

## International Ambassador in South Korea: Observations and Reflections

by Laurissa Backlin, DMA

South Korea has a rich musical culture and history. Many of its classical musicians have won prestigious international competitions, and K-pop (Korean pop) groups have become household icons all over the world. Additionally, traditional *Kugak* music has roots from well before the 20th century. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that South Korea has several excellent university music departments. Sungkyul University in Anyang is a liberal arts university outside of Seoul. Over the past few years, Sungkyul and Delta State University (Cleveland, MS) have fostered an on-going music exchange program between faculty and students. The most recent trip in May 2019 provided a wonderful opportunity to teach Korean and American students in joint master classes, perform in joint student and faculty recitals, present lecture-recitals, and create deeper relationships. Within this framework, I served as a NATS International Ambassador by observing voice lessons and interviewing one of the voice faculty, Dr. Rachel Hyunjoo Kwak, using the International Ambassador Checklist ([https://www.nats.org/NATS\\_International\\_Ambassadors.html](https://www.nats.org/NATS_International_Ambassadors.html)).

### Observations of Voice Lessons

During the exchange, I observed two voice instructors, Dr. Rachel Hyunjoo Kwak and Dr. Dong Hyeon Kim. I was struck by how similar the lessons were to those in North America. Similarities include vocal warm-ups and vocalizes, repertoire selection, and duration.

#### Dr. Kwak, three lessons, junior/senior women

Dr. Kwak taught in Korean, but her physical gestures and singing examples provided clarity as to what she said. Humming on pitches 123454321 began each lesson. Dr. Kwak then mainly utilized the "Italian" [a] [ɛ] [i] [o] [u] vowels in a variety of scalar exercises. She also used [ju:ɪ] and [ja] to release the jaw. During this time, Dr. Kwak played the piano while the student stood.

The remainder of each lesson focused on the students' jury repertoire; juries were within two weeks. Dr. Kwak sat in a

chair while a pianist accompanied the student. The students that I observed were junior and senior women; repertoire included "Lydia" (Fauré), "Thy Hand, Belinda...When I Am Laid in Earth" (Purcell), "The Crucifixion" (Barber),



"Deh vieni, non tardar" (Mozart), "Take, O Take These Lips Away" (Beach), and "Sure on This Shining Night" (Barber). I was surprised to see several English pieces as part of the repertoire, and Dr. Kwak invited me to coach her students on their English diction, which I was happy to do. The students had been well-taught by Dr. Kwak and their English diction professor; consequently, I mainly helped students with words containing stressed *ûr* [ɜr] or [ɜː], such as "earth," unstressed *ûr* [ər] or [əː], such as "wonder," and other words containing the letter "r" preceded by a vowel. The students tended to curl the tip of the tongue too far back towards the palate to create the "r" sound, resulting in decreased resonance in the oral cavity. I explained that the tip of the tongue should remain along the bottom teeth for as long as possible, so that the preceding vowel is unencumbered. As a teacher of English diction, I can attest that these same pitfalls are addressed in my classes in Mississippi! Dr. Kwak helped her students with stretching the vowels in all languages. She also spent time on releasing jaw tension; in the case of one student, she took her thumb and gently pulled the chin down to release tension.

#### Dr. Kim, one lesson, 20-year old freshman male

In Korea, men are required to serve in the military for 21-24 months sometime between the ages of 18-28. This can result

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in older freshmen men if they complete the service by age 20. The delay in academic music studies could possibly be advantageous, as it can provide vocal and personal maturity.

Dr. Kim began the lesson by inviting the student to make a cup of coffee, which the student did. I had never participated in or observed this practice before, and I asked if this was typical. Dr. Kim said it was, and it helped the student to relax and approach the lesson with more freedom. Indeed, it did seem to help him, as he said he was nervous to be observed. Dr. Kim taught in Korean, but as with Dr. Kwak, it was not difficult to understand his pedagogy. After a time of coffee and chatting with the student, Dr. Kim used movement exercises to warm up and relax the body, then proceeded to lip trills. Some work on posture was next, followed by a simple vocal exercise on "Ah" (123454321). He asked the student to sing "Ah" with an "inside smile," then with an actual smile. At times, the student initiated the tone with [h], but Dr. Kim said "no [h]." The student was quick to make the change. The remainder of the lesson was spent on "Intorno all'idol mio" (Cesti). The student sang the entire first verse without interruption from Dr. Kim. I appreciated this, because I sometimes critique a student before they have a chance to warm up. Dr. Kim had the student sing the first verse again with his hands in the cheekbone area. This seemed to help give focus to the sound.

### Conclusions

Although I observed only a few lessons, there were more similarities than differences. The structure was generally the same, and technique and repertoire were familiar to most North American teachers. One difference was in the overall mood; the lessons in Korea felt more leisurely than my own teaching style, yet progress was still made. It was clear that students respected their teachers, and the teachers enjoyed their work.

### **Interview with Dr. Kwak**

The interview provided a great amount of information. The following are of particular interest:

- Incoming Freshmen – Dr. Kwak shared that many incoming students have had high school voice teachers that "pushed" their students' voices in preparation for college auditions; as a result, the students sing "flashy" or "heavy" opera arias that are often beyond their capabilities. Dr. Kwak spends time undoing this approach, focusing on more appropriate repertoire while teaching them to support the tone with body and breath.

- Singing with Expression – Dr. Kwak wants her students to "feel the music, and not just sing notes on the page." This may be more difficult for her students because they are often taught

by their parents to "not speak up" and to respect their elders.<sup>1</sup> However, Dr. Kwak observes the younger generation becoming more expressive in general; consequently, they sing more freely. She encourages all her students, but especially her seniors, to trust themselves. She requires each student to translate foreign language repertoire into Korean. The translations are then read aloud during lessons. Dr. Kwak and I agreed on the importance of knowing and understanding the text.

- Practicing – Dr. Kwak was confident that her students practiced for at least one hour per day, but she would prefer two hours. We agreed again that two hours of practice throughout the day was preferable, but not typical for many of our voice students! The student we observed in Dr. Kim's lesson said he practiced several hours per day, however, he may be an exception.

### **Fostering International Exchanges**

The exchanges between Delta State and Sungkyul universities have reinforced my belief in the benefits of sharing knowledge with voice teachers both domestic and international. DSU and Sungkyul students and faculty became fast friends during both exchanges. I was pleased to observe our DSU students immerse themselves in university life and culture during our brief visit, while the Sungkyul students and faculty were incredibly welcoming and hospitable.

Through NATS, we also have opportunities to participate in cultural exchanges. Recently, representatives of NATS traveled to Germany to participate in a pedagogy exchange. I am proud to be a member of a professional organization that has already taken literal and figurative steps in a foreign country for the express purpose of learning from some of that country's top voice professionals. I hope to contribute further scholarship from continued conversations with our Korean voice teacher and student colleagues. I also encourage NATS members with the opportunity to connect with private or university voice professors in another country to record their experiences and become an International Ambassador in that country. Visit [https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/International\\_Ambassador\\_Registration\\_Form.html](https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/International_Ambassador_Registration_Form.html) to register.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Sherri Weiler, professor at American University of Sharjah (United Arab Emirates), presented at the NATS 55th National Conference (June 2018) with similar observations: non-Western cultures typically do not emphasize self-expression.

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Laurissa Backlin, soprano, (seated, right) is Assistant Professor of Music at Delta State University where she teaches studio voice and other voice related classes. She received the Doctorate of Musical Arts degree from University of North Texas where she was the recipient of a Master's/Doctoral Fellowship. As soprano soloist, Dr. Backlin has sung in performances of concert works across the United States and Germany. As a professional chorister and soloist, she currently sings with Red Shift in Baton Rouge, LA. Dr. Backlin is on the music faculty at Csehy Summer School of Music in Langhorne, PA, where she teaches applied voice lessons and theory. Dr. Backlin was designated a NATS 2018 Emerging Leader for the Southern Region (MS, AR, LA). She currently serves as the Auditions Chair for the MS NATS Chapter.



### 16<sup>th</sup> Annual NewVoice Educators Symposium at Indiana University



#### *Greetings from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music in Bloomington, Indiana!*

**Y**ou are cordially invited to attend the 16th Annual New Voice Educators Symposium on Saturday, February 22, 2020 at Indiana University, Bloomington. The symposium, sponsored by Student NATS at Indiana University, is designed to provide new and future voice teachers an opportunity to present an academic paper related to singing or teaching voice, and to network in a collaborative, professional, and friendly environment. Attendance at the symposium is open to teachers, students, and singers of all levels, but invitations to present are limited to those with five years or less of full-time, collegiate teaching experience.

The symposium is a free event, but does not include travel expenses. If you are interested in presenting, please submit an abstract of your proposed presentation no later than January 15, 2020. Please include your name and title, e-mail address, institutional affiliation (if applicable), and contact information with your submission. You will be sent an electronic confirmation of receipt of your abstract, and a notification once presentations have been selected. Please send abstracts, questions, and any other correspondence electronically to:

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**We hope to see you in Bloomington in February!**