



Greg Banaszak With Maestro Piotr Borkowski American Saxophonist In Korea

I have had the pleasure and honor over the past six years to perform with first class orchestras and jazz festivals throughout Korea. I have been presenting workshops and master classes for students and their current saxophone teachers in most major cities in Korea. This ongoing experience has been rewarding professionally, musically, and personally.

Within this article, I shall be discussing not only my musical experiences, but also the rich aspects of the Korean culture as a whole that make it so special. The saxophone is a relatively new instrument to study in Korea, especially within classical and orchestral repertoire. I have greatly enjoyed furthering its development by exposing standard and new concerti to very large and supportive audiences.

PREMIERE PERFORMANCE

The first exposure of a classical saxophone concerto to a concert going audience took place in Korea's third largest city of Taegu, with a population of roughly over five million people. The work presented was Jacques Ibert's *Concertino da Camera*, performed with the Taegu City Philharmonic under the baton of Maestro Piotr Borkowski, in November of 1998. I initially met Maestro Borkowski on a series of concerto concerts we presented in Europe with various orchestras, including the Olsztyn State Philharmonic of Poland. If it were not for the Maestro's desire to program new repertoire, as well as an interest in twentieth century repertoire, I would have not been invited to perform in Korea. Maestro Borkowski and I will be recording a new CD of romantic saxophone concerti with the Berlin Opera Orchestra in June of 2005.

This past tour I had the pleasure of performing a new

concerto by Cleveland composer David Morgan titled *Consolation* for alto saxophone and orchestra. Although numerous saxophonists study and perform our standard concerti repertoire, the saxophone as a solo orchestral instrument is still a relatively new idea to executive directors and board members of orchestras, who are hesitant to program it. Be it here in the United States or abroad, the conductor, the executive director, and the majority of the orchestra board members have to be in agreement to program a saxophone concerto, and any of the previously mentioned parties has the ability to negate a potential performance. When one saxophonist successfully performs with a professional orchestra, we all win, allowing the possibility of not only earning a repeat performance in years to come for the initial saxophone soloist, but also for other saxophonists to have the future opportunity to solidify an engagement with that specific orchestra or others. My career has been a testament to this. With the experience of performing concertos, one finally acquires, with various orchestras, invitations for repeat performances in the near future.

One very crucial aspect of performing with orchestras, be it in Asia or Europe, (along with some top American orchestras), is the ability to play in tune at A= 442-444; Korean orchestras perform at A = 442. If the performer is unable to adjust to this sound and color, his/her first experience may be his last. Notes that are inherently sharp on the saxophone, such as C# and beyond, will not only be out of tune, but they will also be bright in color and tone. It is very difficult to play with a dark, rich tone, trying to blend with a string section, if the saxophonist's embouchure is collapsing from adjusting pitch. This is not a question of simply pushing the mouthpiece flush to the cork, but more so practicing with a tuner whose pitch can be re-calibrated, then rehearsing with a piano that is tuned at A = 442. Bosendorfer pianos traditionally favor higher pitch.

I have found it most interesting that Korean orchestras and musicians desire aggressive tempi. The term *allegro* can be interpreted several ways. The tempo on the third movement of Ibert's *Concertino da Camera* was faster than anyone might anticipate; despite it being much faster than Ibert intended; however, the Taegu City Philharmonic's performance was flawless and relaxed. Just turning around and watching a full symphony orchestra's string section perform at this tempo with ease, really helped me embrace their tempo and demeanor. The Ibert orchestral parts are difficult for the winds, but especially difficult for the strings.

The media was everywhere, including rehearsals, since this was the first time a Korean audience heard a saxophone concerto with a city orchestra. The concerts were broadcast live on KBS television, which is the Korean National television service. I really was amazed with all the positive press, support, and interest from an entire country, that I could barely speak one coherent sentence. I met so many saxophonists, both young and old. I now teach a number of them on a yearly basis in a master class setting.

THE ARTS IN KOREA

The concept of western classical music in general is

relatively young in South Korea, being just over fifty years old. Soon after the Korean War ended many of the cultural concepts of the United States and the West were quickly adopted and copied, especially in regard to technology, which surpassed certain aspects of the West.

There are several orchestras in the capitol city of Seoul, with the Seoul Symphony Orchestra, which resides in the Seoul Arts Center, being the flagship orchestra. Other internationally known orchestras are The Korean Chamber Orchestra, conducted by violinist Mr. Min Kim. Mr. Kim also happens to be the Dean of Korea's top conservatory, The Korean National University. Another top orchestra is the Bucheon Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by chief conductor Maestro Hun Joung Lim. Other orchestras include the Korean Symphony Orchestra and the KBS Symphony Orchestra

SAXOPHONE STUDY IN KOREA

As with most colleges, The University offers a degree in saxophone. Unlike colleges in the U.S., the average size saxophone studio in Korean colleges is only four to five students maximum, allowing for a saxophone quartet as well. Many of the Korean saxophone professors have studied in Europe, receiving a traditional Paris Conservatoire type education and approach towards the saxophone. Having heard Professor Lee perform this past August 2004 it was easy to understand why his students played at such a high level. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is a very intense education with a firm command of scales. Students practice from Monsieur Jean-Marie Londeix's scale studies, incorporating an extensive understanding of what some American saxophonists unfortunately deem as false or trick fingerings. Having virtuoso wind players on flute, clarinet, oboe and bassoon as technical role models has also assisted in the saxophone's rapid development throughout Korea, especially within the university setting.

Saxophone students are expected to maintain the same standard of technique as other members of the orchestral wind family. The standard *Marcel Mule Etudes* and *W. Ferling Fort-Eight* are used to further both the technical and musical development of the saxophonist. It is particularly interesting to observe the in depth amount of repertoire a student must develop beginning with the early works of Singelee and Demersseman. Saxophone studios throughout the United States have varying philosophies in regard to what repertoire to expose their students to. Some American saxophone studios actually find very little merit in these early works and label them trite and outdated, which I personally feel is inaccurate. Regardless of one's opinion on these early works, any serious saxophonist should at least study these early works for a short time to allow a more in depth perspective on our repertoire's early development. Our compositional history is not as extensive as it is for other members of the wind family, which gives us more justification to understand how early composers wrote for our instrument. Aside from the standard repertoire, including transcriptions, there is a strong movement to expand the saxophone repertoire by Korean composers.

Many saxophone students, even at the undergraduate level, have had a composer friend write a new work for them that incorporates both western classical composi-

tional devices with Korean traditional folk music. I have had the privilege of presenting master classes at colleges such as Suwon University, Kyung Lee College of Music, Catholic University of Taegu- Hyosung, and Keimyung University, to name a few. Each college has a saxophone studio strong above others and are role models for up-and-coming universities that are beginning to offer formal degrees in saxophone. The first formal degree in saxophone to be integrated at the university level began only in the early 1990s (I believe 1992 to be exact).

JAZZ IN KOREA

The popularity, interest and support of jazz throughout Asia is unprecedented. It is the only part of the world that a jazz musician receives the notoriety a pop artist receives in the United States. Touring jazz musicians can attest to the accolades that both the media and audience are so famous for over the years. Within Seoul there are a number of jazz clubs and festivals featuring various styles of jazz including traditional, contemporary, fusion, and bebop of course. The playing level fluctuates from club to club but the audience support is steadfast. The majority of the clubs have an open mic session towards the last set and are always interested in playing with American musicians. Over the years I have developed good relationships with both club owners and local musicians that are always very accommodating to contract an evening concert. I usually perform standards that everyone feels comfortable with of Kern, Porter, Miles, Bird and my mentor Jackie McLean of course. It is so important to pay respect to the origins of bebop. If you think you have Confirmation under your belt play the tune down a half-step or up a minor third with the tempo pushed up, ouch! Audiences love the early blues heads Jackie wrote on a number of records like *Capuchin Swing*, *Jackie's Bag* and *New Soil* on the Blue Note label.

THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF KOREA

There are so many positive aspects of the Korean culture as a whole that this short article cannot address; I will merely scratch the surface, so to speak. The history of Korea is over five thousand years old. The amount of respect one receives is not only honest, but is shared by the population as a whole. My first experience of this was after the long trip I had from Chicago to Seoul. When I was driving from the airport we were at a four lane intersection. At that point all the cars facing us stopped at this intersection and shut off their headlights. At first it appeared to me like a city power outage; the driver just explained to me that in Korea, while drivers are stopped in traffic, the headlights are quickly turned off so the drivers facing you do not receive any glare or discomfort in their eyes. When the light turns green everyone turns their headlights back on and resumes driving. Could you imagine how much more pleasant our lives would be if we were just more courteous and polite to our fellow drivers in our cities and on our highways. American drivers would rather damage their cars than let us into an entrance or exit lane.

The majority of the population also has an understanding of the Korean martial art form of Taekwondo, beginning at a very early age. I can only sum up their culture as a combination of strength, honor and discipline. I have

learned a great deal about myself being exposed to this culture and can honestly say I am a better person because of it. I also find the cuisine exquisite!

There is so much diversity in the food, and it really is amazing. I recently spent three weeks in Korea this past August and never had the same meal twice. I am beginning to bring some adventurous American saxophone students with me to Seoul during the summer months, and the first step in this process is going to dinner at a local Korean restaurant. This helps to not only become familiar with the cuisine, but to also develop some skills with chop sticks.

I strongly suggest acquiring a book and tape of whatever country you are performing in, and learning as much of the language you can. Sometimes when I know a saxophone student of mine will be attending a Korean music festival with me, we will try to have our entire lesson speaking only Korean.

For more information about saxophone study in Korea please feel to contact me at www.gregbanaszak.com. §

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