



Pansori features five-octave singing accompanied by traditional drums

The Art of Noise

PANSORI, THE DIFFICULT, OPERATIC FOLK MUSIC OF KOREA, TAKES L.A. BY STORM

PANSORI, A MUSICAL FORM THAT TRACES ITS ROOTS TO 18TH-century southwest Korea, is a lot like American blues. Both feature improvisational expressiveness, satiric jabs at the upper class, and central themes of grief and suffering. But while blues is accessible to the casual listener, even pansori's biggest fans admit the music can be tough sledding. "A lot of it is hard for even Koreans to understand," says UCLA ethnomusicology professor Dongsuk Kim. "And the performances can last up to eight hours." • All of which makes the current explosion of interest in pansori—and Korean folk music in general—intriguing.

Despite the difficulties posed by the archaic language, the art form is gaining followers for its five-octave vocal performances, which range from husky, cadenced bass lines to soaring falsetto, accompanied by traditional Korean drums. Last September, Radio Korea in Los Angeles began airing weekly pansori broadcasts, with color commentary for first-time listeners. L.A.-based Korean American rappers like Sierize are fans of the music, while Jamez, a hip-hop artist who grew up in Reseda listening to Public Enemy and Korean folk tunes, weaves pansori samples into his socially conscious raps. "The first time I heard pansori, I thought, 'This is the Korean soul,'" he says. Meanwhile, Korean Americans in L.A. are eagerly awaiting the January release of director Im Kwon Taek's *Chunhyang*, a pansori-infused period piece that became the first Korean film entered in the main competition at Cannes.

The interest in pansori may reflect the growing appreciation for all forms of traditional folk music within L.A.'s rapidly expanding Korean American population. Kim, who has performed Korean music at venues from New York's Metropolitan Opera House to the Hollywood Bowl and Dodger Stadium,

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has seen enrollment in his classes increase sevenfold over the last three years. For many students, the performance classes are their first exposure to traditional Korean music. "Back in the seventies, the only time you heard our music was when they hit a gong when an Asian person walked in the room," says Jamez.

Chunhyang, the 97th film in Im's nearly 40-year career, may help attract a new crop of pansori fans. A longtime fan of the genre, Im constructed the movie—a gorgeous retelling of one of the most popular folktales in Korea—

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as a showcase for a pansori singer who narrates the classic fable of revenge and forbidden love. Im's production, featuring more than 8,000 extras and 12,000 costumes, uses segments from a live pansori performance to tell the story of a young nobleman's secret relationship with the 16-year-old daughter of a courtesan. While the film momentarily ran afoul of Korean censors because of its nude scenes, that wasn't the director's biggest worry.

"Pansori is so hard to listen to that there is a special term, *kwimyeongch'ang* [literally 'one who sings with the ear'], for the few who can appreciate it," Im says. "I wanted to make the music accessible to even beginners, and the best way to do that is in a movie."

Im combined footage from a four-and-a-half-hour concert with dramatic scenes to make a manageable 120 minute film. The ritualized, raucous shouts of encouragement from the audience—*chwimsae*, an integral part of pansori and something of an art form in itself—are kept to a minimum. But Im hopes the power of the music, even in its somewhat sanitized form, will appeal to international audiences. "Once they get used to it, people really enjoy it," says Kim. "I didn't really like pansori that much the first time, either." —R.I.