

"Global Ear: Korea"
from the May edition of The Wire magazine

by Jason Kahn

Coming off a grueling two-week tour in Japan, I was hardly prepared for the pleasant surprise waiting for me in Seoul. Günter Müller, Norbert Möslang, Tomas Korber, Christian Weber (who couldn't make it to Seoul) and myself had originally planned to only tour Japan, as part of the Swiss Arts Council's contingent to the World Expo in Aichi. I'd been in contact with Bill Ashline, an American living in Seoul for over ten years now, and casually asked him one day if he happened to know anyone organizing concerts there. Bill immediately put me in touch with the Relay collective of musicians and two concerts were set for March 16 and 17. I spent the last night of my Japanese tour in Tokyo's Shimokitazawa district with my friends Toshi and Kikuko in The Bar With No Name. Going directly from the bar to the airport the next morning I pretty much sleepwalked my way into Seoul. The drive in from Gimpo Airport to our hotel passed in a haze of grey marshlands and the wide expanse of endless cement expressways. Getting off the airport bus the first thing I noticed was two men in suits from a nearby store attempting to pry open manhole covers in the midst of whirring eight-lane traffic. It seemed to me they did things differently here in Korea, though at this point I wasn't sure if I was dreaming. The venue for the first concert, Theater Choo, was only a short walk from our hotel. I began to wake from my post-Tokyo stupor and feel the energy of Seoul's street life. Everything seemed louder, looked rawer. People moved at a quicker pace, hollered around more. The street leading up to Theater Choo looked like a cross between shanty town and open air mall. Just getting into the theater proved difficult. Everything was under construction and great puddles of muddy water obstructed our way. We struggled with our gear through the darkness and found ourselves in a small theater. Tables and musical equipment cluttered the stage. I finally had the chance to meet musician Choi Joonyong, my main contact to the Relay collective. We set up our gear, did a brief soundcheck and then went off with Choi Joonyong in search of something to eat. We ended up in a soup restaurant and ordered the house specialty, Beoseot Maeoon-tang (spicy mushroom soup). Growing up in Los Angeles, Korean food was nothing exotic to me, but never had I tasted anything like this! I finally began to wake up as the hot soup got my circulation roaring. Günter Müller's face was slowly turning bright red and fine beads of sweat rolled down his forehead. All around us graffiti from recent customers covered the walls. The beer was flowing and everyone seemed to be in a good mood, reinvigorated and looking forward to the evening's concert. We made it back to the theater just in time for the first set with Norbert Möslang and Choi Joonyong. Norbert's cracked everyday electronics didn't seem out of place here with Joonyong's eviscerated CD players, exposed circuit boards and mixer antics. The next set featured Tomas Korber and long-time Seoul resident Joe Foster on trumpet, microphones, mixing board and various unidentifiable objects. By this time the theater was nearly full, which seemed to make everyone from the Relay collective smile. Apparently, this was one of their biggest events.

As with all concerts organized by Relay, tonight's also had no entrance fee. According to Choi Joonyong, "If we charged for tickets, nobody would come. It is also illegal to have foreign musicians in Korea on tourist visas playing for an entrance fee." One of the main movers in Seoul's experimental music scene, Japanese musician Sato Yukie, was deported from Korea for this very reason. Sitting in the audience of a concert he'd organized in Seoul last year were two plain clothes police officers. Sato was arrested on the spot and deported for five years. He's now back, thanks to some good luck and being married to a Korean, but even a recent concert by Damo Suzuki was cancelled under similar circumstances. This hasn't made it easy for the musicians in Seoul, but they've persevered and the Relay collective has even managed to receive funding from the Seoul Art Foundation. This made it possible for our group to play in Seoul.

Tomas Korber and Joe Foster's set received enthusiastic applause. I was next up with Jin Sangtae and his exposed hard drives, laptop and shortwave radios. All the hardware detritus brought a pleasant smile to Norbert Möslang's face, but he had to ask "Wouldn't it be enough with just the cracked CD players and hard drives? Why all the laptops as well?" Maybe the answer lies in Korea's role as one of the world's most computerized nations? In any case, more emphasis seemed to be placed on the rough hewn analogue sound sources than on their digital transformations.

Approaching the midway point of the evening, Günter Müller took the stage with guitarist Sato Yukie, who's musical orientation seemed more akin to the New York Downtown Scene of the 1980's. What seemed at first glance like a classic mismatch proved to be an interesting exercise in friction. Although Sato's musical approach takes quite a detour from the other musicians in the Relay collective, he has been an important player in the development of Seoul's experimental music community. According to Bill Ashline, "Yukie's role has been completely central." Yukie is best known in Korea for his psychedelic rock band Kopchangjongol (translating in Korean to "beef tripe casserole"). All the members of Kopchangjongol are Japanese but Yukie sings in Korean—the first hybrid group of its kind in Korea. Yukie has always also been interested in improvised music and started organizing events in 2003 under the banner of the Bulgasari group, from which the Relay collective split off later to pursue a more purely electronic direction. Under Yukie's initiative players as diverse in style as German saxophonist Alfred 23 Harth and free improvisation trumpeter Choi Sun-bae came together with many of the musicians of the current Relay collective for monthly sessions in different bars and cafés in Seoul. Through his contacts to Japan, Yukie also managed to invite many Japanese musicians like The Ruins, Kawabata Makoto, Yuko Nexus 6, Ichiraku Yoshimitsu, Toshimaru Nakamura, Otomo Yoshihide and Sachiko M. This Korea-Japan nexus has led to some cross-pollination, with Otomo Yoshihide inviting some members of the Relay collective over to Tokyo for concerts.

The next set of the evening paired Tomas Korber, Norbert Möslang and mixing board specialist Hong Chulki. The resulting music is austere, with Hong Chulki's feedback piercing through Korber and Möslang's dense sound. Each set has been astoundingly good so far. The music is fresh, the audience attentive and the sound system excellent.

I find myself playing the last set of the night with Günter Müller and Relay's main

organizing force Ryu Hankil, who has assembled a collection of dismantled analogue clocks and contact microphones running through various software patches. The sound of the clocks' ticking, whirring gears transforms the room into one giant machine. We can literally here time slowly ticking out, signalling the end of our first memorable evening in Seoul.

Links

<http://slowalk.com/relay/>

<http://www.bulgasari.com/>

<http://www.balloonneedle.com/>