

# Kim So Ra

Artist Information Sheet

Grades 3-7

## Tradition

For over 2,000 years, the Korean peninsula has been home to a vibrant drumming tradition full of color, movement, and thrilling energy. This drumming, called *pungmul*, has been part of village life in Korea for generations. You might think that in order to play drums you need to be seated, but like a marching band drummer, the drummers in *pungmul* do not stay in any fixed position. Most performances take place outside, with dozens of drummers in constant motion—drumming, twirling and dancing. *Pungmul* was originally played as part of farm work, on holidays, and as accompaniment to religious rituals. One of the most impressive elements of *pungmul* performances is the colorful costuming, in particular, the hats. Known as *sangmo*, these traditional hats are adorned with feathers, large pom-poms, or streamers called *pi-ji*, which are attached atop the hats, which twirl and spin around the acrobatic drummers.

The *pungmul* drumming tradition is deeply connected with the Korean folk spirituality also known as *musok*. *Musok* is the oldest form of religion on the Korean peninsula, involving beliefs in numerous spirits. These spirits are believed to watch over humans and nature through select members of society who can directly interact with them. In ancient times, these select people, often women, performed a unique version of *pungmul*.

In the late '70s a new and more contemporary form of *pungmul* emerged. Called *samulnori* (meaning four objects), it uses four of the core *pungmul* drums, each of which symbolizes one element of nature: *janggu*, the hour-glass shaped drum, represents the rain; *buk*, the barrel drum, represents the clouds; *jing*, a large gong, represents the wind; and *kkwaenggwari*, the small handheld gong, represents thunder. This new style is perfect for watching and listening to in a theater.

## Artist

Korean master drummer Kim So Ra is one of the leading musicians of *samulnori* drumming in the world. Her primary instrument is the *janggu*, one of the most well-known Korean instruments. Its body looks much like an hour-glass from its side, with each face of the hourglass creating a different sound (one pitched high, the other low) and played with sticks. The *janggu* represents the rain sound of the *samul nori* ensemble. Despite its size, the *janggu* is light enough to be strapped to the performer's body and incorporated into a traditional dance as well as held by a performer while seated.

Samulnor master Kim So Ra was born in the South Korean city of Jeongeup, an epicenter of *pungmul* music. She grew up surrounded by *pungmul* players and ensembles, soaking up the traditional sound. Like many high-energy kids, she was drawn to the drums and began to study the *janggu* seriously at age 9. Soon she embarked on a traditional musical apprenticeship, choosing to live with a master drummer where she could live and breathe the *janggu*. She often practiced up to 8 hours a day, learning the nuances of the instrument by heart. As her studies progressed, she became more interested in treating the *janggu* as a lead instrument, something that hadn't been

done before. While the janggu doesn't play a melody, it has two tones (high and low, based on the side of the hour-glass drum) when struck rhythmically with sticks.

Kim blends ancient Korean rhythms with modern techniques to strike a balance between old and new styles of playing. The result has landed her on international stages and garnered an adoring audience at home. She is also creating new paths for Korean women drummers and is the founder of the country's first all-female percussion ensemble.

## **Place**

South Korea is a country in East Asia that occupies the southern portion of the Korean peninsula, bordering North Korea. It is surrounded by oceans on three sides. While the modern-day Korean peninsula is divided between North and South Korea, the people of both countries have a shared culture and history. Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, has a population of just under 10 million, making it one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world. It is a thriving city where ancient tradition and modern customs exist side by side—where traditional kimchi (salted, fermented vegetables) is as equally important culturally as the global music force that is K-Pop (Korean pop music).

Kim So Ra's performance in the video is set in the Euljiro neighborhood of Seoul. Euljiro is a perfect example of Seoul's balance between old and new. A small neighborhood of just one square mile, Euljiro is home to thousands of tiny manufacturing shops and outdoor food markets where old customs are preserved. But also found in this maze-like neighborhood are small cafes, artist spaces, and the hippest restaurants in the city, symbols of a modern Korea.