**Breaking the Trend: Composing Korean Music for Korean Instruments**

**Hilary Finchum-Sung (Seoul National University)**

**Intro**

When asked to contribute to a roundtable on interculturality in East Asian Contemporary music, the notion of interculturality spanning physical space—two foreign cultures originating in disparate geographic space meeting, or colliding--dominated my vision. This assumption emerges from truths about contemporary developments in traditional music. Yet, like anyone doing research on contemporary traditional music culture in Asia, I’ve had to come to terms with the nuanced complexities of context and musical change. In the case of Korea, the story of ‘interculturality’ in contemporary music calls for us to reconsider interculturality beyond interaction of people and/or elements from different cultural backgrounds (across space) to one embracing interface across time. The interculturality in music in the past has infered a west-to-east flow paradigm which was long ago debunked in globalization studies. Yet, still discussions of interculturality often assume that the domestic, or indigenous culture, is indeed the domestic culture. In Korea’s case, the traditional music of Korea is more foreign than Hayden Sonatas or Philip Glass. In this very brief presentation, my goal is to argue for a reevaluation of interculturality in new music creativity as one inclusive of historical distance, time and revival.

**(Slide 2)** In order to consider a more nuanced model of interculturality in new music composition, I will briefly cover essential trends and contributors to new music composition for traditional instrumentation. Over time, we can see a budding contemporary composition culture heavily dependent on Western compositional structures, idioms and frameworks (such as key signatures, mensural notation, functional harmony, etc) which develops gradually into one open to traditional creative practice and alternative expressivities. To demonstrate this, I have highlighted four scenarios of new music for gugak.

**Brief History**

The earliest composition recognized as something other than traditional music of the court and folk repertoire was composed in 1939 **(REFER TO SLIDE 3)**. The socio-political climate of the 1940s and 1950s did not nurture active creative endeavors. Once the new Republic of Korea began to seek a modern identity in the late 1950s national development and modernity became closely aligned with a Western model. Music of the traditional court and folk realms took a back seat and, often, were looked upon with disdain. In the 1960s however, efforts to develop new music were jump-started by a wave of traditional orchestras appearing in Singapore, Tokyo, Beijing, etc. Korea’s efforts to modernize the nation also included placing traditional instruments together within a European classical orchestral format. The new performance form required repertoire, which led to government-led ‘national music’ competitions and commissions.

With no previous formalized system for domestic compositional training, the model for composition drew on the ideals of the Western composer, identifying composition as an academic endeavor within which the composer and performer played separate roles. Because ‘composition’ was defined locally as a Western tradition, there were no standards for composing *gugak* (Korean traditional music). Rather, the earliest 20th century composers received training in Western compositional techniques and applied these to works designed for *gugak* instrumentation **(refer to slides 4-5—Yi Sung Chun—how he is different. Common to have haegeum act like violin, etc, but his work on developing instrumentation)**. For many earlier composers, the key to development, it seemed, rested in combining something Western with something Korean. Yet, Hwang Byung-ki…**(refer to slide 6)**.

Following such developments, including a preservation system, in the 1960s and ‘70s, young musicians in the 1980s began to consider gugak popularization as an ideal. Keep in mind that, despite the efforts of composers, gugak remained relatively unpopular and, with the majority of new music composition being experimental, had a limited audience. The primary mechanism was fusion *gugak* instrumentation with instruments such as keyboards, guitars and drum kits. This new ‘fusion’ reinforced the paradigm that gugak development depended on blending with Western instruments, musical structures and idioms. Such a dependence on Western tools to create new Korean music drew criticisms from many in the world of gugak, most notably Lee Kang Sook, whose 1977 treatise on “Genuine” and “Quasi-Korean” music warned Koreans not to be “deceived by the allure of Western material.” Lee, and others, believed such a deception could lead to uncertainty regarding an “authentic” Korean music.

Beginning in the 1990s, however, young *gugak* instrumentalists and composers began defying this assumption by seeking development within *gugak* itself, which led to a proliferation of compositional styles and resource materials for use within these styles.

**Won Il**

*P’iri* performer/percussionist and artistic director Won Il’s compositional mission has been to generate a continuum from Joseon-era performance and creativity aesthetics. Such an aesthetic is that of the musician as composer. Won has founded many teams, most notably is the currently on hiatus team Baramgot, which formed in 2004 with Won as artistic director. Baramgot’s central musical inspiration remains *sinawi*. According to Won Il, *sinawi*’s relative freedom from a set musical form makes it the perfect foundation for the creation of new music. Because of years of training within the new 20th-century based conservatory mode, neither composition nor improvisation came naturally to the team consisting of *kayagŭm*, *taegŭm*, *kŏmun’go* (and later sitar and *haegŭm*).The musicians engaged in intensive workshops aimed at honing improvisational and compositional skills; abilities, Won believes, left dormant in contemporary musicians because most have not been trained to tap their creativity.

The concept of “play,” in particular, remains central to Won’s personal composition philosophy. “Play” refers to the manipulation of rhythmic and melodic motives—creativity without sacrificing musical integrity. The piece “Compass” developed initially as a programmatic piece, reflecting the team’s impressions of their travels in India. When the quest for individually-submitted motives was unsuccessful, Won tried playing with a particular rhythmic pattern. As he worked that out, a melodic theme came to mind, which he subsequently directed members of the team to play. This motive was combined with a distinct *kŏmun’go* melodic motive (2:39) and an Indian tala inspired rhythmic cadence (따리라리란 repeated three times, 05:44) added to the overall rhythmic texture of the piece **(video)**.

**Jeonggaakhoe**

The JeongGaAkHoe (hereafter, JGAH) formed in 2000 with the goal of drawing on repertoire deeply rooted in Korean musical traditions. With the guiding principles of ‘harmony’ and ‘balance,’ the team has become known for performing the chamber music of the court repertoire as well as contributing innovative new works to the contemporary Korean soundscape. Initially commissioning external composers for new works, the team eventually began to write their own pieces through intensive collaborative jam sessions. The team’s mission remains to innovate without reliance on Western musical styles and instrumentation.

“Sangsabyeolgok” is a piece based on the *gasa* of the same name. While the aesthetics of long poetic song provide the framework for the piece, the beginning developments and subsequent composition of the piece add another layer to a piece which, at first, appears to be an arrangement of this *gasa* piece. The piece began as a directive from the *taep’yo* to create a gamelan version of “Sangsabyeolgok.” Team members attempted this, but decided to explore the initially created rhythmic motives through their individual instruments, resulting in intersecting, repeated melodic motives that form the instrumental section of the piece beneath the vocals. Once the representative patterns for each instrument was set, the patterns were then combined in groups of three, such as 1-2-3 together with 123 123 and 321 321 **(video)**.

**Jaram Lee**

Jaram Lee is a pansori singer who refers to herself as a storyteller. Based on a desire to tell stories relevant to her own life, Lee began creating pansori-style pieces combining backing ensembles, theatrical staging, costumes and choreography.

*Sacheon-ga* is an adaptation with a modern pansori twist of German playwright Bertolt Brecht’s 20th-century play *The Good Woman of Szechwan*. Through her performance, Lee delves into many issues of contemporary society such as selfishness and materialism. Her crafting of this play transforms the story into new pansori performance with a universal message. While drawing on conventional pansori vocalizations and rhythms, she innovates on the form with the incorporation of the modern vernacular, contemporary cultural references, and multiple musical sources (such as pop and traditional court vocal music). According to pansori scholar Jan Creutzenberg, “Not so much a “fusion”, but rather, using the episodic structure of traditional pansori, a juxtaposition of poetic and mundane lyrics, modern and pseudo-traditional quotes, pop and pansori. In short,Sacheon-ga is like a pot of budaejjigae: Everybody will probably find something tasty in there, but at any moment something unexpected might turn up from the spicy broth.”

**From West to East**

For years, well- and lesser-known composers from Europe and the Americas have been composing music using Korean instrumentation and concepts. Works by (**composers on slide 10)** used Korean music as resource for exploring new realms in composition. Yet, it’s one thing to write new pieces using Korean musical idioms and instruments as a resource and it’s another actually to contribute to the development of the repertoire, writing pieces that are incorporated into performance regularly. Recent examples of non-Korean composers writing for Korean instruments are (composers on slide 11). There is a significant freedom for these composers, as they are not burdened by domestic expections and labels such as ‘gugak composer.’ According to Thomas Osborne, “I don’t see what I am doing as composing gugak. At the same time, I am coming into these from a completely different tradition, which allows me to really appreciate the instrument as it is, without trying to make it sound ‘traditional’ or forcing expected compositional trends.”

“The inspiration for Mass Migration comes from the movements of large flocks of birds as they travel South in autumn. These birds create fascinating patterns and shapes as they follow each other in looping paths that seem almost musical. To create the effect of a large flock gathering and moving together, I asked that the performers begin and end the piece by playing with chopsticks on the strings, which creates a soft, haunting tone.” Most important for Osborne is the musician’s willingness to try something new, despite a long history and related repertoire.

**Conclusion**

In more recent years, the question amongst many composers and musicians a like has been focused more on how one can create something while retaining the integrity of the genre/instrumental sound/etc. We’ve seen an increasing presence of musicians creating their own repertoire, drawing on musical structures and creativity techniques that have been a part of Korean traditional music for centuries before “the composer” stepped onto the scene. We’ve also seen contributions of non-Korean composers lead to an expansion of the repertoire, primarily due to the efforts of Korean musicians to network and teach people outside of Korea about their instrumentation. This new interculturality reflects inter-cultural contact across space, but it also suggests a connection to culture across time. Through connecting musically with the past, the old ways of doing things have become a part of the future.