

The Gift of Music

Ensemble Ari chamber group bridges a divide while benefiting others

By Lou Fancher



Ensemble Ari, from left: Sharon Lee, piano, Jaehee Jeong, viola, Sarah Hong, cello, Jean Ahn, composer, Jiwon Evelyn Kwark, violin, and Joowon Kang, baritone
Photo Rachel Lee

Having appeared in grand concert halls and on prestigious stages worldwide, Ensemble Ari co-founder and composer Jean Ahn has found the sweetest rewards performing in Lamorinda living rooms.

"Home concerts work well when there's a strong community of people who appreciate music," the 39-year-old Orinda resident says.

Ensemble Ari is a chamber group consisting of seven Bay Area-based Korean American professional musicians dedicated to bridging the divisions between Korean history and music and other cultures. Performing primarily on western or European instruments, but mingled on occasion with Korean or Asian instruments, the ensemble introduces audiences to traditional and contemporary music that crosses boundaries to reveal surprising commonalities. The group formed officially in 2014.

Ahn and co-founder pianist Sharon Lee Kim, a faculty member at Saint Mary's College, became acquainted through their children, who attend Del Rey Elementary School. Ahn is a lecturer and assistant choir director at UC Berkeley and says she and her husband, Ryan Kim, moved to Orinda in 2007 "like many people - for my kids."

Her compositions have been in-

cluded in the repertoire at Aspen New Music Festival, Oregon Bach Festival, Festival of Contemporary Music, Berkeley Symphony Under Construction and Pacific Korean Music Festival, among others. Attending a Saint Mary's concert at which Kim performed and where Kim is also the assistant director of the College Choirs and Faculty Chamber Sundays Series, Ahn says the two musicians discussed working together and the idea "took flight that very day."

The ideas underpinning the ensemble evolved organically, Ahn says, rather like the multiple meanings of the Korean word naming the group. "Ari" means many things: big river, wisdom and beauty, depending on the word's context. "I knew these people and wanted to work with them. It emerged naturally," says Ahn.

Ensemble Ari in addition to Ahn and Kim, includes Jiwon Evelyn Kwark (violin), Heeguen Song (violin), Jaehee Jeong (viola), Sarah Hong (cello) and Joowon Kang (Baritone).

Within the classical music repertoire that the members perform with groups including San Francisco Opera, Oakland Symphony, Marin Symphony, Berkeley Symphony, Korean Symphony Orchestra and others,

Ahn says their reach has boundaries. But free to set their own agendas, commission new works, or draw from Asian folk songs, electro-acoustic music and other musical forms, the ensemble's audience is unlimited. "Each time we perform, we can introduce new music, not be relegated to contemporary or classical music, and bring out the beauty of Korean music. Because we are in America, where people from all countries live together, we're not only reaching Korean audiences," Ahn says.

Beyond the music and cultural heritage that connects them, the members of Ensemble Ari are united by a desire to give. "Each one of us has a heart for community. We believe music is a gift from God, a tool we were given to serve the community. It's not for us, it's for sharing," she says.

The connection turns rehearsals into a time of unique fellowship. In a world often preoccupied with obtaining material goods, establishing financial security, looking out for self, it is almost quaint - hard to believe but oh, so attractive - to hear of professional men and women in hot pursuit of giving.

The home concerts have all been benefits for Del Rey.

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