

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

# JEONJU INT'L SORI FESTIVAL

## SOUTH KOREA

Jeonju is the place to hear traditional Korean *pansori* – that's what makes it one of *Songlines'* Top 25 festivals. But it offers a lot more besides

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Tapsa temple, a spectacular day trip from Jeonju

Arriving at Seoul's Incheon airport, visitors are greeted with luscious images of South Korea – misty mountains, spring blossoms, magnificent temples, even music performances. Korea's landscape is indeed spectacular with a rugged mountainous spine running down its centre. But like anywhere, it takes time to discover Korea's treasures.

Jeolla province, in the south-western part of the peninsula, is one of them. It's considered a heartland of traditional food,

music and natural beauty. Jeolla is to Korea what Andalucía is to Spain – the home of *pansori* as Andalucía is the home of flamenco.

Like all cities in countries with rapid economic development, Jeonju, the capital of North Jeolla province (Jeollabuk-do), looks a mess when you arrive on the bus. Home to 650,000 people, it's a jumbled mass of shabby apartments and shiny high-rise offices with a rash of signs and hoardings. But hidden at its centre is the historic Hanok Village with several streets of old

houses next to a 15th century Joseon period royal shrine. Part of the International Sori Festival takes place here in atmospheric locations and the rest in the new Sori Arts Centre on the edge of the city.

"What we want to do here is focus on vocal styles," explains Park Kolleen, a singer of Korean and American parentage, and the festival's co-director. "Pansori is at the heart of it, but then around that you have all these other vocal styles and then music from all around the world. Our aim is to make a festival where people who are interested in great voices from around the world think that Jeonju is the place to be."

The festival has been going ten years, but it's only recently that it started to reach out to international audiences. Last year, alongside the Korean artists, there was the excellent flamenco band of Diego Guerrero, bluegrass outfit The Earth Stringband from the US, and traditional Rajasthani musicians and dancers from India. This year El Gran Combo from Puerto Rico are coming.

But for me, it's the Korean music that is the most interesting. Every day at the crossroads in the centre of the Hanok Village a stage is erected where people can hear local bands for free. It brings the festival into the heart of the city and creates a buzz. The area around is full of tea-houses, restaurants and galleries. Korean food is delicious, full of flavours. *Bibimbap* (mixed rice with vegetables) is the local speciality, including mountain ferns and intriguing side dishes, while the local beer bars have interesting snacks like silkworm larvae which aren't as nasty as they sound.

One of the initiatives of the festival is the Sori Frontier competition – a contest for 'world music' groups. Inevitably there's a confusion about how you define the term, but eight groups performed in a spectacular setting in front of an old Confucian shrine. They ranged from a rock band with piano and Korean percussion to rather delicate groups of traditional instruments. *The X Factor* has clearly had its influence on the often damning public critiques from the judges straight after the performances. Last year's winners Balsaechul have an official slot this year.

It's the rich rhythmic traditions of Korean music that appeal to outsiders and fuse best with other styles. That's why the percussive *samul nori* type of farmers' music, with its drums, gongs and hats with



The opening performance of the 2011 festival was a theatrical display of various aspects of Korean music in the Sori Arts Centre. Below: Korean drums on sale in the Hanok Village

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swirling ribbons, has proved so popular at festivals. There was an excellent samul nori-meets-jazz concert with a saxophone playing over intricate percussion from gongs and *janggu* drum. The *janggu* (or *changgo*) is Korea's equivalent of the Indian *tabla* – the basic percussion instrument used in both popular and classical music. It's an hourglass drum, with a differently pitched skin at each end struck with a hard and light stick, often with virtuoso technique.

Traditional music in its classical form can be an acquired taste, but it's worth acquiring – particularly for the extraordinary range of zithers that Korea has: – the *gayageum*, plucked with the fingers, is delicate and expressive; the *geomungo*, hit with a stick, is more muscular and interesting; while the *ajaeng* is bowed with a stick, harsh and scratchy to listen to, but intensely satisfying. Korean instrumental music is usually heard in what's called *sanjo* – in which the soloist is accompanied by a *janggu* drummer, a bit like an Indian instrumentalist with a *tabla* player.

The *sanjo* performances in Jeonju are held in a great location in the Hanok Village. On a platform in the courtyard of a 19th century wooden house called the *Hakindang*, the musicians perform with the audience in the open air. It's the perfect place to hear this music – like the traditional recordings done on the Akdang label.

It's inside the *Hakindang* that the traditional *pansori* performances take place. I've written about this in detail (see #85), but an art form that I once considered unbearable became hugely enjoyable here. *Pansori* is an accomplished art in which a singer narrates a story and also acts the characters involved, accompanied by a drummer. The key ingredients are a good performer (of course), an on-screen translation so you can understand every word, an intimate performing environment and the vocal responses of a knowledgeable audience. I can't imagine a better place to hear and appreciate *pansori*, and this year they are doing all five traditional stories with translations for the first time.

"We had Quincy Jones here and we presented the whole array of Korean music," explains Park Kolleen, "and he completely focused on *pansori*. 'Oh my God, that is amazing' he said about the *pansori* singer. 'She is all about soul, she is singing from her inside!'"

*Pansori* was my lasting memory of the Sori Festival, but there was a grand finale in the Arts Centre with pepped-up *pansori* and dancing girls which attracted a huge crowd. And it all ended with a great samul nori wig-out in the open air with ribbons flying. **N**

**DATES** The next edition of the Jeonju International Sori Festival is September 13-17, [www.sorifestival.com](http://www.sorifestival.com)

