



Sejong Soloists
Press Kit

Sejong Soloists

Hyo Kang, artistic director

Hailed as “one of the top ensembles of today” by CNN, Sejong Soloists has established itself to be a first-class string orchestra that has performed approximately 400 concerts on major stages around the world. Envisioned fifteen years ago as a “young cultural ambassador” by Artistic Director Hyo Kang, a renowned violin professor at Yale University and the Juilliard School, he invited fourteen individually distinguished young musicians from eight different nations – Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the United States – to form Sejong Soloists bringing performances, television and radio broadcasts, youth development activities as well as philanthropic endeavors worldwide. Since then, the unique conductor-less string orchestra has performed in 100 cities across the United States, Europe, and Asia, recorded six highly acclaimed albums, premiered seven new works, and has been featured in several documentary films.

Renowned for its exceptional dynamic style with ranges of quartet-like precision to full orchestra resonance, highlights of Sejong Soloists’ past seasons include appearances at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, Cadogan Hall in London, Salle Gaveau in Paris, Suntory Hall in Japan, Bridgewater Hall in Manchester, England, Seoul Arts Center in Korea, the National Arts Theatre in Taiwan; residencies at the Aspen Music Festival and the Great Mountains International Music Festival in Korea. National Public Radio’s *Performance Today* and European Broadcasting Union regularly broadcast Sejong Soloists’ performances every year. The ensemble has also made special appearances on various CNN programs hosted by Paula Zahn.

Sejong Soloists is named after the 15th century Korean Emperor, Sejong the Great, who was an arts advocate. Sejong Soloists’ 2011 official sponsor is Samsung Electronics America Inc.



Critical Acclaim

"Sejong's virtuoso soloists shone. This was a highly physical performance, in which one felt the tug of bow on string, and the inner resonance of wood and varnish, at a deeply visceral level."

- *The Times (London)*

"The 15-member International Sejong Soloists form **a top-notch conductor-less string orchestra.**"

- *The Washington Post*

"I love the variety of sounds you get. There are moments when I'd swear there are 60 players here. And then there are other times when it has the tightness and the concision of a string quartet."

- **Fred Childs, Host, National Public Radio's *Performance Today***

"The International Sejong Soloists is **a polished ensemble that produces beautiful sounds and projects high spirits...**"

- *The Los Angeles Times*

"All of the musicians are renowned soloists and they come together tonight as one of the top chamber music groups in the world."

-**Paula Zahn, CNN's *Paula Zahn Now***

"Two works by Toru Takemitsu, *Music of Training and Rest*, and *Waltz*, **showed the ensemble's stellar ability to adapt to diverse musical styles with conviction and precision.**"

-*The Strad (London)*

"The conductor-less string mini-orchestra thoroughly **charmed the crowd with a welcome combination of superior musicianship, crisp ensemble work** and a refreshing departure from the usual chamber repertory."

- *The Rocky Mountain News*

"The International Sejong Soloists provided **a definitive example of superb string playing...** Its superb cohesiveness was a direct result of the seamless match of tone and technique within each instrumental part....The ensemble made a strong impression, deftly meeting the daunting interpretive challenges while playing with masterly control..."

- *The Sunday Telegram (Worcester, MA)*

Wednesday, January 19, 2011

UN Secretary-General Guest of Honour at 11th Anniversary Gala of the Sejong Soloists “Dream Team” at Carnegie Hall

Sejong Soloists, the brilliant 14-piece conductor less string ensemble, often referred to as the sensational “dream team,” once again razzled and dazzled an internationally distinguished audience at their 11th Annual Gala in New York.



Ban Ki-Moon with Paula Zahn
(Photo Times Square Gossip)

[This group](#) of former Juilliard students has been receiving laudatory reviews since their formation in the mid-1990’s, and has established itself to be a first-class string orchestra, renowned for its exceptional dynamic style with ranges of quartet-like precision to full orchestra resonance. The ensemble has performed approximately 400 concerts on major stages around the world, including Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, Cadogan Hall in London, Salle Gaveau in Paris, Suntory Hall in Tokyo and Seoul Arts Center.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, South Korean Ambassador to the United Nations In-kook Park, and Consul General Young-Mok Kim attended along with more than 30 United Nations ambassadors. For her 11th year in a row, Television journalist Paula Zahn, formerly with CNN, served as the delightful host for the event, sponsored by the Seoul Metropolitan Government’s “Visit Korea Year” tourism campaign and Samsung Electronics America Inc. The performance featured special guest artists mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, pianist Seong-Jin Cho, and violinist Daniel Cho.

At the after-party gala, Makgeolli, the famous Korean rice wine, was served for the first time at Carnegie Hall at the reception hosted by Samuel Koo, president of the Seoul Tourism Organization. In addition to bringing music to Carnegie Hall, Sejong is known to bring its Korean culinary specialties, including kimchi to Carnegie for the first time at a previous reception for its 2007 concert. During the reception, where artists, diplomats, and other guests mingled into the late hours of the night, videos promoting Korea's tourism and advanced technologies, including pharmaceutical industries, were presented.

The world-renowned ensemble, which performs under the artistic direction of Juilliard violin faculty member Hyo Kang, consists of some of the finest rising stars from Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and the United States. Each member is an accomplished soloist and chamber musician and they have been performing in cities throughout the U.S., Europe, and Asia. Although the Sejong Soloists perform music from the standard string literature, but they are also committed to new music, and have commissioned works from composers such as Augusta Read Thomas, Richard Danielpour, Eric Ewazen and Jay Greenberg, among others. The group is based in New York, and it has its second home in Seoul.

The ever charming Paula Zahn, an accomplished cellist herself exclaimed, "I can hardly believe I am upon my second decade with this brilliant ensemble." She not only hosted the evening and joined the ensemble on cello for the holiday favorite "White Christmas," but also informed the audience of all Korea's other unknown accomplishments, including mentioning that Seoul was the first city to have electricity.

The evening introduced the 16-year-old Seong-Jin Cho to New York City audiences, who is already a celebrated pianist in Korea and Japan. He has already garnered top prizes in both the seventh Hamamatsu International Piano competition and the sixth Moscow Chopin Competition for Young Pianists. Recently he participated in the Castleton Festival where he played the Grieg Piano Concerto at the invitation of the world-renowned Lorin Maazel. Another youngster, the 16-year-old violinist and Juilliard Pre-College Division student Daniel Cho was the winner of the 2009 Great Mountains international Music Festival Competition. Their musical careers are blossoming and they are scheduled to record the Mendelssohn piece for Universal Korea later this year. It is Sejong Soloists' mission to foster the next generation of musicians so as to keep classical music alive today. Their talents and vigorous passion awed the audience as they performed their pieces moving their entire bodies on stage. "This was a very meaningful and special moment all around: a young composer's work was played by these young people with incredible energy," said the very proud Hyo Kang of Juilliard. "It is an exceptional moment to discover such stellar talent and be able to create an opportunity for them to perform at Carnegie Hall, much to the delight of tonight's audience."

The concert also featured celebrated American mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, a graduate of Rice University, the Juilliard School, and the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. Cooke caused a sensation as Kitty Oppenheimer in the Metropolitan Opera premiere of John Adams's Doctor Atomic. She was praised in The

New Yorker for her “fresh, vital portrayal, bringing a luminous tone, a generously supported musical line, a keen sense of verbal nuance, and a flair for seduction.”

Among the classical musical pieces performed included Corelli's Concerto Grosso in G minor, Op.6 No. 8, “Christmas Concerto,” Mendelssohn's Concerto for Violin and Piano in D minor. The luminously beautiful and pregnant Sasha Cooke sang Ottorino Respighi's “Il Tramonto.” She was certainly a standout singing vigorously with a warm, radiant tone. During the reception, she was surrounded by fans who congratulated her, not only on her performance, but also on her upcoming new career as a mother. “I am delighted to perform and intend to do so until I give birth,” she shared at the reception.

At the end of the concert and reception where guests were welcomed and greeted by Korean women elegantly dressed in their colorful national costume, one was certainly curious to learn more about what the country has to offer to the world, both as a tourist and a business partner. “With dignitaries like top U.N. diplomats attending, we are happy to partner with Sejong Soloists,” said Samuel Koo, President of the Seoul Tourism Organization. “The Sejong Soloists ensemble is a fixture on Seoul’s exciting cultural scene, which counts more artistic performance of all kinds on an average day than any other Asian city.”

This diverse ensemble was the brainchild of Artistic Director Hyo Kang, who himself is a renowned violin professor at Yale University and the Juilliard School. Its goals are multifold continuing to bring musical performances, television and radio broadcasts, youth development activities as well as philanthropic endeavors worldwide.

By Dina Pinos – MercoPress - New York Correspondent

Haydn • Mendelssohn

Haydn Violin Concertos - No.1, HobVIIa/1; No. 4, HobVIIa/4

Mendelssohn Octet, Op. 20

Sejong Soloists / Gil Shaham *vn*

Canary Classics

Shaham and co bring bustling virtuosity to Mendelssohn's teenage masterpiece

Often when listening to Mendelssohn's Octet, I find myself searching for moments that might betray the youthfulness of its creator: Some Prolixity, some passing pomposity, some momentary immaturity or fleeting grandiosity pointing to the fact that the composer was only 16 years old. Needless to say, time and time again I draw a blank, finding it impossible to pinpoint anything that suggests that it's anything less than perfect, one of the true miracles of music. Gil Shaham and the Sejong Soloists - a handpicked ensemble of young musicians - present a driving performance, bustling and forward-moving in the opening *Allegro*, Perhaps a little cosmetic in the *Andante* but ideally airborne and impish in the *Walpurgis-Scherzo*. Shaham is spotlit within the balance, most notably in the first movement, although a better equilibrium is approached thereafter. There are some breathtaking

pianissimos and beguiling touches of *portamento* in what is most likeable performance, building cumulatively to a chattering contrapuntal finale that demonstrates these players' admirable abilities individually and in ensemble. I maintain a soft spot for the recording (on period instruments) by Hausmusik (Virgin, 9/90R); This is sweeter, less stately, equally compelling.

The couplings are two of Haydn's three extant violin concertos, also early works, although "early" for Haydn means he was around twice the age of Octet-period Mendelssohn. Shaham's rich violin tone is a boon in these works, making this a viable modern-instrument alternative (with fairly inoffensive harpsichord continuo) to the recent Podger in No. 1 (Channel Classics, 12/09) or the older Standage/Pinnock (Archiv, 5/89) and Wallfisch (Virgin, 11/92R). Stephen Somary's otherwise comprehensive booklet-note goes through all manner of contortions to concoct a link between Haydn's slight concertos and the still remarkable genius of Mendelssohn's teenage masterpiece.



Santa Barbara Independent



photo by Paul Wellman

The full ensemble Sejong onstage with Gil Shaham for the Haydn concertos.

Gil Shaham and Sejong at UCSB's Campbell Hall

Classical Ensemble Performs with Immediacy, Virtuosity

Thursday, April 9, 2009

By [Charles Donelan](#)

It's a rare classical ensemble that fulfills the promise of an unmediated experience of the music. Sunday's performance by Gil Shaham and Sejong at UCSB was one of those unusual occasions when the group and the material come together to create the sense that the music is just there, completely alive and seeming to breathe the same air as the audience.

The impression was there from the outset, as the extremely self-effacing Gil Shaham took up his position at the center of a semicircle of 12 standing musicians without saying a single word of introduction. In fact, Shaham never addressed the audience at all during the entire performance. Instead, he let his flawless technique and lyrical tone do the talking for him. Sejong are a leaderless ensemble, and they handled the intricacies of the first two pieces marvelously well. Both violin concertos by Joseph Haydn—the G Major and the C Major—were spun out into delicate, mesmerizing webs of sound. The absence of a conductor made the performance feel more intimate, and the effect of a string-only ensemble on the music was to highlight the magical intensity of the bass, cello, and viola parts.



photo by Paul Wellman

⊕ Gil Shaham and Ani Aznavoorian performed at Campbell Hall last Sunday.

Shaham manages to combine extraordinary virtuosity with uncommon restraint, and both qualities have made him a favorite soloist with the world's leading symphony orchestras. Yet the setting here made his playing if anything more special, lending an engrossing sense of listening and communication to the act of making beautiful music. If the silence achieved by the rapt audience was any indication, this was one of the most fully appreciated concerts of the season, and by the end of the third call back, any doubts on that score had been thoroughly banished.

In the second half of the concert, Shaham was joined by seven of the Sejong musicians for Felix Mendelssohn's charming and cosmic *Octet in E-flat Major, Op. 20*. This is one of the crown jewels of the chamber music repertoire, and few will have heard it played any better than it was on this occasion. The majestic sweep of the augmented quartet form was given full rein without any diminution in tone or execution. The sound was lush without a trace of buzz, and open and airy without ever becoming wispy or faint. The ultimate triumph of this concert was in the great blending achieved by the ensemble and the soloist, two powerful forces in the service of a higher cause.

Review: Sejong (Oct. 20)

Contributed by D.S. Crafts

Saturday, 20 October 2007

Last Updated Saturday, 20 October 2007

Young and bursting with talent. That would be an apt way to describe the International Sejong Soloists, who now prefer to be called simply Sejong. Thursday night brought them to the stage of the Lensic Performing Arts Center hosted by the Santa Fe Concert Association in a varied program ranging from Michael Haydn to Dimitri Shostakovich by way of Astor Piazzolla.

The members of the New York-based group are predominantly but not exclusively of Asian background hailing from eight different countries. With a beautifully focused and often very delicate string sound, the conductor-less Sejong displays a repertoire from Baroque to contemporary works performed with the clarity and unanimity of style one might expect of a smaller chamber ensemble. The program began with a Notturmo in F by Michael Haydn, brother of Joseph and a professional composer in his own right. From its graceful 18th century air to the Shostakovich work which ended the first half was a wide leap indeed. Bridging that gap was the *Variations on a Rococo Theme* by Tchaikovsky, full of the kind of opulent harmonies that composer was noted for, here in an all-string arrangement. Cellist Ole Akahoshi, the first chair cellist of the ensemble took the difficult solo part, crafted to a significant degree by the cellist Fitzenhagen for whom the composer wrote the work. Akahoshi's warm, ingratiating tone in the Andante sostenuto was coupled by solid technique traversing the treacherous double stops of the Fifth and Seventh Variations and the extended range of the Fourth—an outstanding rendition. The Prelude and Scherzo of Shostakovich is an early work full of the kind of unorthodox rhythms and harmonies that brought the composer great notoriety at an early age. Sejong wove through its intricate counterpoint masterfully using only an octet of players.

The group began the second half with Elgar's *Serenade for Strings* in three short movements, evoking splendidly the English pastoral tradition. But it was Piazzolla's *Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* (Las cuatro estaciones porteñas) that brought the most excitement. This is clearly not Vivaldi, though there are more than a few built-in homages to "the red-haired priest"; But the style is, not unexpectedly, full of tango rhythms and jazzy harmonies, not to mention a host of arresting percussive effects exacted from the strings. The first three concertos, mirror the earlier work in a fast-slow-fast sequence, and there are virtuosic solo violin passages throughout. The violinist Chee-Yun was to be the guest soloist in this work, but due to a broken collarbone, she was unable to appear. However, misfortune often provides opportunity, and the violinists of Sejong stepped forth brilliantly to perform the solo sections. Leader Frank Huang took the parts in the outer two concertos, with Ji In Yang playing the sweet, languid lines of the Summer season, and Emilie-Anne Gendron, the vigorous double-stops of Autumn. Here too cellist Akahoshi jumped in once again with masterful passagework. The final strains of Winter echo another Baroque work, Pachelbel's canon.

MUSICAL OPINION

July-August 2007

Sejong at Cadogan Hall

The 14-piece conductorless string orchestra Sejong, founded in New York by Hyo Kang, appeared at Cadogan Hall in a remarkable programme on 10 June. They began with a version for Solo Violin and String Orchestra by the Russian composer Leonid Desiatnikov of four *Tangos* by Astor Piazzolla which have been brought together under the title *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*. With witty quotations from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, this made a delightful start to the programme, each Piazzolla Tango Concerto being brilliantly played by four separate Sejong soloists, Frank Huang, Ji In Yang, Emilie-Anne Gendron and Yura Lee.

These mini-concertos were followed by the British Premiere of *The Four Seasons of Pyeong Chang* by the South Korean composer Sukhi Kang. The work constituted another *Four Seasons* series of Concertos for Solo Violin, quite superbly played by Stefan Milenkovich, although the post-modern melodic nature of the work did not quite match the outstanding technical resource which the 73-year-old composer, who was present, brought to his own music.

Finally, Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings* received an outstandingly fine performance. On this showing, Sejong is, simply, a chamber orchestra of world class, and we must thank the Korean Shinhan Private Bank for bringing these highly gifted musicians to London.

ROBERT MATTHEW-WAKER



SEJONG RETROUVE PARIS

Salle Gaveau, Paris
8 juin 2007

Dix-huit mois après le programme Britten, Penderecki, Schubert (Mahler) qu'il donnait à la Salle Cortot [lire [notre chronique](#) du 3 novembre 2005], l'ensemble New-Yorkais **Sejong** retrouve Paris dans un tout autre menu. Ses jeunes artistes, sonnans tous des instruments de rêve - Minozzi, Guadagnini, Bergonzi, Gagliano, Stradivarius et Guarneri, excusez du peu ! -, faisaient offrande au printemps de la première partie du concert. Tout d'abord avec *Las cuatro estaciones porteñas*, initialement écrites pour bandonéon, contrebasse, piano, violon et guitare, par **Astor Piazzolla** entre 1965 et 1970, puis ingénieusement adaptées pour violon solo et orchestre à cordes il y a une dizaine d'années, par **Leonid Desiatnikov** - compositeur ukrainien né en 1955, vivant aujourd'hui en Russie, auteur de plusieurs opéras et de nombreuses musiques de films.

L'option de cette exécution sera de faire succéder quatre solistes au fil des *saisons*, chacun s'illustrant du mieux possible à rendre compte de la vision ponctuelle de l'Argentin. C'est **Frank Huang** qui ouvre un *Printemps* dévorant et nerveux, impatient, en quelque sorte, accompagné par un *tutti* un rien maigrelet, malgré la remarquable assise de la contrebasse - **Rachel Calin**. L'*Eté* de **Ji In Yang** ne surligne pas les clins d'œil motiviques à Vivaldi, dans une approche soignée qui, dans l'ensemble, manque cependant d'énergie et d'engagement ; de fait, il semblerait que cette musique se passe difficilement d'un chef. Les abords rugueux de l'*Automne* trouvent en **Emilie-Anne Gendron** la dispensatrice d'une sonorité qui va se réchauffant, dans une belle couleur. Enfin, avec une sonorité moins épaisse mais un indéniable sens de la nuance, **Yura Lee** offre un hiver *doloroso* très gracieusement âpre.

Commandé par le Great Mountains International Music Festival, qui a lieu en Corée du Sud, dans la province de Gangwon, *Les Quatre Saisons de PyeongChang* (dédié à cette ville de la région) de **Sukhi Kang** - compositeur né à Séoul en 1934 - comprend huit brefs mouvements, donnés ici en création européenne. On y remarque particulièrement l'excellente intervention soliste de **Stefan Milenkovich** dont la palette dynamique fait florès de cette partition hybride. Pourquoi hybride ? Parce que cette œuvre semble avoir absorbé plusieurs esthétiques dont le XXème siècle fut traversé, marquant un goût personnel tant pour la seconde école viennoise ou l'emploi d'*ostinati* centre-européens que pour des répétitions reichiennes transcendées par un lyrisme qui rappellera peut-être certaines pages de Takemitsu. C'est, indéniablement, bien *ficelé*, mais on se demande tout de même où se trouve l'auteur dans tout cela.

C'est après l'entracte que survient le meilleur moment de ce rendez-vous avec Sejong : la *Sérénade Op.48* de **Tchaïkovski**. Le 1er mouvement nous fait goûter une pâte générale fort généreuse, tandis que la fin de la *Valse* du second se fait des plus élégantes. L'*Élégie* bénéficie d'un bel équilibre, maintenant délicatement la nuance globale dans une articulation fluide, que la savante demi-teinte ouvrant le *Finale* magnifiera d'autant plus.

Bertrand Bolognesi

8 June 2007 Sejong Concert @ Salle Gaveau (translation)

Eighteen months after performing Britten, Penderecki, and Schubert at Salle Cortot, the New York-based ensemble Sejong returned to Paris with a completely different program. Its young artists played on instruments of dream including Minozzi, Guadagnini, Bergonzi, Gagliano, Stradivarius, and Guarneri to name a few, offering Spring at the first part of the concert. The first piece was *Las Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas*, initially written for bandoneon, bass, piano, violin, and guitar by Astor Piazzolla between 1965 and 1970 and ingeniously adopted some ten years ago for a solo violin and orchestra by Leonid Desiatnikov (born in Ukraine in 1955, currently living in Russia, and composer of several operas and numerous film scores).

The piece was executed by four soloists playing each season successively and each soloist expressed as well as possible to realize the Argentinian vision. Frank Huang opened with the passionate, nervous, and impatient Spring, which was occasionally accompanied in tutti by a contrabass played by Rachel Calin. Despite the fact that it was just one bass, the sound was nothing short of being rich and full. Ji In Yang playing Summer executed neatly but lacked energy and engagement which does not really delineate the Vivaldi motives. It seemed that this music was played with difficulty without a conductor. In the rough style of Autumn finds Emilie-Anne Gendron playing with warmth and in beautiful color. Lastly, Yura Lee performs the graceful but bitter Winter doloroso with a sound that is not as rich but with an undeniable sense of expression.

Commissioned by the Great Mountains International Music Festival, Gangwon Province, South Korea, *Four Seasons of PyeongChang* (dedicated to the region) by Sukhi Kang, born in Seoul in 1934, is composed of eight short movements, given here in European premiere. Stefan Milenkovich, the soloist of this piece was particularly noticeable giving dynamic palette and flora in this hybrid composition. Why hybrid? Because this work seemed to have absorbed and traversed 20th century aesthetics, showing personal taste towards the Second Viennese School or the Central European *ostinati* with Reichian repetitions transcended by lyricism that perhaps points to certain works by Takemitsu. The piece was undeniably well put together but at the same time, one wonders where to find the actual voice of the composer.

The best moment of rendezvous with Sejong came after the intermission: Serenade in C by Tchaikovsky. The first movement reminded all of us of the taste of rich pâte while the end of the Waltz in second movement was done most elegantly. The Elegy gave off beautiful balance, maintaining the delicacy of overall nuance in a fluid articulation, which later made the profound half-tone opening in Finale all the more magnificent.

PERFORMING ARTS

Thursday, May 10, 2007; C13

International Sejong Soloists

"Last Round," the driving string nonet by Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov that opened the Sejong Soloists' concert Tuesday evening, could have easily come off as just a basic introduction, paving the way for the bigger works on the program. The New York-based chamber ensemble, filled with top-notch young performers, was at the Kennedy Center to close out the Fortas Chamber Music Series season. The players played the 1996 piece with a bravado and technique that made it more entree than appetizer.

In the way that the music of Bruckner conjures the sound of a grand organ, Golijov's piece strikes up the sonority of the bandoneon, an accordionlike instrument central to tango. Based on dance rhythms that build to an almost maniacal intensity, the opening movement uses the compression of the instrument, while the second movement is its matching, languorous release. Sejong attacked that opening with abandon -- surging lines from two high violins slashing across more dense textures. Gentle sequences and yearning tunes made up the remainder of the piece.

The boldness in attack, strength of accent and tightness in ensemble turned out to be welcome fixtures of the group's playing throughout. The Adagio from the Notturmo in F, Perger 106 of Michael Haydn (Franz Joseph's younger brother), rarely touched pianissimo, but the group lovingly traced the flowing lines and plush accompaniment. A smart arrangement of Ravel's Quartet in F kept all of the original's elegance, though the added volume took away some of the deep mystery from the gorgeous third movement.

The group's principal cellist, Ole Akahoshi, made the most of the solos in Tchaikovsky's "Variations on a Rococo Theme," Op. 33. A warm tone and generally precise intonation marked his fine playing. Akahoshi and the other players are still growing musicians. But the way that the phrases developed and moved left little doubt that more interpretive profundity is on the way.

-- Daniel Ginsberg

GRAMOPHONE

MARCH 2007

Vivaldi

Violin Concertos – ‘The Four Seasons’;
‘La tempesta di mare’, RV253; ‘Il piacere’, RV108
Cho-Liang Lin *vn* Anthony Newman *hpd/org* Sejong
Naxos © 8 557920 (55' • DDD)

**An invigorating account of the Seasons
– even if New York slyly creeps in**



This is a straightforward *Seasons*, a perfectly good pick from the many available recordings for anyone who wants the music played with skill and commitment, and no

funny business. Cho-Liang Lin and the New York-based Sejong play on modern instruments, choose uncontroversial tempi, and produce a sound which combines rich vibrancy with a clean-edged brightness and coursing freshness which recreates something of the inspiring effect of a dose of mountain air. Comparatively little interest is shown in the music's descriptive qualities but there is plenty of sensible interpretative detail, with textures clear and ensemble tight; rapid repeated notes are not just scrubbed at, you can really hear them!

Thus there is not much to dislike, though I for one found some of the group ornamentation irritating; it is only an occasional twiddle here and there, but without the necessary spontaneity they are more distracting than enhancing. The sudden brief outburst of chamber organ activity in the final movement of “Spring” is another strange intrusion, while the background noise of New York City is also a worry – at times it is almost as if, somewhere a few fields away from where the shepherd sleeps, agricultural machinery is at work.

Two delightful programmatic companion works from Vivaldi's Op 8 make ideal fillers and are dispatched with similar bracing energy.

Lindsay Kemp

Concert Review: Garrick Ohlsson and the International Sejong Soloists

By [Sharon McDaniel](#)

Palm Beach Post Music Writer

Saturday, March 04, 2006

An artistic collaboration just for touring purposes is hardly a new concept. But a true artistic communion as a result is exceedingly rare.

There's hardly an orchestra that tours without a guest soloist. Recitalists and chamber groups are endlessly playing mix-and-match. Yet you can count on one hand the collaborations that trigger real synergy.

But lightning struck Thursday afternoon on the Regional Arts series. Pianist Garrick Ohlsson and three young artists of the International Sejong Soloists opened the Kravis Center program with Brahms' *Piano Quartet in G minor*. In their hands, the work evolved into a movingly gorgeous and altogether thrilling 40 minutes.

Evolved — it didn't start out that way. About 10 minutes into the first movement, chemistry kicked in between pianist Ohlsson and violinist Adam Barnett-Hart, violist Richard O'Neill and cellist Ole Akahoshi. They showed not only technical mastery and finely tuned control, but also musical maturity, unflagging energy, and a well-thought-out single-mindedness.

Despite Brahms' constant curveballs, Ohlsson negotiated each with refined clarity and lightness, always in perfect blend with the three string players. A frequent visitor to South Florida, Ohlsson is the latest illustrious guest to tour with Sejong.

A group of 14 string players, formed in 1995, has been the Aspen Music Festival ensemble-in-residence since 1997. It's led by artistic director and Juilliard School violin professor Hyo Kang, but like another famous New York-based ensemble, Sejong performs without a conductor. As "Soloists," the violins and viola perform standing.

For the Mozart *Piano Concerto No. 14 in E-flat*, the entire group of 14 formed a half-circle with Ohlsson nestled in front and center. With his famously warm tone, Ohlsson caressed every melody. His perceptive approach emphasized not only the music's youthful charm and brightness, but also its songfulness and intricate layers of inner detail.

Sejong

HILARY FINCH AT WIGMORE HALL

Sejong was a 15th-century Korean emperor who invented an alphabet simple enough for everyone to use, and who was an energetic patron of the arts. It is also the name of a band of New York soloists, most of them Korean, who for ten years have been indefatigably networking their way through the world of classical string playing. They made their long-awaited London debut at the Wigmore Hall on Friday.

The International Sejong Soloists are conductorless. They stand (apart, that is, from the cellos and basses) in a semicircle. And they listen and respond to each other with a rapidity and intensity that ensures constantly highly-charged playing. So highly-charged, in fact, that even the back row of the Wigmore Hall was almost blasted back to Oxford Street by the time their concert was over.

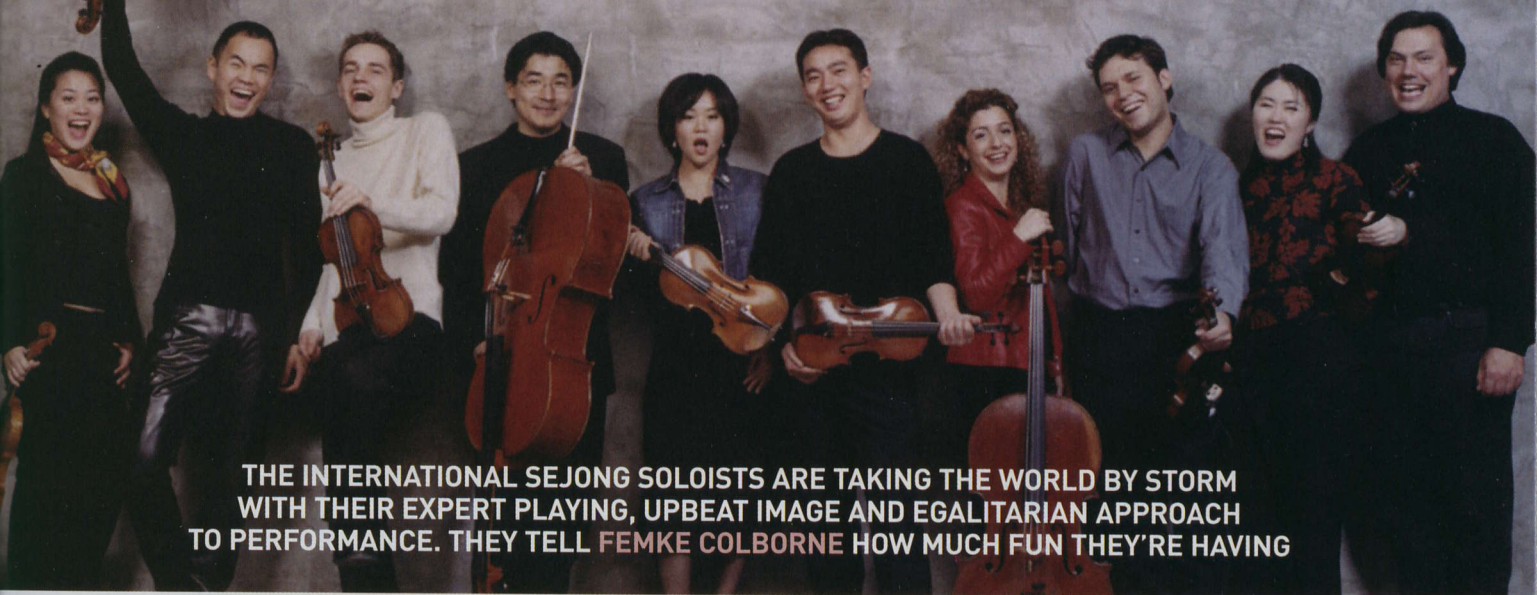
Sejong didn't take the easy option on programming, either. They began with a bright blazon of New World heraldry: David Diamond's 1944 Rounds for String Orchestra. Laser-bright unison playing, feisty counterpointing, slick syncopations: it was like Suzuki on speed.

Even in the orchestrally-accompanied version of Britten's *Lachrymae* for solo viola, Sejong were on an octane high. Richard Yongjae O'Neill's viola solo was ravishing. But one longed for a little more subtlety instead of the high-gloss dialogue of this nonetheless prodigiously accomplished ensemble.

The dark, questing voice of the viola gave satisfying continuity into the opening of Penderecki's *Sinfonietta* for Strings. Here, Sejong's virtuoso soloists shone. This was a highly physical performance, in which one felt the tug of bow on string, and the inner resonance of wood and varnish, at a deeply visceral level.

And finally Mahler's lush and angst-filled orchestration of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* string quartet. This was a bit of a sledgehammer to crack a nut in both concept and performance: a real rage against the dying of the light. But if only Sejong had paused to remember the work's origin in song, and balanced drama with a little more metrical and dynamic discrimination.

Balancing act



THE INTERNATIONAL SEJONG SOLOISTS ARE TAKING THE WORLD BY STORM WITH THEIR EXPERT PLAYING, UPBEAT IMAGE AND EGALITARIAN APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE. THEY TELL FEMKE COLBORNE HOW MUCH FUN THEY'RE HAVING

If the International Sejong Soloists (ISS) were a political system, they'd be a democracy. Not only are they multicultural and multi-racial but also they perform and rehearse without a conductor, sharing decisions about tempo, dynamics and who plays what. They may all be soloists but there's no room for exhibitionism or egos in this outfit.

Formed in 1995 by Hyo Kang, the 10-member ISS is a happy medium between an orchestra and a chamber ensemble and is equipped to tackle works for both. Most members are in their mid-20s and many studied together at the Juilliard School, where Kang is a professor.

The Sejong Soloists have played all over the world – including Taiwan, Ravinia and the United Kingdom – but they particularly enjoy performing in Korea due to their popularity over there. This stems from the fact that Kang himself is Korean and is underlined by the group's name: King Sejong was a great Korean emperor under whose leadership the country is said to have experienced a golden age of cultural and intellectual enlightenment.

'We are kind of like rock stars there,' says 27-year-old cellist Ani Aznavoorian (pictured fourth from right in the red jacket), a graduate of the Juilliard School. 'We'll play a two-hour concert and then we'll stand outside for another two hours signing autographs and having our picture taken.'

Kang still acts as the group's artistic director but his role consists mainly of putting his head around the door during rehearsals to check up on things rather than dictating what is going on. 'Sometimes he rehearses with us but usually we rehearse alone,' confirms Cornelius Dufallo (to Aznavoorian's left), a violinist with the ensemble since its third season. 'He offers us pointers and ideas – a group always has to have a set of ears outside of the group. We work a piece up and then we show it to him and he gives us fresh perspectives.'

Dufallo, who is 31 and studied at Juilliard with Dorothy DeLay, enjoys the challenge of this democratic approach. 'It's one of the best things about the group,' he says. 'Each member becomes really important and we all share the responsibility of making the ensemble work. Cues and tempo changes are shared out between the group so you have to remember when it's your turn.'

This can, of course, lead to a few heated discussions: 'It never gets nasty but we argue all the time about musical ideas – in a good way. Any time you're

in a chamber ensemble everyone has their own ideas and the bigger the group gets the harder it is. If there are four people you have four ideas but with 10 people you have 10 ideas. It's a challenge to find common ground musically – we're all individually thinking musicians.'

Working so closely together means that the players have built up a real rapport, something Aznavoorian thinks really comes through in the group's performances. 'It's definitely a unique ensemble and group of people,' she says. 'We have a lot of fun together in rehearsals and when we're touring. On tour we all go out eating and drinking together – we're a very happy bunch.'

Dufallo agrees: 'We definitely have a lot of fun when we play together. It's a small enough group that everyone has a relationship with everyone and a really important role and that adds a lot of energy to the stage.'

The closeness of the group comes in handy when times get tough, Aznavoorian says: 'When we were in Japan once we had to get to Saboro to do a concert and we got caught up in the worst snow storm I've ever seen – and I'm from Chicago so that's really saying something! Our flight was canceled so we had to get a bus across Japan and it was an all-day trip. We started taking bets on exactly how late we would be for the concert and I won. I can't remember how long it was exactly but it was at least an hour. We got there and the hall was still full – we thought people might have given up and gone home but they hadn't.'

In terms of repertoire the ensemble is happy to tackle anything from chamber music to large pieces for string orchestra but it has always enjoyed focusing on contemporary music. In 2001 the group commissioned a work from Augusta Read Thomas (which it has since taken all over the world) and it has also given premieres by Earl Kim, José Bragato and Krzysztof Penderecki.

This choice of repertoire is in keeping with the group's young, vibrant image, something that has helped to set them apart from other ensembles. 'Nowadays everyone is playing with their image – it's an important thing,' confirms Aznavoorian. 'Classical music is in a different place from where it was 20 years ago – it's not just all about the music. It'd be great to be able to say that but, especially in the US these days, it's all part of the package.' ■

