

## SEOUL

→ SOUNDING OUT



Namdaemun, the ancient Great Southern Gate, serves as a portal to the modern, bustling city

## The South Korean capital can be a confusing place for the foreign visitor to negotiate. Kim Hee-sun unveils the best spots to experience music in this most cultural of East Asian cities

A quarter of South Korea's population lives in Seoul – that's over ten million people in this lively, dynamic and confusing city. It was founded in 1394 by King Taejo, the first king of the Joseon dynasty, and historic sites are often juxtaposed with the ultra-modern. At the centre of Seoul's new high-rise development is Mount Namsan, a green oasis topped by a television tower. The old city, with several spectacular palaces, and the modern centre of Seoul lie to its north, while to the south is the Han River – on the south side of which are cultural venues like the Seoul Arts Centre and National Gugak Centre which showcases traditional music. Despite a history of 5,000 years, Korean music, which is strikingly distinct from that of China and Japan, is only just taking its place on the world music scene thanks to groups like Dulsori, Noreum Machi and the Tori Ensemble. There are fine traditional musicians and many groups bringing a new slant to Korea's traditional instruments and music. Seoul is an exciting place to hear what's going on.

Concerts, festivals, and performances take place throughout the year in every corner of the city. Traditional music can be heard in atmospheric palaces and old houses. Alongside

Broadway and West-End hits, there are new Korean musicals being staged. The Hongik University district has venues for indie rock, hip-hop, and jazz. The streets of Itaewon, once the playground of American soldiers in Korea, have now become a multicultural district with food from India, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, Thailand, Mexico and Malaysia. The clubs of Itaewon, south of Namsan, and Gangnam, south of the river, are popular nightspots. And the international success of Hallyu (Korean Wave) or K-pop brings increasing numbers of fans to the city – Girls' Generation are the current sensation. As in Japan, karaoke – known as *noraebang* in Korea – is a hugely popular way of spending an evening out with friends and a way to get to grips with those K-pop songs.

In Seoul the old image of Korea as the 'Land of the Morning Calm' seems rather distant. It's a fast-changing, vibrant city which is also opening up to the sounds of the world. Even if you don't speak the language and can't read the elegant *hangul* alphabet, the metro is easy to use and efficient. The old streets, galleries and teashops of Insadong are a great place for shopping and if you haven't yet discovered it, Korean food is arguably one of the tastiest and healthiest cuisines on the planet.

## TRADITIONAL MUSIC

### National Gugak Centre

This is the place for Korean traditional music and dance, situated alongside the Seoul Arts Centre, which includes an opera house, concert halls and galleries. The Gugak Centre has court, folk, contemporary music and dance troupes, a museum of traditional musical instruments and a good record shop. There are programmes of traditional music and dance every day in two different theatres. For all concerts English programme information is available. There are also classes in Korean instruments for foreigners from March to June, September to December every Saturday morning.

**2364 Nambusunhwanro, Seochogu,**  
**www.gugak.go.kr**

### The National Theatre of Korea

Under the umbrella of the National Theatre, there are three national arts companies. Established in 1962, the National Changgeuk Company performs *pansori* (one man vocal narrative singing) and *changgeuk* (pansori opera) with performances every Saturday. The National Orchestra of Korea, established in 1995, is a 'symphony orchestra' of traditional Korean instruments playing contemporary compositions. The theatre also hosts musicals, concerts, dance and festivals.

**59 Jangchundanro, Junggu, www.ntok.go.kr**

### Korea House

Located in downtown Seoul, this old house is a cultural space to enjoy royal cuisine, traditional music and dance. Its 150-seat theatre, shows pansori, *samulnori* (percussion quartet), shamanistic music and fan dances. Reservations required.

**80-2 Pildong iga,**  
**Junggu, www.**  
**koreahouse.or.kr**

### Court Music & Dance at Old Palaces

The first Sunday in May, the Jongmyo shrine, a UNESCO site, hosts the royal ancestors ritual of the Joseon dynasty. The ritual music and dance in the courtyard in front of the shrine is very impressive [pictured above].

**www.jongmyo.net**

Concerts are held every weekend in May, June, September, and October at four historic palaces (Gyeongbok, Deoksu, Changdeok and Jongmyo). Traditional music and dance, including ancestral shrine music, with English information.

**www.gung.or.kr**  
**www.royalpalace.go.kr**  
**www.deoksugung.go.kr**  
**www.cdg.go.kr**  
**www.jm.cha.go.kr**



## FESTIVALS

### Hi! Seoul Festival

Held in May in Hangang Park along the Han River, Seoul's most representative community-based festival showcases the best of home-grown artists including traditional music and dance.

**www.hiseoulfest.org**

### Jarasum International Jazz Festival

Korea's best-known international jazz festival is held in Gyeongju, only one-hour from Seoul (a shuttle bus from Seoul is available). Held in early October, it features local and international artists.

**www.jarasumjazz.com**



The Tan-Emotion quintet perform at the Changwoo Theatre which hosts a three-day world music festival in August

## RECORD & INSTRUMENT SHOPS

### The National Gugak Centre Record Shop

This small shop is located at the entrance of the Traditional Instrument Museum and has the largest collection of traditional music in Seoul.

**www.gugak.go.kr**

### Go Heung-gon Korean Musical Instruments Institution

If you want to purchase high quality traditional instruments this place is worth a visit. The instrument maker Go is now designated as a human cultural property.

**347gil 37, Nambusunhwanro,**  
**Seochogu, www.gohgon.com**

### Hanullim

If you're a big fan of *samulnori* you can purchase the instruments, costumes and accessories in store or online.

**8-31 Yangjaedong, Seochogu,**  
**www.hanullimdrum.com**

### Nakwon Sanga

Located downtown in Jongno, the whole building is packed with a variety of shops selling a wide range of instruments from samulnori percussions to electric guitars, *djembe*s and pianos.

**284-6 Nakwondong, Jongnogu,**  
**www.enakwon.com**

### Changwoo World Music Workshop Festival

Seoul's own three-day mini world music festival held at the end of August. It's a spin-off from Gwangju World Music festival. Korea's other world music festivals are in Jeonju and Ulsan in October.

**www.bcchangwoo.com**

### Grand Mint Festival

Held in mid October in the Olympic Park, this two-day festival showcases the best home-grown indie, rock, and world music bands.

**www.grandmintfestival.com**

## OTHER MUSIC VENUES

### LG Art Center

In the business district of Gangnam area, south of the river, this state of the art theatre (capacity 1,100) hosts local and international artists. Recent performers have included Omara Portuondo, Youssou N'Dour and Goran Bregović.

**679, Yeoksam 1-dong, Gangnamgu,**  
**www.lgart.com**

### Olympic Park Olympic Hall

Located inside the Olympic Park, this recently opened large hall (capacity 4,300) is the venue for K-pop and international rock and pop stars. Alongside it, Muse Live, is a small venue recently opened for pop, rock, indie and world music.

**88 Bangidong, Songpogu,**  
**www.olympicpark.co.kr, www.koreanpop.co.kr**

### Bukchon Changwoo Theatre

This tiny theatre (capacity 130) sits right in the historic area of Bukchon, next to the Changdeok palace. It hosts regular contemporary traditional music shows and a world music workshop festival in August in association with the World Music Festival held in the southern city of Gwangju.

**158-2 Wonseodong, Jongnogu,**  
**www.bcchangwoo.com**

### Jeongdong Theatre

This downtown theatre (283 seats) performs the 80-minute long original Korean musical *Miso* for tourists.

**43 Jeongdonggil, Junggu, www.chongdong.com**