[To the Reviewer: Thank you! Please note this paper represents the roughest of rough drafts. I struggled with connecting the many loose ends in a coherent fashion, but do recognize the paper, as yet, is unsuccessful in this regard. I am fascinated by the ideals of acoustic science, but more interested in how we construct and perceive acoustic space. In Korea, this has surfaced in a very particular way recently, and I hope the paper communicates this. I look forward to your comments and suggestions for ways to further focus the research and improve upon this initial draft. And, deepest apologies for the late submission. Competing projects and travels meant an unavoidable delay in completing this first draft.]

**The Sonic Habitus of Silk and Wood: Gugak’s 21st Century Terrain[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract**

Transformations in Korean traditional music’s social and cultural capital echo the Republic of Korea’s breathtakingly rapid contemporary developments. Mid-20th century, the country’s traditional music faced a conundrum: selective resuscitation within a restrictive space of ‘tradition.’ Since then, many musicians and composers have extended the boundaries of tradition, manipulating the success of cultural trends to build new platforms for *gugak* in contemporary Korea. Yet, *gugak* remains subject to long-standing cultural prejudice, placing it in an underdog position within the music market. Underscoring *gugak*’s contributions to a core Korean aesthetic serves as one apparatus in fighting such prejudice. This aesthetic celebrates nature and collective emotion, as well as *gugak*’s precious fragility in the contemporary music market.

Inspired by the researcher’s ongoing research on conceptual and visual communication in performance, the paper considers use of physical space as a mark of distinction and status in Korean traditional music performance. The paper examines the restoration of acoustic space in contemporary performance, from the concert stage to the refurbished *hanok*, as crucial to *gugak*’s developing 21st century sonic identity. Far from an unbiased and detached physical realm, the acoustic space becomes meaningful in the act of performance just as it lends meaning to a musical event. Debates regarding amplification, or absence thereof, in addition to ideal stage materials and design, relate closely to contemporary ideals of *gugak*’s authentic sound. The act of performance draws performers and audience alike into an interpretive performance space, reinforcing the moment’s contributions to a Korean socio-historic sonic experience.

**Warming up…**

Last night in my dreams/I saw a wild goose/this morning before dawn/ a magpie sat and cried/ By chance, will my love come? / By chance, will a letter arrive? / The light fades as I wait/ in the western sky/ the sun sets over the land/ the moon has risen / When/ I meet my gentleman/ I will release it all/ Such is life...hey...

Driving the stretch of road between Inji Village of Jisan District and the neighboring Seokgyo Village of Imhoe District,[[2]](#footnote-2) Songdae Gang recalls the hours and days she spent traveling between Jindo Island districts to teach folk songs to fellow islanders. “There was no *jeonsugwan* (training center) in Sibilsi at that time, so we’d meet in people’s homes, or the slaughter house, when it was cold out.” Gang, current holder of the regional intangible heritage *namdo japga* (southern professional folk songs, 2001), has been singing since she can remember. Her mother, Geunyeo Lee, taught her local and professional song repertoire and *pansori* (epic song) she had learned from Hwajungseon Lee, an early 20th century pansori master and recording artist. Gang’s version of “Yukjaebaegi” (six-beat song), in particular, draws strongly on Hwajungseon Lee’s clear yet heavily-ornamented style. “My version of ‘Yukjaebaegi’ was too difficult for many of the women,” notes Gang, “so they changed it to fit their voices.” Yet, in interviews with Jindo women regarding their musical lineage,[[3]](#footnote-3) nearly all credit Gang with teaching the intricacies of this musical representative (*daepyo*) of the island of Jindo. From Hwajungseon Lee, to Gang’s mother and onto Gang, “Yukjabaegi” maps her memory, and vestiges of her “Yukjabaegi” remain mapped around the island.

The above story of a song’s nomadic travels and lineage is set in the 1970s and to mid-1980s, a time of transitions and re-articulation of traditional expressive culture in South Korea. Even on Jindo, a small island off the southwestern coast, times were changing. The irony of the song’s story should not be overlooked: islanders seeking training in the performance of songs most had heard their entire lives. When asked why they were compelled to seek such training, most replied, “To know how to sing it right.” The mounting significance of an intangible heritage system (est. 1961) framed songs such as “Yukjabaegi” within a specialized landscape, one within which formal training and performance were increasingly becoming the norm. Flash forward to today’s Jindo and older villagers gather in the local transmission center to practice and perform; performance of a song like “Yukjabaegi” inspiring erect posture and the use of a fan prop in reference to now-common stage etiquette.

The above story helps illustrate transformations in traditional music’s social and performance contexts over the last century. The intangible cultural heritage system in the Republic of Korea began in 1962 with the designation of the first intangible cultural properties. Two years later, the government selected the first holders of intangible cultural heritage (*boyuja*, or human cultural treasures/*ingan munhwajae)*. The art forms designated as official intangible heritage shaped the curriculum in the new conservatory model of *gugak* (traditional Korean music) education, the first major emerging at Seoul National University in 1959. The Gungnip gugakwon (National Gugak Center), which had been established in 1951, formed the core of gugak officialdom and served as the model for other traditional arts institutions. The increased professionalization and exclusivity of gugak concurred with its newly-framed economic and social capital under the new cultural nationalism of a modern Republic of Korea (Howard 1989 and 2006; Maliangkay 2004 and 2008).[[4]](#footnote-4)

This paper focuses on the concert stage as a key space within which gugak epistemologically has been re-situated. Here, the concert stage is conceived as a centering device for gugak-based experience, one both reflective of and actively framing contemporary gugak aesthetic ideals. The economic rationality inherent to gugak underscores its social status, particularly its function as a symbol national identity. Promotion of gugak remains deeply entrenched in promotion of South Korea: Gugak as nature; Gugak as authentic experience; Gugak as precious legacy; Gugak as core of Korean identity. Such promotion functions both as outward and inward projections, the latter particularly significant in underscoring the music’s relevance to 21st century Korea. Certainly not a popular music in contemporary Korea, gugak essentialisms place the music as an aesthetic enculturation of national pride. Examination of gugak sound space design ideals reveals refurbished relational ontologies of musical place and social context. The epistemology of the contemporary gugak concert hall is a relational epistemology based in economic and social capital (Titon 2013: 17), one deeply related to gugak’s struggle for sustainability and relevance in contemporary society.

In the pages below, a brief history of the concert hall in Korea will be followed by a discussion of the relocation of gugak performance to the stage. Consideration of the stage as symbol of centralization of gugak performance and gugak aesthetic production will be examined before details regarding specific theaters. Nationwide, performance halls designed exclusively for gugak performance exist in every major city and spots, such as Jeonju and Namwon, significant to the music’s development over time. For the purposes of this paper, however, a representative few Seoul-based sites will be discussed as well as the new trend in intimate traditional home (hanok) performance space. While acoustic science remains significant to any discussion of acoustic space, the focus of this paper addresses the social significance of acoustics as relevant to aesthetics and ideals framing contemporary gugak performance.

**Gugak and the Stage**

The two major historic milieu s defining Korean traditional music were the court and the village. At court, occasions determined performance placement, from ancestral shrines to private residences, from processional music accompanying the movement of important men to banquets. The village context includes places of labor, play, economic transactions (i.e. the market place) and *gut pan* (shaman ritual space). Gugak, as a whole, derives considerable meaning from context-specific framing (Yeom and Lee 2001:195-196). For the Royal Ancestral Shrine Ritual, for example, the two orchestras, terrace and court yard, were placed symbolically to represent the realms of heaven and earth, but also acoustically accorded balance within the performance space. *Pungmulnori* presented by *sadang pae* teams in the village *madang* (community space) made full use of the space through highly sonorous performance and choreographed movements within that space.

Heavily contextually and functionally-oriented, music performance historically did not take place in a theater (Lee and Yeom 2001: 195). Much of the music we call ‘gugak’ was ‘popular music’ up until the early part of the 20th century. Therefore, music, dance, ritual activities took place in homes, market places and other venues and most not in special separate spaces (aside from rites connected to sacred locations). This reality led 19th century missionaries such as Isabella Bird Bishop to bemoan the paucity of theater culture and popular entertainment in Korea (1898).[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to Andrew Killick (2010) influence of Japanese and European theater culture led to the development of hybrid forms, such as musical theater, which gave initiated interest in commercial theaters (55). Early theaters were developed conjunction with technological innovations, such as the Seoul Electric Company in 1899 and streetcar lines. Killick identifies Hyeonmnyulsa as the first western-style commercial theater which held performances daily from 6-11 pm. The theater featured a brick external façade and three grades of audience seats. Included in the daily programs were performances of acrobatics and early changgeuk (musical versions of pansori tales) (58).

The Ministry of Education established the National Gugak Center in 1951 focusing on traditional music preservation and promotion. Its function at that time was primarily that of a research institute. Because its institution coincided with the dawn of the Korean War, the early years of the National Gugak Center were spent in a small building in Busan. In 1953, the Institute relocated to Seoul in Unni-dong in central Seoul. At this time, a six-year educational program was established which laid the foundations for the current national middle and high schools of Korean traditional music. In 1967, the Center moved once more to Changjungdong , at the site of the National Theater of Korea. In 1984, land was purchased in Seochodong in southern Seoul and the Center moved to this site in 1988. The first theater, Umyeondang, opened in 1988. There, regular Saturday performances took place and continue to this day. This was the first theater dedicated specifically to the regular performance of traditional music.

*Theater Space Reorienting Gugak*

With the dawn of the intangible heritage system accompanied by the decline in context-specific performance, the need to collect, manage and present traditional performing arts within a central location took precedence. In Jindo, for example, local intangible heritage designations sparked a need for a central *jeonsugwan* (training and transmission center). In order to manage preservation and transmission activities of the national intangible heritage *ganggangsullae* (women’s circle dance, 1966), Namdo *deulnorae* (southern farming cultivation songs, 1973) and Jindo *ssikkim gut* (shaman ritual for the dead, 1980), the local government built the Muhyeong munhwajae jeonsugwan (intangible heritage transmission and education center) in Jindo Township in 1984.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Muhyeong munhwajae jeonsugwan space includes administration offices, classrooms and a small indoor stage and outdoor performance area. This spaced became the primary performance site for intangible heritage until the building of the Hyangtomunhwawon (institute of local culture) in 1997.[[7]](#footnote-7) The site since has hosted once-weekly Saturday afternoon performances as a part of a tourist route known as the “Saturday Folk Tour” (*toyo minsok yeohaeng*). Performances feature Jindo-based national and regional/local intangible heritage by individuals designated human cultural treasures (*ingan munhwajae*). In Jindo as well as other regions, the collection of local performance styles under one roof contributed to decreased local diversity and increased standardization of performance style. The ‘right’ way to perform a particular folksong, such as ‘Jindo Arirang,’ for example, became very narrowly defined and based on the styles of senior performers (in this case, human culture treasures) (Dongmae Bak, 01.09.15, interview).

In 2004, the National Gugak Center opened the Jindo regional center, the establishment of which Keith Howard notes “represents a considerable shift in orientation” (1996:100) in gugak performance and transmission on the island. The National Gugak Center in Jindo (Gungnip namdo gugakwon) sits on the southern edge of the island, just north of the small fishing village, Gwiseong, in Imhoe District, approximately 30 minutes by car from Jindo Township. Physically isolated from many communities on the island, the institution nevertheless has become a dominant presence on the island, offering shuttle buses from Jindo Township to its fee Friday evening performances and evening classes. The orientation shift to which Howard refers is that of management as well as authenticity. With is establishment in Jindo, the Center has since gained management over major community festivals (such as the Mysterious Sea Road Festival/Jindo sinbi-eui badatgil chukje and the annual Southwestern folk song competition) and it has become the island’s leading authority, aside from the intangible heritage center in Jindo Township, on gugak..

As in the case of Jindo, theaters established for traditional music and dance performance are extensions of the Ministry of Sports, Tourism and Culture as display vehicles for preserved heritage. Government-run theaters such as the Umyeongdang at the Seoul Center and the theater of the Jindo Center embody central government gugak supervision and design. According to artist and independent theater-owner Yunjeong Heo, “[Such theaters have not been] a commercial enterprise, but more of a concept of service…before the engagement with the world music market, the entire concept of gugak performance was not about ‘selling gugak,’ but about presenting it” (10.03.15, interview).[[8]](#footnote-8) This accounts for the historic significance of the *chodaegwan*, or invitation ticket, in filling theater halls. Designating space for gugak performance has not been a response to demand but, rather, has aligned consistently with government paradigms of and goals for gugak.

*Re-packaging Gugak in Theater Space*

Heo credits the increasing active engagement with the world music marketplace since 2000 as a turning point in the concept of gugak performance domestically; spurring interest in commercially packaging gugak-based performance groups, particularly amongst younger performers. As a performer, Heo was at the forefront of international collaborations. “Because I manage a theater, I thought: If I produce an opportunity for showcases, we can create commercial viability and potential for this music.” She contends the new engagement with the world music market—via performing arts markets and world music festivals—created a demand for alternative gugak performance space.

There were already major, government-run theaters dedicated to gugak performance. Truthfully, it was the repertory that was lacking. It had nothing to do with an absence of theaters. There really was no need for new theaters. But, once young performers took to international collaborations, fusion and cross-over on a large scale, there was a demand for new space. At that time [before 2008], the large government theatres did not present performances of cross-over or fusion genres.

Heo’s theater, Changwoo gukjang, became a nurturing space for young artist development. In 2008, Heo secured funding from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (from here on, the Ministry) to launch the “*gugak* realm future ‘star incubating’ project” (*gugakgye miraeui seuta inkyubeiting peurojekteu*). Through this project, young performers and teams competed for a spot in the lineup via the theater’s *Cheonchamanbyeol* (Myriade Wave) concert series. The project aimed to “nurture new artists and groups, and secure Korean traditional music’s creative succession and competitive power on the 21st century world stage.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Heo’s work at the Changwoo Theater stimulated a paradigm shift in gugak and a new space, that of the trendy Bukchon (north village) and Seochon (west village neighborhoods), for a youthful gugak. Inspired by the indie music scene in the Hongdae university neighborhood of Seoul, the website ‘indiegugak.com’ was launched as a promotional site for performances in this ‘unofficial’ gugak space. A precedent for this paradigm shift would be that of the Space Theater’s role in catapulting the percussion team SamulNori to near rock-god status in the late 1978. At that time, the presentation of a tradition-based performance genre on an urban stage not specifically allocated for gugak performance was mind-blowing (see Hesselink 2012). The success of this maiden-voyage of urban gugak stimulated a gugak popularization movement in the 1980s which paved the way for internationalization in the early 2000s.

One year prior to Heo’s project, officialdom was stepping in line with this paradigm shift. The National Gugak Center, in partnership with the Gugak Broadcasting (a government-run gugak-only radio station) had launched a similar project in 2007, the 21st Century Korean Music Project, with goals aligned to that of Changwoo’s star incubating project. This new, trendy and commercial gugak which had developed in the periphery of the gugak world was coming full circle and entering the fold of the gugak theater. The Korean government’s interest in this new gugak realm was founded in a realization of Korean popular culture’s value in boosting Korea’s position in the global economy as well as in global culture. The current concert lineup in the theaters of the National Gugak Center in Seoul includes a fusion/cross-over concert series featuring the highest ticket prices amongst the concert series offered.

**Defining Gugak Space**

On March 27 and 28, 2012, The National Gugak Center held a performance of the complete suites of *Yeongsanhoesang*. The archetypal *pungnyu* (‘wind and stream,’ aristocratic chamber) piece exists in several versions, three of which (original, wind, extended) are preserved as a part of the National Gugak Center’s classic repertoire for the court music performance troupe. The performance took place in the Yeakdang, the large theater of the NGC. At the opening of the concert on March 27, master of ceremonies Yeongun Kim announced microphones would not be employed throughout the two days of *Yeongsanhoesang* performances because the music “was never meant to be amplified.” Then-Director of the NGC, Dongbuk Lee, expressed concern the large space would eat up the sound, yet emphasized the symbolic significance of reaching for a purer, unadulterated sound (personal communication, 27.03.2012).

The scenario described above epitomizes current concerns regarding acoustics in gugak theaters as well as general concerns regarding capturing the best sound possible in live gugak performances. The wide-spread understanding in acoustic science, and amongst musicians, of the distortion possibilities of amplification and the impact the shape, size and materials of a concert hall can have on the overall sound quality of a performance is nothing new. In Korea, however, the move to develop more gugak-friendly spaces has gained momentum in only the last ten years, inspiring the construction of acoustically-sound spaces and renovations of older spaces.

*To mic or not to mic?*

The art of applying amplification to acoustic instruments can be tricky. For decades, acoustic science has grappled with techniques for amplifying acoustic guitars and violins, among many others, without destroying the integrity of the acoustic sound. Many concert spaces are designed with the right amount of liveness to project the sound of instruments, but not muddle the sound in the case of large ensembles. Pickups were designed to project acoustic sound properties without changing essential qualities of tone color and range distinctions (i.e. between treble and bass).

Acoustic science specialists have recently begun to explore the differences between amplifying traditional Western and Korean instrumentation, and some of the most innovative research has been conducted within sound studios. In a 2013 study, for example, Je-seok Han experimented with microphone mounting angle and distance instruments based on their radiation characteristics. Close microphone techniques within a recording studio setting were used to determine the strengths and weaknesses of varied positioning of microphones in relation to the instruments. Han first determined the natural radiation patterns of instruments as soft as the 12-string gayageum and as brash as the small gong, gwaenggwari, then positioned microphones to project sounds in a pattern that best mimicked a typical stage setting. He concluded with a table of ideal microphone positions for gugak instrumentation (4760).

The research described above might appear applicable to a closed, controlled environment, but it is valuable in providing specific techniques for amplification in the field. Particularly in mixed string-wind ensembles, silk string instruments with a relatively close radiation projection and quick decay easily lose to the more sonorous bowed string instruments such as the haegeum and the double-reed piri. In an all-too typical scenario, a gayageum will be quickly amplified by a microphone placed on the floor beneath the instrument to allow for it to be heard. In addition, the common substandard amplification of instruments at festivals and in some theaters (such as the Hyangto munhwawon in Jindo) ends in sound distortion and, typically, ear pain. Most people who have experienced low quality sound systems might agree the poor quality undermines gugak’s accessibility and social positioning (Han 2013: 4754).

*Designing for gugak*

Concert Halls designed specifically for Korean music performance are a relatively new phenomenon. Because the concert hall is an imported phenomenon, the halls that existed up until the late 1990s were not designed with gugak instrumentation acoustic properties in mind but for typical acoustics of western vocal styles and instrumentation. Within the first decade of the 21st century, the newly instituted Busan National Gugak Center and the Daejeon Gugak Center were in the process of building gugak-specific concert spaces (Hye-Yeon Kim, et al 2014: 310) and looking at the strengths and weaknesses of pre-existing gugak spaces. Among the components considered significant were reverberation time, decay time, voice articulation and clarity (312-213).

In research on gugak theater design, most scholars assert traditional architectural styles and building materials best carry and manage the sonorities of Korean traditional instrumentation (Gyeonggu Bak and Jeongtae Gim 1995: 282-283; Chang-won Yeom and Eun-seok Lee 2001: 196; Won Kim [date?]: 25-26). For example, the natural wood floors and beams of the hanok (traditional Korean home) accentuate the desired sound balance in “our tradition, which emphasizes the bass and absorbs the treble sonorities” (Bak and Gim 1995: 283). The wood of the hanok, as well, deflect the sound to allow for maximum sound production by the silk string plucked instruments. Duration of decay for Korean traditional instruments is 0.8 to 1.2 seconds on average. Compared to an average of 1.7 seconds for Western instrumentation, the short natural decay necessitates much attention to this aspect of design. Such research contends use of natural materials such as wood, mud, rice paper in contemporary theatres maximize sound decay and clarity, particularly important to the slowest genres of traditional performance.

Beyond building materials, space design carries both figurative and practical weight. On the practical end of the spectrum, researchers argue variable stage design to be ideal for gugak performance, considering the diversity of traditional genres and corresponding acoustic needs. The performance of pansori, for example, involves an active performer who engages continually with an (ideally) responsive audience. Staging in the middle of theater with audience members surrounding maximizes the potential of such a performance style. But changgeuk (musical theatre based on pansori) on the other hand is primarily presentational in nature and relies on stage settings and choreography. For changgeuk, then, a stage facing an audience is ideal. Instrumental performances thrive in a semi-circular format due to sound projection arcs inherent to the instruments’ natural materials (Bak and Gim 1995: 283; Won Kim [date?]: 25; Haan, Lee and Jeong 2005). Figuratively, design space mimicking performance in “the field,” an open space with minimal divide between audience and performer (Bak and Gim 1995: 293), represents an authenticity of origins.

Authenticity in design remains significant for gugak-oriented theatres (Lee and Kim 2000:114). Beyond acoustic properties, the physical reference to traditional performance space and design principles marks the gugak theater as distinct from general theater space. In descriptions of the theaters outlined below, references to traditional design take precedent over details of acoustic properties. The physical design persists in authenticating the space as traditionally Korean.

**Gugak Theaters[[10]](#footnote-10)**

Concert hall culture was a decidedly Western one in most of Korea’s 20th century. Post-armistice Republic of Korea focused on development and modernization, with the latter typically associated with westernization. The development of conservatory-style education at universities reflects a desire to legitimize gugak’s presence in contemporary society. When a young Seoul National University gayageum student, Chaesuk Lee, made the decision to hold a solo recital in a concert hall in 1964 it represented, according to Hee-sun Kim, an effort to create a new elite image for gugak (2008:179). Over twenty years later, the first theaters for gugak performance emerged.

*National Gugak Center—Umyeondang, Yeakdang, Pungnyu Sarangbang, Outdoor Theater*

The Umyeondang opened in 1988. The theater served as a vehicle of the National Gugak Center’s preservation and cultural promotion goals, offering regular performances of traditional folk and court-based music and dance. According to current promotional materials, the Umyeondang is a space “suited for the traditional and modern arts.” The 2015 promotional brochure also notes, “This 300-seat scale small theater reduces the audience and stage divide for a more authentic performance experience.”

The theater was renovated in 1997 following the publication of a detailed critique of the theater’s shortcomings (Bak and Gim 1995). Criticisms included a high level of ambient noise disrupting the clarity of sound for the audience as well as environmental noise caused primarily by the theater’s proximity to a main thoroughfare (Nambu Beltway). The report called for more concerted effort in acoustic design and sound proofing. The lack of variable stage settings, as well, proved an issue. Following the report, the 1997 renovations focused on rectifying the problems identified in the report. A high-tech stage sound system was developed for both clarity of sound for the audience and a monitoring system for the performers. Sound proofing was reinforced and a mobile stage was built into the front of the main stage to allow for transitions between more intimate and large-scale performances.

In 1996 in response to the demand for additional performance space, a second theater was built. Known colloquially as the ‘large theater,’ the Yeakdang became the central stage, hosting major, large-scale performances at the National Center. The design of the theater reflected the renovations of the small theater, including a mobile stage and concerted effort at sound design. According to the Center’s 2015 brochure, “The 700-seat theater keeps alive the feel of the old-time madang [community space]. The shield-shaped sound reflectors demonstrate a strong connection to traditional aesthetic principles.” The theater has undergone renovations several times since it opened in efforts to enhance the acoustic integrity of the space (Kim and Jeong 2015). Directly facing the Seoul Arts Center, an arts complex devoted primarily to Western traditional performing arts, the Yeakdang stands as the National Gugak Center’s centerpiece.

In 2011, tragedy struck the National Gugak Center when, during the heavy rainfalls of the summer, the base of the mountain (Umyeong Mountain) against which the Center sits collapsed in a series of mudslides. A good portion of the complex, including a museum and offices in addition to the two theaters, was buried in mud. Archival materials were destroyed, instruments were lost and the two theaters experienced extreme water damage. Months of repairs and renovations followed as plans for the building of two new theaters went into effect. A massive outdoor arena was built behind the Center once new drainage systems were built and the side of the mountain was re-landscaped. Seating 1300, the Yeonhui madang hosts summer evening concert series.

The other theater, the Pungnyu sarangbang (space for the love of pungnyu), opened in early 2012. Touted as a state-of-the-art theater designed exclusively for gugak acoustics, the theater hosts purely acoustic performances.[[11]](#footnote-11) Spatial beauty and function were to meet within a space referencing traditional through a contemporary lens. *Pungnyu* (wind and stream) refers to an aesthetic wherein one draws more closely to nature, and one’s rightful self, through artistic activity. Spaces within which the pungnyu lifestyle was practice were called ‘*pungnyubang*.’ The space within aristocratic homes designed for male family members to enjoy literature and the arts as well as welcome guests was referred to as the ‘*sarangbang*.’The promotional brochure labels the theater, “A sarangbang (space for enjoyment) of intact reverberations and affect.” The design and acoustic properties lend the space a sense of authenticity, crucial to the acknowledgment of gugak’s import in contemporary Korean society.

The Pungnyu sarangbang represents current trends in gugak cool—an aesthetic of organic sound and a holistic approach to music experience. In recent years, the word ‘traditional’ has been linked to organic materials suggesting a pure Korean nature. In hanbok design, for example, hanbok made from hand-dyed fabric can sell for an average of 3 million won (about 3,000 US dollars). The new trend in traditional-style clothing has meant clothing stores lining the streets of popular locations such as Insadong in Seoul and the Jeonju traditional village selling ‘hand-dyed and designed’ clothing for exorbitant prices. The aesthetic of nature suggests a connection with a true Koreanness which is now quite marketable. Promotional materials for the theater play up the purity of the space and its ability to transport the listener to a space of pure Korea.

The theater features stadium seating with a twist: there are no chairs but descending levels upon which pillow placed in lieu of seats. Concert goers must remove their shoes before entering the space meant to mimic the feel of entering an old home for an intimate performance. The brochure continues:

An old-time literati gathering place for society’s music, the place of social exchange known as the pungnyu bang is reinterpreted through modern society. With no sound system, just the natural reverberations of instrument and song, one can feel the essence of the performer’s breath within this domestically unique 130-seat performance space.

The physical features of the theater add to its Korean mystique, particularly the sound reflectors suspended above the stage. The reflectors function to direct and contain the sound within the space, but are designed to re-inforce the symbolic significance of the space. Designed to mimic the appearance of traditional lattice, the reflectors project “a vintage charm, adding an important aesthetic effect to the theater space.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Despite attention to detail and in-depth research on the perfect design, budget constraints meant a quick finish and last-minute materials replacement. Wood intended to mimic the acoustic strength of the traditional hanok was replaced by less-expensive paneling. Issues of quick decay and deadening of sound have proven problematic for string players. While the space is evocative of an old Korea aesthetic charm, the theater has become a nightmare for gayageum and *geomungo* (6-string plucked zither) players who must strive to overcome the sound-dampening effects of the space. The theater has also begun to host semi-acoustic performances of fusion as part of a new trend concert series, employing electronic amplification when necessary.

The four theaters of the National Gugak Center serve as platforms for performances by the Center’s four major troupes: Traditional Dance, Court Music, Folk Music and Contemporary Music. Situated besides the Seoul Arts Center, arguably the premier performing and fine arts facility in southern Seoul, the NGC represents power and centrality in the word of Korean traditional music. Having transitioned from vehicle for display of intangible heritage to center of new trends, the NGC continues to revise and develop its stages to fit the ideals of acoustic science and space design. The significance of this is one of status: re-interpreting expressive culture as elite icon of national identity.

*Namsan Gugakdang*

Located near Namsan Mountain in the northern part of Seoul, the Namsan Gugakdang sits inside the Korean folk village at Namsan. Run by the Sejong Seoul Center, the theater is built into the lower levels of a structure with the façade of a traditional aristocratic home. Opened in 2007, the theater has quickly gained a reputation for its innovative, traditional-style performances which stretch the boundaries of ‘tradition.’ English information about the theater a Korea tourism site states, “The main performance space on the first basement level is the only music venue in Korea equipped with a specially-designed solid wood interior which does not absorb sound, allowing the audience to experience natural unamplified acoustics.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The Korean version, however, corrects this area by emphasizing the theater as the first theater designed for acoustic performances of gugak.

Emphasis on nature, once again, points us to an important contemporary understanding of traditional music aesthetics. The pungnyu aesthetic has become an especially appealing one in Korea’s urban, global 21st century. It is significant to note that the re-invented pugnyu is a genteel aesthetic, one of organic calm. The aesthetic reaches back to aristocratic sons of Silla and the literati of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), but historically it was an exclusive one designed for the social elite. The embracing of the pungnyu aesthetic in 21st century urban Korea seems a bit ironic, considering the rejection of elitist ideals during the people’s movement (*minjunghwa undong*) of the 1980s.The social movements of the ‘80s embraced a folksy rawness as an expression of indigenous modernity, and served as the perfect vehicle for anti-government protests.[[14]](#footnote-14) Adoption of pungnyu ideals hints of a new elitism, one clothed in the organic trends of privileged and couched in the language of egalitarianism. Within this aesthetic exists a tinge of nostalgia, but it is a nostalgia re-focused within Seoul’s busy urban soundscape. The traditional-style wood structure of this theater physically sets the building apart, demarcating it as both escape from the bustle of everyday lives and resurrection of an inner elegance and tranquility.

In the design references to an elite refinement, the theater aligns closely with presentational trends in gugak, as exhibited by the design of the Pungnyu sarangbang at the National Gugak Center. Yet, the theater sets itself apart from the NGC by its choice of repertoire. The theater hosts performances by some of the most renowned performers in the world of gugak, such as gayageum master Byeongki Hwang, but it has become particularly well-known for up-to-date presentations by young, up-and-coming performers. While steeped in traditional aesthetics and genres, the performance lineup at the Namsan Gugak Theater appeals to the general public, specialized enough to attract gugak specialists but entertaining enough to draw in novice crowds. The theater has become known as a commercial success in the world of gugak, selling tickets at 30,000 won (approx.. 30 US dollars) a pop.

The theater has become the stomping ground of many young, popular performers, such as the JeongGaAkhoe (JGAH). The team formed in 2000 has become known for its renditions of traditional chamber music as well as contributing innovative new works to the contemporary Korean soundscape. Their concert series, Pyeongnong (평롱/平弄) combined their team-composed repertoire with light and video effects. The overall theme of the performance connects to existential questions of existence and belonging in the contemporary world. Summer 2015 featured another well-received performance series “Big Sisters of Gugak” featured performances by popular female artists such as haegeum (2-string fiddle) player Ggotbyeol and daegeum (large transverse bamboo flute) player Seungmin Cha. The concert series was solidly sold out for weeks, still an anomaly in the traditional music concert world, but evidence of change.

*‘New’ Trend: The hanok*

With her body leaning into the wood of the instrument and arms stretched over twelve silk strings, the *gayageum* (plucked zither) performer draws the witness to her artistry over the hills and valleys of the doleful *namdo gyemyeonjo*, a melodic construction of a deeply shaken mi, sustained la and breaking tone featuring a descent from do to ti. As the space between body of performer and body of instrument becomes imperceptible, sound transforms into an intimate expression of inner aesthetics. The music’s intense earthiness finds a poignant resting point in a sustained and unornamented high do. Seemingly dissonant, the tone represents not conflict but sorrow. Reaching this ‘pocket of sorrow’ (*uleum boddari*), the performer lets the sound slowly decay before she once again plucks the string and slowly manipulates the dying tone into a gentle and mournful tonal descent.

Sharing this performance space, I am at once mesmerized by the intimacy of the event and discomfited by it. Seated on the floor of a refurbished *hanok* (Korean traditional home), I am overwhelmed with the perfume of pine beams, the coolness of oak floors, the feel of the cool late-summer breeze through the open windows and the sound of rustling bamboo accompanying the gayageum’s resonance. Others surround me, seated on flat floor pillows covered with ornate silk in a semicircle within reach of the performer. Together as an audience, we alternatively admire the intricacy of the performance techniques and bow our heads reflectively. Some stretch their legs, unaccustomed to the practice of sitting straight-backed and cross-legged on a floor. The environmental aura and the masterful performance are designed to draw us into a space evocative of Korean tradition, a space out of time yet in time. The hanok itself represents time past harnessed for present enjoyment; making it a perfect space within which the gayageum’s aged tunes can arouse ageless pleasure. Yet, intellectually I am aware of the history of the symbolic capital electrifying the air we breathe. The hanok itself is a reconstruction of an idealized past, a reflection of the modern urban home in the early 20th century which has now come to symbolize a Korean essence and timeless past.[[15]](#footnote-15) This space and sounds meant to draw us to the depths of Korean experience exist on the periphery of contemporary society and culture.

Performances in hanok have become increasingly common events since the first decade of the 21st century. Yunjeong Heo, the musician and owner of the Changwoo theatre mentioned above, regularly hosts hanok concerts in the Bukchon (north village) neighbourhood of Seoul, one of the last bastions of hanok in a Seoul filled with semi-modern villas and high-rise apartments. Myungsook Kim of Soongsil University presented his research on hanok acoustics and traditional music performance at the Acoustical Society of America annual meeting in the fall of 2015. Kim contends the hanok acts as a resonator due to the architectural recipe of wooden floors atop stone blocks encasing an under-floor heating system. According to Kim, the structure acts as a “soundbox, spreading sound to every corner of the house” (ASA ). The natural reverberation time increases to an average of 1.25 seconds, better on average than that of theaters designed for gugak performance.

In the spring and summer of 2014, the JeongGaAkhoe organized the concert series “Artists Enter Hanok (yein hanok-e deulda)” in the aristocratic Min Family Home of Namsan Folk Village. The series included performances by senior gugak performers, and featured a mentoring program within which young, fledgling artists were paired with seasoned performers. The program booklet described the choice of hanok as a sport to be one of connecting with the ancestors by getting closer to earth. Rather than a beautiful backdrop to the performances, the program notes contend the hanok itself serves as a sound system, raising of the beauty of the sound while drawing participants to the roots of Korean aesthetics.

**In closing…**

The paper has journeyed through the development of theatre culture in Korea to current trends dominating gugak-oriented theatre space. Through examination of the aesthetic principles of gugak theatre design, the paper has demonstrated the epistemological placement of gugak in contemporary Korean society. The concert stage becomes a metaphore for gugak-based experience, one both reflective of and actively framing contemporary gugak aesthetic ideals. Examination of gugak sound space design gives us the opportunity to uncover the relational ontologies of its place and social context, one revealing a consistent search for sustainability and relevance in contemporary society.

Consideration of theater aesthetics uncovers themes of authenticity tied to a reconstruction of gentility and its symbolic power as unique cultural entity in the world of music. The event of place (emplacement, Casey 1996: 24) becomes reality once concert goers, performers and place come together in the experience of cultural aesthetics. No one element of this triad supersedes the other as they interanimate each other in the creation of meaning within space and time. This meaning, deeply entrenched in contemporary gugak history and social developments, forms the core of the music’s potential for sustainability beyond the 21st century.

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1. I have chosen to use the ROK’s revised Romanization system for ease of use and compatibility with primary source material. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. More widely known on Jindo as ‘Sibilsi’ (10-day town), the village is named for its market held every ten days in the village center. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Referencing my field interviews with women between ages 60 and 90 from the villages of Sopo, Inji, Seokgyo, Hyanggyo and Gwiseong and Jindo Township. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Scholars such as Keith Howard and Roald Maliangkay have written extensively on the intangible heritage system in Korea. For in-depth details on and critiques of the system, please refer to their publications referenced. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quoted in Killick 2010:54 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Current national designations also include Jindo *dashiraegi* (funeral play, 1985) and regional/local designations also include Jindo *buk nori* (1987), Jindo *manga* (1987), Namdo *japga* (2001), Sopo *geolgun nongak* (2006), Jodo *datbae norae* (2006) and the making of Jindo *hongju* (1994). <http://www.nihc.go.kr/nihchome/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do;jsessionid=ZTqhha7SRl11ULd1W7XHNeiKhRdJwuJaBs1CXBvF8wbDVKI76ZC5vUwVNCXTx8NX.Svc-Arch-WEB_servlet_engine3?nttId=2557&bbsId=BBSMSTR_000000000112&pageIndex=5&searchtitle=&searchcont=&searchkey=&searchwriter=&searchWrd=&mn=KO_02_04_02> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.crezone.net/?resource=%EC%A7%84%EB%8F%84%ED%96%A5%ED%86%A0%EB%AC%B8%ED%99%94%ED%9A%8C%EA%B4%80&tab_act=listing_description> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Heo owns and operates the Changwoo Theater near Anguk Station in Seoul. The theater was among the first to regularly sell tickets to performances of cutting-edge traditional arts-based performances. Heo, as well, runs the annual Changwoo World Music Festival in the Bukcheon neighborhood, bringing in artists from around the world to collaborate with Korean artists. Overwhelmed with the responsibilities of managing a theater while maintaining an active performance career, Heo has put theater activities on hiatus at the moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <http://www.provin.gangwon.kr/dep/part17/sub06/sub06.asp?hb_Mode=readArticle&hb_BoardManager_ID=BFEEAA03&searchRegYear=&hb_SearchItem=&hb_SearchWord=&hb_BoardItem_ID=110006&hb_PageNum=4> [last accessed August 2015; the content has since been removed]. I.S.M’s 2015 performance in this concert series is a good recent example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOS4Zgx71CA> For more on such endeavors, see my article in the 2012 special issue of *the* *world of music* on Korean ensembles and contemporary soundscapes (Finchum-Sung 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Due to length and time restrictions, the Intangible Heritage Transmission Center’s Pungnyu Theater and KOUS (Korea Cultural House) will not be covered here, but will be discussed in the presentation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. http://www.newscj.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=183357 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://www.munhwanews.com/koreaCom/view.html?idxno=4492>;

    <http://www.newscj.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=183357> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <http://www.visitseoul.net/en/article/article.do?_method=view&m=0004003002010&p=03&art_id=196&lang=en>; <http://www.visitseoul.net/kr/article/article.do?_method=view&m=0004003002010&p=03&art_id=196&lang=kr&tab=detail> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Folk music in Korea existed historically in the realm of commoners. For a good part of Korea’s history, folk music performance remained an extra-court phenomenon until members of the upper classes began to actively enjoy it in the 18th century. Folk music’s historic personality as music of the commoner and antithesis of elite court music made it an appealing vehicle for anti-government protests. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Reference to Robert Fouser’s writings on the hanok’s symbolic capital in contemporary Korea. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)