



Composer and pianist Ellie Lee led her jazz quartet in a recent concert at the Livingston Library.

## Jazz Artist Communicates with Music

After earning a master of jazz performance from William Paterson University in 2022, Ellie (Seunghyung) Lee performed in New York and New Jersey. But the one place she wanted to play the most was, she said, “my town of Livingston. Playing in my town is meaningful not only to me but also to my family.”

Lee was thrilled when the library’s staff hosted her concert, funded by the Friends of the Livingston Library, on April 23.

About 250 people attended the high-energy performance of Ellie’s Jazz Quartet. Many of them enthusiastically but silently accompanied the music – tapping with their hands and feet – and came up after to talk with the performers. The quartet includes Pureum Jin on saxophone, Ron Gardner on bass, and Dan Giannone on drums. Lee is the pianist.

“I was very happy to play my music for my students and colleagues in Livingston,” Lee said.

Many of the pieces the quartet played will be on Lee’s forthcoming jazz album, her first, that she plans to release this summer. “Originally, there were songs with different instrument settings, so I rearranged them,” she said.

“In addition, I wanted to show



Ellie Lee

the audience the beauty of spring by adding a jazz standard called ‘Joy Spring,’ which I think is the best match for spring, and ‘Blue Bossa,’ a song that everyone knows.”

The library concert was not actually Lee’s first musical contribution to Livingston. She had arranged two traditional Korean songs, “Arirang”

and “New Year’s Day,” for a cultural program at Riker Hill School, which her daughter, Isabelle, attends. Isabelle and her friends sang the songs.

Lee’s path to composing and performing began when she was seven, growing up in South Korea. Her late father had served as a D.J. as a young man, and introduced Lee to different types of music on LPs. She began learning piano and quickly advanced.

“When I played the piano on the stage, I was able to forget my shyness and feel joy, happiness, and satisfaction,” Lee recalled. Doing well in competitions also boosted her confidence.

Yet there was a time that she harbored doubts about becoming a professional musician, when she quit music and entered a college to study history. But that did not bring her the joy that music did. She left school and practiced hard for months in order to enter South Korea’s competitive world of music majors.

Lee earned a bachelor of music degree in classical piano performance from Sookmyung Women’s University, a prestigious music university in Korea, but found that she was looking for more.

“I was frustrated because I’ve always had a desire to play music freely without being constrained by rules,” Lee explained. “Eventually, I found jazz music, which has a certain frame but also can be changed freely.”

With little opportunity to learn jazz in Korea, Lee got a scholarship to move to the U.S. and attend the Berklee College of Music.

“The U.S. has many opportunities to experience true and raw jazz,” she said. However, she says, “the late night jam sessions is a culture that is not easy for a mother to do.” Lee reaches out to musicians she knows, and their friends, when she can play.

“Surprisingly, as I learned jazz, I became more and more attracted to the classical music that had frustrated me,” she said, “Especially when I played Bach’s music, I felt the coexistence between classical and jazz music, which I did not know before.” Conversely, she could feel “the depth of classical music” in the ballad tunes of jazz pianist and composer Bill Evans.

Playing jazz music with other instruments “made me feel like I was communicating with the world,” Lee said. “It was enough to make me feel bliss to listen to the sounds of other instruments, to play them together, and even without words I was able to know their thoughts and intentions in the performances.”

Performing on stage with bands and interacting with the audience, and teaching young students, affirmed her decision to continue her music.

“I could go one step closer to creating my original music in jazz, and I could, as a musician, express my feelings in the same music,” she said.

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