



East Meets West with CelloGayageum

Transcript

Story by Gina Marie Rodriguez

[MUSIC: "A LITTLE WIGGLE"]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (00:06):

This is Gina Marie Rodriguez, and you are listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast. Over a decade ago now, a Korean musical genre known as K-Pop rose in popularity amongst U.S. audiences. And we can probably thank Psy and his song, "Gangnam Style" for that. But there's so much more to Korean music than K-pop, and U.S. audiences are in for a treat when they discover CelloGayageum.

The group founded by Austrian cellist, Saul Daniel Kim, and Kayam Player Dayoung Yoon will be introducing U.S. audiences to their unique sound with their first North American tour. In celebration of the lunar New Year, CelloGayageum will pursue their mission to create harmony of east and west for music enthusiasts. This is where classical music meets Korean tradition.

I had the pleasure of speaking with Sol Daniel Kim about CelloGayageum's music, history, and passion. I learned a lot about classical music fusion, and I hope you will too.

For those Korean speakers listening, please forgive my accent. I promise. I did try my best. That said, here is my interview with Sol Daniel Kim of CelloGayageum.

[MUSIC ENDS]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (01:14):

Thank you so much for being with me. I really, really appreciate this. Can you do me a favor and teach me how to properly pronounce your name and the, the group's name?

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SOL DANIEL KIM (01:25):

Ah, right. So my name is Sol Daniel Kim. It's just Sol Daniel Kim and Dayoung Yoon is the gayageum player. So it's just Da and young, like young age. Our group name is called Cello. Kay. So cello is just like the cello and gayageum is spelled a little bit weirdly. You have G-A-Y-A-G-E-U-M, but it's pronounced very easily if you just remove the "e" and "u" between the "g" and "m." That was very complicated, right now. Then you'll get it perfectly. So it's "kaya" and then "gm". So G.M., imagine you have "kaya," and then just G.M.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (02:12):

Okay, so, CelloGayageum.

SOL DANIEL KIM (02:15):

That's perfect. That couldn't be more perfect. That's perfect.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (02:19):

Said with zero confidence, [laugh] but I'll get it.

SOL DANIEL KIM (02:21):

That was it.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (02:24):

Thank you. Yeah, I was trying to look it up so that I could see how to pronounce it phonetically and it's spelled, if you look at the phonetic spelling, it's spelled K-A-Y-A-G-U-M.

SOL DANIEL KIM (02:39):

Yeah, yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (02:40):

That makes sense. I prefer hearing someone say it first though before I try to sound it out myself. So, thank you. Thank you for the lesson. I appreciate it. Is this your first North American tour?

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SOL DANIEL KIM (02:55):

Actually, we've been in San Francisco last year. So, we've played there and in Silicon Valley and then Napa Valley, actually. We had three small concerts, but this is our first really big tour. It's like we never had a tour this big, actually, because we always went to Europe, for example, for a couple of concerts, maybe two or three. But fourteen, that's a big tour, I guess. For us at least.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (03:26):

That is a big tour. You're covering multiple states because before you said California, I think.

SOL DANIEL KIM (03:30):

Exactly. Yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (03:31):

Okay. Well, we're focused on New Jersey here, so we'll talk about all the exciting performances you have coming up in New Jersey. I believe you have four of them, actually. So good news for all of our New Jersey followers. Can you explain to me the origin story, I suppose, of how this group came together? How did you and Dayoung work together?

SOL DANIEL KIM (03:57):

Yeah, it's actually a very interesting story because my nationality is actually not Korean. I was born in Austria and I have an Austrian nationality, and I was living in Berlin by the time when I met Dayoung. I just finished my studies there, and she was in Berlin because she was part of an exchange program from her university, and she was supposed to be a gayageum teacher at the Korean cultural center there and the cultural center in Berlin, they have multiple events during the year, and they host multiple concerts as well. And one of the concerts was classical music meets Korean traditional music. So, I was invited there to play with Dayoung and with some other players together, some chamber music that was written for gayageum and string quartet actually. And we played those pieces together and I thought, actually, I would like to learn more about the gayageum.

SOL DANIEL KIM (05:06):

So I just reached out to Dayoung and I asked her, would you mind just having a jam session with me and just let's just try out something. And she was like, 'sure, let's do it.' And we started jamming and that's when our first piece just was made, which is called "Dreamlike Fantasy," and that's how we started. And

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yeah, that's basically our origin story. We started there. We weren't sure if the piece that we made was nice until friends reassured us, 'that's actually something that sounds very nice, you should try to perform it somewhere.' And we asked the Korean Cultural Center to just put us in- into some smaller events. And we always had good resonance with the audience. And that's when we started to create more music. And one thing led to another thing, and then we suddenly started having concerts through Europe, and then we started also to win some competitions in Korea. And then we thought, okay, that's something that we should pursue, pursue further professionally. So that's how we came onto here.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (06:18):

That's so cool. And it's funny to hear you say that it was a jam session because I don't picture classical music and jam sessions going together, but this is also coming from someone who doesn't play music or necessarily have the vernacular to speak about music. But I love that. I love that you came together and you found something that worked for each of you. Can you also tell me about the instrument you're playing? I think I read that you're currently playing on an instrument from 1825. Is that still accurate?

SOL DANIEL KIM (06:48):

Yes, yes, that's true. That's true. Yeah. My instrument is actually very special, I guess because it's made by a guy who's not very well known. It's a Swedish cello, so it's from Stockholm. And that in itself is very special because normally when you picture cello, when you think of cello, most of musicians would think, oh, it's Italian, or it's French, or whatever. So it's not very common that you get something from Scandinavia, actually. But yeah, this cello is lent to me by a very nice sponsor, and I'm playing on it in a not so classical way, and I'm very happy that my sponsor isn't mad about that. He's actually supporting my music a lot. So that's nice because if you're starting hitting your instrument for working with this stuff, I guess not a lot of sponsors are going to like that, [laugh] but since the music is nice, I guess he says, oh, that's cool. Just continue doing that.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (07:52):

Well, we're always grateful for those who sponsor the arts, so thank you to your sponsor for doing that. There's this song that I like of yours, and I mean, I'm assuming that it's played on the same instrument that we were just talking about, but I want to get the name right, "An Unusual Cowboy."

[MUSIC: CELLOGAYAGEUM'S "AN UNUSUAL COWBOY"]

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SOL DANIEL KIM (08:10):
Oh, yeah, exactly.

[MUSIC ENDS]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (08:28):
I really like that song.

SOL DANIEL KIM (08:31):
Really, you do? Thanks.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (08:32):
A lot. No, I do. But again, I hate sounding like I don't know what I'm talking about, but when you say that your group is - your kind of cultural ambassadors bringing the East meets West and combining those two things, but I hear it. I hear it in that song most of all, but I can't pinpoint what is the western sound, what is the eastern sound. And I don't know if this is a question that you can answer, but how do you distinguish the two and then decide to combine them?

SOL DANIEL KIM (09:06):
Oh, all right. I think you can think of it like that. Instead of trying to distinguish Western sounds and eastern sounds, you should more think of it like symbiosis, like a new thing that's created by two ingredients. So sometimes if you cook a meal, there are some meals where you can distinguish the ingredients from each other. And then there are meals where you are like, that's totally new flavor. What is this? What is this made out of? And I think our music is kind of like that. So we are not focused on showing, oh, this is Korean music, and oh, this is western music, or this is the cello, this is the gayageum. What we actually want to do is we want to create our own sound. And actually when you say you cannot pinpoint what's western, what's eastern, that's exactly what we want. That's exactly what we want. And -

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (10:06):
I'm glad.

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SOL DANIEL KIM (10:07):

I think - Yeah, totally. So, I'm very happy because that's exactly what we were looking for. But still, of course, we have some- the ingredients are still Western music and Korean traditional music. So for example, in "An Unusual Cowboy," we are using some fiddling and some country music, for example, and then we're using some walking baselines and we're inspired by jazz a little bit and by blues, and then suddenly it shifts into rhythm and five, which is [Korean language], that's a Korean rhythmical pattern, and then it suddenly drifts into even more far Eastern music style. So we wanted to have this panoramic view of just how this cowboy starts, I guess, in America somewhere. Just giving up his life saying, I don't want to shoot bad guys anymore. I don't want to ride into the West, into the sunset. I want to do something else. And then he goes into the east and he discovers all those landscapes and cultures that he would've never met if he would've come west. So just try to imagine that he goes over the Atlantic Ocean crosses Europe, and then goes into Korea eventually. So that's actually our journey.

Also, CelloGayageum, we started in Berlin, and now we are based in Korea. It's like the complete opposite way of how people would think because Korean music or Korean fusion groups or crossover groups mostly start in Korea and they try to get to Europe and perform there. But we started our career in Europe, and then we came to Korea, and from there, our worldwide tour started actually.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (12:07):

I absolutely adore that story. And it makes me wonder if, as you said, you were born in Austria, were you familiar with the Korean music before you began working with Dayoung? Or is this new to you as well in your musical journey?

SOL DANIEL KIM (12:25):

I was absolutely not familiar with Korean music. There is one famous composer in classical music who was writing music inspired by Korean traditional music. So that was the only time when I was trying to get exposed to it a little bit, but it was so contemporary that I was like, maybe not. So, yeah, I actually never had the chance to really meet somebody who plays a traditional instrument until I met Dayoung. So in 2016, that was an eye-opener for me because Korean traditional music for somebody who was trained classically sounds so different and so out of the world, it sounds so modern and contemporary. At the same time, it has some structure and some story, and you're like, what am I listening to? What's going on and what's this instrument? And then I was listening to this, gayageum, and I thought the

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sound of the instrument somehow resonates with me, and I know I'm going to sound cheesy, but maybe it's because my roots are Korean, and that's something that resonated inside me.

SOL DANIEL KIM (13:41):

But I was like, this instrument is something that I really would like to play together with and to work with. I had some collaborations with other instruments as well, and I was a classical musician my whole life, but I was always looking for opportunities to expand my soundscapes and expand my musical knowledge by collaborating with jazz people or doing a lot of contemporary music. But this gayageum was something different, and I felt that. Like, that was something that was from the first moment, I thought, okay, that's what I have to do. And then I just followed my gut instinct, and that's also something that I did for the first time in my life.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (14:27):

I completely understand something cultural resonating with you and wanting to connect with your roots. So I really, I'm glad that you did. I'm glad that you pursued that and that you reached, you basically reached out to a stranger. You didn't know her when you saw her. I think that's such a great story.

SOL DANIEL KIM (14:44):

Thank you.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (14:45):

Of course. My next question is slightly dangerous to ask artists, but I ask it anyway. It's like choosing a favorite child, but do you have a song that you adore playing more than anything else? Or are they all your babies and you love them equally?

SOL DANIEL KIM (15:02):

[Laughs] yeah, exactly. It's asking a parent who's your favorite child? It's actually pretty mean, but-

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (15:11):

I'm so sorry, I have to squeeze in one mean question.

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SOL DANIEL KIM (15:14):

Yeah, no, no, it's totally fine. I was just joking. But it's very interesting. It's a very interesting question because we are always creating new music, and if you create something new, of course, because it's new, it's the most interesting thing right now. Okay. So I would say always the newest thing that you make is the one that you like the most because then eventually you'll get used to it. But then there are some pieces that mark some milestones, I guess, and I think we can point them out. And one of them is of course, our first piece that I was talking about, "Dreamlike Fantasy." That's like our first ever piece that we've made. And the interesting thing is that despite being our own music, and despite being written and performed really a lot by us these days, it keeps getting more difficult on stage. And I don't know why.

SOL DANIEL KIM (16:19):

I think it's like, because we have some expectations to ourselves to play it even more perfect the next time. And some people might say, but it's your thing. It's like, it's your piece. If you play on stage, it's still your piece. Who cares? And I'm like, no, that's not how it works. [Laughs]. So we want to play it even better all the time. So I think, yeah, "Dreamlike Fantasy" is one of those. And then "Hanyang," for example, is also a piece that we like a lot, and that's because it's loved by our audience so much. I think they love it a lot. And then there's, oh my God. So now, okay, now I'm ranting.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (17:08):

I opened a door.

SOL DANIEL KIM (17:11):

But I would still say "Dreamlike Fantasy," I think. And I think it's because it's started it all, and it's still like - you get some analytics on Apple music and stuff, and it still performs the best. And I think that says something.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (17:27):

Absolutely. Well, I loved hearing you talk about your music. I think it's really important to hear the passion coming from an artist. And you mentioned your audiences as well, and I'd love to know what you're hoping audiences will take away when you bring this tour here, but especially our Jersey audiences. What would you like to hear from our Jersey audiences?

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SOL DANIEL KIM (17:53):

What we hope to do is to just open eyes and ears for those who've never embraced, or who never had the chance to actually listen to Korean traditional instruments. And I think our music is a nice doorway to open up that world, because if you would just listen to traditional Korean music without ever having listened to something else that's kind of similar, you would be like, well, okay, well, what's that? It's like drinking black coffee for the first time. Like drinking an espresso for the first time in your life. You're like, oh my God, what is that? But then if you get used to it, you start to really like it, and then you get crazy about it at some point. So, I think maybe you could start out with a sweet latte first or with a caramel macchiato or something, and then you work up your way to the real thing. So, I think we're somewhere there at the caramel macchiato, I think, and there was one critics about our music, and they said, yeah, you music sounds like caramel macchiato. And I think that was a nice compliment.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (19:20):

You're really great at these analogies, I have to say.

SOL DANIEL KIM (19:24):

Oh, thank you.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (19:25):

Of course. No, I seem to deal a lot in analogies, and I don't know if that's as I've gotten older or what, but I understand things better if somebody can give me an analogy for it. And I never used to be that way when I was young. So, I really appreciate you speaking my language.

SOL DANIEL KIM (19:42):

[Laughs.] Thanks. But yeah, by the way, so you were asking what we were hoping to hear from the Jersey audience. Yeah, we just hope that they have a good time listening to our music and being okay. We would like them to live with an aha, like, oh, that was cool. And then also with a question mark. What did I just listen to? What was that? That's something that I've never listened to before. It sounds kind of familiar, but then it's also new, and we want to just leave this small question mark so that they can remember us and look up our music so that we can get more clicks. [Laughs]

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (20:26):

Yeah, so those analytics matter. But I think, I mean, I had that experience listening to your music for the first time, so I'm very excited for those who are coming out to Stockton University. But also too, you have two additional performances in New Jersey, so I hope that everyone listening will come and see you because your music is lovely. It's been really lovely chatting with you. I appreciate you taking the time.

SOL DANIEL KIM (20:49):

Oh, no, absolutely. It was lovely to talk to you and having somebody who is really interested in our music. So, thanks for all those very interesting questions.

[MUSIC: CELLOGAYAGEUM'S "HANYANG"]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (21:02):

CelloGayageum will bring their first big North American tour to Stockton Performing Arts Center in Galloway, on February 4th at 2:00 PM. Here, you've been listening to CelloGayageum's, "Hanyang."

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (21:14):

For more information, be sure to visit stockton.edu/.

If you liked this episode, be sure to review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, links relevant to the story and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at jerseyarts.com.

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This episode was hosted, edited, and produced by me, Gina Marie Rodriguez. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Isaac Serna-Diez. And my thanks to Sol Daniel Kim for speaking with me today.

I'm Gina Marie Rodriguez for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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