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Pacific Rim Music Festival: New sounds, ancient roots

IN SANTA CRUZ, THEMES COVER LIFE, POLITICS AND EVEN PLANTS

By Mark Whittington
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Santa Cruz becomes a musical crossroads for the next two weeks.

International stars such as Byung-ki Hwang from Korea, Wu Man from China and Aki Takahashi from Japan gather with local treasures such as Kent Nagano, Terry Riley, Zakir Hussain and the Kronos Quartet at the Pacific Rim Music Festival, which opens Friday.

``I would like to make this bridge. The world is so small these days,'' says artistic director Hi Kyung Kim, trying to sum up the diverse festival.

It blends modern with traditional. Listeners can hear classical, electronic, jazz and folk music from several countries. Among the instruments: cello, voice, electric violin, guitar, drums, clarinet, computers, tabla, gamelan, *pipa, gayageum*, *daegeum* and -- seriously -- plants.

Kim, a composer and University of California-Santa Cruz professor, got the idea for the festival after attending events sponsored by the Asia Composers League -- a 12-country group that stretches from Israel to Japan.

``I was impressed with the quality of the music,'' Kim says. ``It was a look at where `new music' is moving to. I thought it would be a good concept here.''

She organized smaller festivals in 1996 and 1999. But this year's festival is ambitious, with nine concerts and four symposiums in nine days.

At first, Kim seems stumped when she's asked to identify the focus or theme for the festival. Instead of trying to think of the festival as a unified whole, Kim breaks it down concert by concert.

``Each program blends countries and styles,'' Kim says, ``so people can see diversity in cultures.''

It becomes clear that each concert sparkles on its own.

Forced to pick one crowning jewel, Kim points to the closing concert, which pairs a sneak preview of ``Manzanar: An American Story'' with works by three Japanese composers. Nagano and the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra are joined by pianist Takahashi.

Nagano, a UC-Santa Cruz alum, returns with ``Manzanar,'' a work so new it doesn't get its official world premiere until *after* the festival. The state of California asked him to create a musical work to commemorate the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Nagano commissioned scores by Naomi Sekiya, Jean-Pascal Beintus and David Benoit and text by Philip Kan Gotanda.

Some other highlights:

• Composer Riley celebrates his 70th birthday with many of his musical friends, including the Kronos Quartet, tabla master Hussain, violinist Tracy Silverman and saxophonist George Brooks.

• EarPort Ensemble, an experimental group (one of the pieces is for ``performer and plants'') from Germany, pairs in separate concerts with more traditional groups: Speculum Musicae from New York and the New Asia String Quartet from Korea.

• A Korean musical ceremony features two of the country's best-known artists -- dancer Aeju Lee and Hwang, a master of the *gayageum*, a 12-stringed Korean zither-like instrument.

• The opening concert, ``Hún Qiáo (Bridge of Souls),'' features the Bay Area's Ensemble Parallèle with Chinese *pipa* player Wu Man, Japanese mezzo-soprano Matsumi Hatano and Korean violinist Young-Nam Kim. One of the works is by Japanese composer Michio Mamiya, which he wrote as an apology for his country's atrocities in China and Korea during World War II. ``He is saying, `It hurts in my heart, too,' '' Kim says, summing up the program. ``Four composers from four countries. They have asked, `How are we going to move forward in peace?'

``This is the spirit that I have carried in the whole festival.''

Pacific Rim Music FestivalWhere University of California-Santa Cruz and Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium

When Friday through May 7

Tickets Free to $60; (831) 459-2159 for most events; (831) 420-5260 for Tuesday's Terry Riley concert

More info **pacificrim.ucsc.edu**

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