwang is one of the few Korean composers to successfully bridge the gap between tradition and creation.

Hwang's efforts to preserve tradition while creating new music, without upsetting the balance between the new and the old, was by no means an easy task. However, unlike other composers who chose to break sharply with tradition, Hwang was able to overcome and successfully meet this challenge by grounding himself in tradition first and branching out from there.

From the very start his compositions for *kayagŭm* were a great success and soon became an integral part of the standard repertoire for *kayagŭm* performers throughout Korea. His compositions embodied the heart and soul of tradition, and at the same time, were creative works that were novel in a modern sense. As such, they have become "new classics" that have won wide recognition both at home and abroad.

*The Forest*, composed in the 1960s, was one of



*Hwang Byung-ki transmits the sensibilities of the Korean people to modern audiences through his 12-stringed kayagŭm.*

the first works to be written in a modern idiom for the *kayagŭm*. Other compositions, such as *Chim-byang-mu* (Dance in the Fragrance of Aloes) and *The Silk Road*, written in the 1970s, recreate the 1,000-year-old beauty of the Silla period through

mystical melodies. *The Sound of Night*, created in the 1980s, portrays the calligraphic world of the Chosŏn period. These works, together with *Spring Snow* (1991), created especially for the newly-devised 17-string *kayagŭm*, reveal Hwang's extraordinary talent for composition.

Hwang's compositions have not only won high praise from music critics and professional performers; they are also well-known and loved by the general public. He is acclaimed in the mass media and now his fame has spread overseas with performances at a broad spectrum of festivals and art stages around the world, revealing the ethereal beauty of his works to an international audience. Statistics show that of all newly-composed works for *kayagŭm*, Hwang's are performed most often. And his recordings are the biggest sellers.

Hwang's life was quite ordinary before he became a professional musician. Hwang was born in Seoul in 1936, but the Korean War (1950-53) forced his family to take refuge in the southern port city of Pusan. There, by chance, he heard the *kayagŭm* for the first time and was charmed. It was an incident that would eventually set him apart from everyone else and launch him on his career in Korean music.

In 1951, Hwang began to study *chŏngak* (court music) under the tutelage of Kim Yong-yun at the National Classical Music Institute (NCMI) (now the Korean Traditional Performing Arts Center (KT-PAC)). He also took lessons in *minsokak* (folk music) under the great *sanjo* masters Kim Yun-dŏk

## Bringing Classical Music to Modern Audiences

and Shim Sang-gŏn.

In 1954, when Hwang was a third-year high school student, he won first prize in the instrumental division of the national traditional music contest. He won the same honors again when he was a law student at Seoul National University (SNU). It was then that Hwang first began to attract widespread attention. In those days, traditional music was usually handed down from father to son, so for a student of SNU, the most prestigious college in the country, to capture first prize in the contest was quite a revelation. It eventually led to his appointment as lecturer at the newly-established traditional music department of the SNU College of Music and also at the NCML.

The 1960s brought a monumental change in Hwang's life. In 1961, Chŏng Hoe-ŏp wrote the first *Theme and Variations for Kayagŭm and Orchestra* and Hwang was chosen as soloist for the premiere. The next year Hwang produced his first composition, *By a Chrysanthemum*, which was followed by *The Forest* acclaimed as one of the finest masterpieces of *kayagŭm* music. Since that time he has been known as a composer of "new, real classics in the traditional idiom."

In 1965 he was invited to the "20th Century Festival of Music" sponsored by the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii. There his works were acclaimed by critics as a "mental antidote for moderns," and praised for their successful modernization of traditional music. At home he was cited by the then Ministry of Culture and Information for his success at the festival and his efforts to introduce Korean music to the

American people through lectures and performances at universities.

Despite his prominence as a musician, for all practical purposes Hwang had to subordinate music to his work as a businessman. But in 1974, he left the business world for good and became a full-fledged artist when he was appointed professor of the traditional music department at Ewha Wom-

an's University. Through this work, Hwang revealed a new form of Korean music by employing new

forms of the Three Kingdoms period to the musical traditions of the Chosŏn period. The work is inspired by Buddhist art and the sacred music of the Silla Period in which worldly beauty is sublimated into a religious ecstasy that is both sensuous and mystical."

Through this work, Hwang revealed a new form of Korean music by employing new *kayagŭm* and accompanying *changgo* (hourglass-shaped drum) techniques, resulting in a multiplicity of sounds that evoke an atmosphere of fantasy and exoticism. With pieces such as *The Silk Road*, (1975) and *The Haunted Tree* (1979), Hwang's works took firm root as Korea's new classics.

The 1980s and 1990s saw Hwang playing a major role in traditional music by becoming a leading recording artist and through many performances both at home and abroad. His efforts to introduce Korean music to foreign audiences were highlighted in 1985 when he was invited to lecture at Harvard as visiting professor of Korean music.

Hwang is a truly gifted artist who, through his musical activities in the 1960s, opened up new horizons for traditional Korean music. He continues to do so today. He has rediscovered the beautiful sound of the classical tradition that has been handed down from generation to generation and thus has been able to transmit the sensibilities of the Korean people to modern audiences. It is for this reason that the noted music critic Park Yong-koo says: "Hwang put Korean music on a level with modern music. Without his efforts it might have been buried in a museum." ♦



PHOTO BY NORA

an's University.

From 1974 his works began to take on an even more striking coloration as evidenced by his composition *Ch'im-hyang-mu*. In the composer's words, "*Ch'im-hyang-mu* may be compared to a string of historical relations spanning a broad period of time, connecting the broadly flowing musical