

‘Even though I was called ‘Mrs. Meddler,’ I did it with sense of duty’

OKA-sponsored 17th Peace Concert, themed ‘Path of Light,’ was held at UNESCO headquarters.

70 Korean musicians, French cellist, Spanish pianist performed together on same stage

“I’ve been promoting Korean culture to the world for 22 years as a civilian diplomat. Raising the status of the Republic of Korea is my life.”

Lee Mi-ah (57), president of the Korea-France Cultural Exchange Association and known as a “civilian diplomat” for promoting Korean culture in France, recently visited Korea to attend the Korean Women’s International Network (KOWIN) conference hosted by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. She made these remarks in an interview with Yonhap News on Sept. 2.

Lee founded the nonprofit organization Echoes of Korea (Echos de la Coree) in 2003 and has dedicated 22 years of her life to promoting Korean culture to the world. In recognition of her contributions to Korea-France cultural exchanges, she received the French government’s highest medal of arts and culture and the Korean government’s presidential citation in 2013.

The 17th Peace Concert, sponsored by the OKA and held Sept. 26 at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, is her signature event.

“This festival, held annually for 17 years, promotes Korean culture and prays for peace on the Korean Peninsula. Masters like Jo Sumi and Baek Kun-woo collaborate with emerging artists, nurturing promising talent.”

This year’s theme was “Path of Light.” A 70-piece Frankfurt-based orchestra and choir, primarily comprised of Koreans, a gifted French cellist and a Spanish pianist participated.

“Last year, singer Sohyang performed with La Musique de l’Air. We invited diplomatic envoys from 193 countries, and 40 to 80 ambassadors and diplomatic delegations attended.”

She emphasized her network with high-ranking French officials, saying, “Because of the scale of the event -- with current ministers and chiefs of staff giving congratulatory addresses and ambassadors from various countries in attendance -- some people



Chairwoman Lee Mi-ah (R) receives the Order of Arts and Letters from the French government in July 2013. Former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing presented the medal to her.

mistakenly believe it's hosted by the Korean Embassy or the Korean Cultural Center.”

22 years as civilian diplomat; French Nat'l Medal of Merit

The inspiration for Lee's journey to become a “Korea promoter” stemmed from a shock she experienced while working as a Korean language instructor at the state university of Evry in 2001.

“When I assigned my students a report on Korea, most of the 50 or so students submitted reports on topics like the dire human rights situation in North Korea. I was shocked to discover that South Korea was less well-known in France than North Korea. That's why I decided to properly promote Korean culture,” she said.

In 2003, Lee founded the Korea-France Cultural Exchange Association (Echos de la Coree, Echoes of Korea), which organizes and hosts various cultural performances and exhibitions.

It began with small-scale events for Korean language students,



Lee Mi-ah, president of the Korea-France Cultural Exchange Association



A poster for the 17th Peace Concert, sponsored by the Overseas Koreans Agency

such as making “kimbap,” experiencing “hanbok” and teaching the song “Spring in My Hometown.”

“I borrowed hanbok from pastors and expatriates in Paris, had students wear it and had them practice the ‘sebae,’” she said, referring to the traditional Korean bow. “That was the seed of the organization.”

As her first project, she hosted the Korean opera “Chunhyangjeon” at the Theatre Mogador in Paris. “After 1 1/2 years of preparation, all 2,400 seats were sold out for two consecutive days. French broadcasters like Figaro and Radio Classics were abuzz, proclaiming, ‘Western opera exists in Korea, too.’”

Following Jo Sumi and Baek Kun-woo, Lee leads the way in discovering new talent

At the time, before any other Korean singers, including Jo Sumi, gained international attention, Lee captivated locals by live broadcasting a Korean soprano’s aria (“Sarangga”). Since then, she has bid for and hosted major events, including the Hanji Festival in collaboration with the city of Paris, the ballet “Simcheong” and a large-scale sculpture exhibition commemorating the 120th anniversary of Korea-France diplomatic relations in 2006.

“The works of Korean sculptors were permanently exhibited in the squares of the new city of La Defense in France and aired as a primetime special on French national television,” she said. “We also created a bibimbap performance at the UNESCO headquarters at the request of the Korean delegation.”

Lee’s activities were not limited to culture. She served as a waymaker in various fields, including signing an MOU between the

Daegu-Gyeongbuk Robot Cluster and the French Robotics Association, serving as an honorary ambassador for the Yeosu Expo, supporting the Busan Expo bid and assisting in the relocation of the Korea Agro-Fisheries & Food Trade Corporation to Paris.

“Everyone becomes a patriot when they go abroad,” she said.

For the past four years, as the president of the Korean Women’s Association in France, she and her members have made 700 to 800 kilograms of kimchi each year and distributed it to international students and the elderly, with the total amount of kimchi exceeding 3 tons.

140th anniversary of Korea-France diplomatic relations next year; preparing for 18th concert

Ahead of the 140th anniversary of Korea-France diplomatic relations next year, she expressed her concerns.

“As someone who successfully led the 120th and 130th anniversaries, both countries should have announced an agenda for sector-specific diplomatic events by now,” she said. “We are also preparing for the 18th Peace Concert next year, which will be held in conjunction with the 140th anniversary.”

She also spoke candidly about the challenges she faces during her activities. When her French husband, demanding an end to her activities, cut off his annual support, equivalent to the price of a Mercedes-Benz every year, she found a job at a company to finance her work and has been operating independently for four years. “I’m called ‘Mrs. Meddler,’” she said. “But it’s because of my sense of duty.” 