

Gabor Takacs-Nagy brings spiritual medicine in long-awaited Korean debut



Conductor Gabor Takacs-Nagy and Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra perform at the Seoul Arts Center Orchestra Festival on Tuesday at the Seoul Arts Center Concert Hall. SAC

The Hungarian conductor reflects on music as connection, healing — and a second life beyond the violin

By Park Ga-young

For Gabor Takacs-Nagy, arriving in Korea had long been a personal wish. Despite decades of international touring across Asia, the Hungarian conductor had never set foot in the country — until this week. On Tuesday evening, he finally took the stage at the Seoul Arts Center, leading the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra, an ensemble he has shaped for nearly two decades.

His Seoul debut came as part of the Seoul Arts Center Orchestra Festival, which brings together leading orchestras from across Korea alongside invited international ensembles such as the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra. He described the format as “completely unique.”

It was, by his own account, worth the wait.

“I loved the concert hall — fantastic acoustics,” he said after the performance, in a stream of exhilarated words that seemed to mirror his conducting style. “The public was enthusiastic from the moment we entered the stage. I felt (as if I was) 25 years old (again) — at least for 30 minutes after the concert. I was happy. I could fly.”

Tuesday night’s performance matched that exhilaration. Working from a heavily annotated score — dense with color-coded markings — the 69-year-old conductor shaped the music with vivid, almost theatrical energy that carried clearly into the hall.

The maestro himself seemed free of everything beyond the stage — even the early flight awaiting him the next morning — and the hand condition that has quietly reshaped his life in music.

In fact, that is exactly what he hopes for his audience.

“If even one person in the audience forgets their problems for a few seconds, then the concert was worth it,” he said ahead of



Conductor Gabor Takacs-Nagy, pianist Rafal Blechacz and Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra greet the audience at the Seoul Arts Center Orchestra Festival on Tuesday at the Seoul Arts Center Concert Hall. SAC

the performance. “Music is spiritual medicine — we are here to heal.”

A second life beyond the violin

Now a prominent conductor, his path to the podium was anything but expected. A founding member of the Takacs Quartet, he spent 17 years as its first violinist before a hand condition forced him to step away in the early 1990s. The transition was not immediate — it took nearly a decade before he reestablished himself as a conductor.

“Conducting saved me,” he said, adding, “I’m a super lucky person that I can still go on stage.”

The condition persists, and still prevents him from holding a baton. Instead, he leads with his hands, his eyes and his breath — emphasizing communication over control.

For his long-awaited Korean debut, Takacs-Nagy turned to the composers closest to him. The program centered on works by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven — a deliberate choice that reflected both his musical roots and the

identity of the orchestra he leads.

“I grew up with this music. It’s in my blood,” he said.

Rather than introducing himself through novelty, he chose familiarity — but not in a conventional sense. For Takacs-Nagy, Mozart and Beethoven are not monuments of the canon, but living voices. Their music, he insists, speaks directly because it is grounded in human experience.

“They are not gods,” he said. “They are human beings like us — they had fears, love, depression, enthusiasm.”

That belief shapes the way he conducts. Precision, while necessary, is not the end goal. What matters is whether each note carries meaning.

“The score is like an envelope without the letter,” he said. “We must bring the soul back.”

That philosophy carries into his work with the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra, where he draws heavily on chamber music principles.

“No one is a slave,” he said. “Everyone is free, but together.”

That sense of shared listening was particularly evident in his collaboration with Rafal Blechacz, a Polish pianist who rose to international prominence after winning the International Chopin Piano Competition in 2005. Throughout the performance, Takacs-Nagy remained closely attuned to the soloist, at times exchanging a quiet, knowing smile with him.

“I knew he was free and creative,” he said. “It meant we were accompanying him in the right way.”

The connection extended to the audience as well. The orchestra offered three encores, including a moment that drew immediate warmth from the hall: players calling out “manse,” the Korean expression for “long live” or “victory.”

“We thought a lot about the encores and it was a gesture to the Korean people,” he said.

“It was an unforgettable evening for me and for every musician of the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra,” the maestro said.

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White porcelain saved for price of 15 homes goes on view at Kansong

By Park Yuna

In 1936, a single piece of Joseon white porcelain fetched the equivalent of 15 houses at an auction in colonial Seoul.

It was Jeon Hyung-pil (1906-1962) who secured it after intense competition with Japanese collectors in the colonial era (1910-1945), claiming the work that might otherwise have disappeared overseas.

The white porcelain was later designated as a national treasure.

Jeon — who devoted himself to preserving Korean cultural heritage during the colonial period as a wealthy merchant — acquired the porcelain “White Porcelain Bottle with Grass and Insect Design in Underglaze Iron, Copper, and Cobalt Blue” for a record-breaking 14,580 won.

It was the highest price ever recorded at the Gyeongseong Art Club auctions at the time, according to the museum.

Marking the 120th anniversary of Jeon’s birth, the exhibition revisits his 14-year engagement with the auction market in the colonial era through archival materials and selected works from the museum’s collection.

The national treasure is unveiled to the public at the exhibition “The Spirit Preserved by Cultural Conviction” at the Kansong Museum of Art, Korea’s first-ever private museum built by the Korean collector in 1938, showing 46 pieces of Korean cultural heritage.

The white porcelain vessel, originally used to store oil such as sesame oil, later gained recognition for its outstanding craftsmanship.

Alongside the national treasure is the article published on Nov. 23, 1936 by the Gyeongseong Ilbo, the official newspaper of the Japanese colonial government in Korea as the most widely circulated publication during that time.

“The auction began at 1 p.m. on Nov. 22 and drew an overwhelming number of buyers, creating a frenzy of bidding,” the article said.

The auction, founded in 1922 by Jap-



▲ “Chimgye (Ash Stream)” by Kim Jeong-hui (Chusa)
Kansong Art and Culture Foundation

▶ “Uprooting and Wearing an Orchid” by Heungseon Daewongun
Kansong Art and Culture Foundation

▼ White Porcelain Bottle with Grass and Insect Design in Underglaze Iron, Copper, and Cobalt Blue
Kansong Art and Culture Foundation



anese dealers, became the largest art market in colonial Korea, but functioned as a key conduit for the outflow of cultural heritage, much of which never returned.

“Cultural heritage can only be passed on to future generations when there is a conscious effort to value and protect it,” said Jeon In-geon, director of the museum and a grandson of the museum founder.

“Through this exhibition, we hope to share the intense history of collecting behind these works and the true

meaning of safeguarding cultural heritage with visitors.”

The exhibition shows Jeon’s focused acquisition of works related to Kim Jeong-hui, widely known by his pen name Chusa, whose calligraphy and intellectual lineage were highly valued in the art market at the time.

Jeon’s collecting through the auctioneer began in earnest with his acquisition of an orchid painting album by Heungseon Daewongun, one of the most influential figures in the late Joseon era, as the father of King Gojong.

Also known as Lee Ha-eung, Heungseon Daewongun is often seen as working within the artistic lineage influenced by Chusa.

The exhibition will run from April 15 to June 14, with reservations available through Noll Ticket.

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Classic tale of filial daughter returns as modern elegy for unjustly dead

By Hwang Dong-hee

In the traditional pansori “Simcheongga,” the story of a daughter who sacrifices herself for her blind father, one of the most arresting moments is her leap into Indangsu, the fabled sea, as an offering to appease the waters in exchange for rice promised by sailors.

In the lead-up to that scene, Simcheong encounters a chorus of lamenting spirits, many drawn from Chinese folklore. In a new production, the director Nam In-woo reimagines them in a contemporary Korean setting. Here, the spirits are Korea’s own: independence activists and young workers killed in industrial accidents.

The shift reframes Simcheong — long seen as the embodiment of filial piety and a victim of patriarchal ideals — as a symbolic figure who consoles the unjust and sorrowful deaths.

Speaking at a group interview on Wednesday, Nam said she had grappled with how to preserve the distinctive musical and narrative qualities of pansori while making its themes resonate with contemporary audiences.

“I wanted to create a work that pays tribute to those who, like Simcheong, have suffered unjust deaths,” she said.

She recalled a news report from two years ago about a 19-year-old factory intern who died while supporting himself and his family. “I felt there was a parallel with Simcheong’s story,” she said, noting that both figures bore the weight of responsibility at a young age. “With this perspective,

audiences may see the traditional ‘filial daughter’ in a completely different light.”

Musically, the production blends tradition with experiment. Five musicians guide the performance through improvisational sinawi, or shamanism-inspired ensemble music, while in the Indangsu scene, a cello and loop station underpin a soaring arrangement of Mozart’s “Requiem,” creating a modern, monumental elegy.

The production is part of the “Peerless Pansori” series by the National Changgeuk Company of Korea, which has, since 2021, showcased contemporary reinterpretations of pansori by a younger generation of performers.

This latest and sixth installment will be performed April 24 and 25 at the National Theater of Korea’s Daloreum Theater, featuring company members Choi Ho-sung and Kim Woo-jeong.

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▼ Choi Ho-sung (left) and Kim Woo-jeong rehearse scenes from “Peerless Pansori.” National Changgeuk Company of Korea

