

Concept, Practice and Repertoires of Traditional Improvisatory Music of Korea⁽¹⁾

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The concept of improvisation, opposed to composition, has largely been developed in the Western art music tradition. Developed from a small fraction of materials of the world's music, it could hardly be universally applicable. The *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, for example, defines improvisation as "the art of performing music spontaneously, without the manuscript, sketches, or memory... the art of introducing improvised details into written compositions... (1969:404)," and it goes on to state that "the great art of improvisation has been lost, since it is no longer practiced by composers and survives chiefly among organ virtuosos (Ibid.)." What the dictionary's definition concerns is doubtlessly the Western art tradition up to the late 19th century, and the definition is inoperative in other culture's improvisatory music, such as Indian *raga*, Korean *sinawi* and American jazz. While recognizing different degrees of performer's creativity in composition and improvisation, Nettl asserts that juxtaposing them "as fundamentally different process is false, and that the two are instead part of the same idea (1974:6)." Following a comparative study on the nature of improvisation of American Indian, Arabic, Iranian and Indian musics, he arrives at a conclusion which rejects the dichotomy of composition-improvisation by saying that "we must abandon the idea of improvisation as a process separate from composition and adopt the view that all performers improvise to some extent (Ibid.: 19)."

The objective of this paper is neither to rebut Nettl's denial of dichotomy of composition-

(1) This is a modified and enlarged version of "Improvisation in Korean Musics," *Music Educators Journal* 66(5):137-45, January, 1980.

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improvisation nor to formulate a universal concept of improvisation. Instead, this paper will be confined to what Korean musicians perceive of improvisation as opposed to the fixed composition, and how it operates in a performance practice, mainly examining the two culturally recognized representative genres of improvisatory musical styles of Korea. In other words, the content of this paper is an ethnocentric view of the improvisatory music of Korea.

In other occasions the author has pointed out that unlike their counterparts in neighboring China and Japan, both classical and folk musicians of Korea have been accustomed to considerable freedom in performance. Such tradition was due to the fact that because "many aspects of traditional Korean music are not rigidly specified. Musicians may exercise a certain degree of freedom when interpreting rhythmic nuance and embellishing the basic melody. Therefore, the music may vary with each performance (Lee 1979:2)." This kind of practice, of course, is not uniquely Korean as we find a similar nature from McCullough's statement regarding the traditional Irish music: "Style in traditional Irish music, though guided by certain conventions, is not perceived by traditional musicians as a rigid, static set of rules that must be dogmatically or slavishly followed. It is, instead, a flexible, context-sensitive medium through which an individual's musical expression can be given a form and substance that will invest his performance with communicative values (1977:97)." It should however be noted that the austerities of Confucianistic prescription limited the climate of variation and improvisation in classical and the flexibility widely enjoyed by folk musicians.

When Korean musicians speak of traditional *chŭkhŭng ūmak* ("improvisatory music"), the musician's preconception includes the two best known forms of Korean improvisatory music, namely *sinawi* (improvised instrumental ensemble music) and *sanjo* (instrumental solo music), and precludes the rest of the genres of the genres as fixed composition. To be sure the concept of improvisatory music is not extemporized out of nothing, but is done by using macro-unit models such as rhythmic content and modal configuration and micro-unit models such as motifs and ornamentations. Both *sinawi* and *sanjo* are believed to be evolved out of the shaman ritual music of southwestern region of Korea, namely, Chŏlla Province. The extemporization in these two forms and conceptual difference of

them from other "composed pieces" are not questioned by the majority of Korean musicians. They are uniquely Korean traditions with counterparts found neither in China nor in Japan despite the close historical relationship of other musical genres among these countries.

Traditionally, *sinawi* has been employed in the shaman rituals, especially for the accompaniment of the improvised solo shaman dance called *salp'uri-ch'um*, *salp'uri* meaning "exorcise the devil" and *ch'um* for "dance". In fact, the twelve-beat rhythmic pattern of *sinawi* is called *salp'uri changdan* ("*salp'uri* rhythmic pattern"). Most of the *sinawi* musicians and *salp'uri-ch'um* dancers of the past were closely related with shamans either lineally or occupationally. Presetly, both *sinawi* and *salp'uri-ch'um* are frequently included in non-ritual concert programs.

Sinawi ensemble of shaman ritual ordinarily includes a *changgo* (hourglass-shaped drum), *ching* (large gong), *taegüm* (transverse flute), *p'iri* (double-reed pipe), *haegüm* (fiddle) and a voice. Occasionally, the concert version of *sinawi* ensemble comprises of *ajaeng* (bowed zither) and *kayagüm* (plucked zither) in addition to the foregoing instrumentation. Due to their instrumental idiom and characteristic capability the *taegüm* and *p'iri* parts consist of relatively short motifs; *haegüm*, *ajaeng* and voice with longer melodic phrases; *kayagüm*, probably the busiest instrument among the *sinawi* instruments, has rhythmic and ostinato-like melodies; *changgo* provides a prescribed rhythmic patterns which frequently varies; and the *ching* punctuate the triple metric groupings of the rhythmic patterns.

The performance of *sinawi* depends upon highly developed spontaneous creativity of the musicians. Prescribed rhythmic pattern and the abstract modal configuration are only points of reference for extemporization in the entire duration of the performance which may last for hours. In shaman ritual or concert performance situation, each player has a varied number of stock of melodic motifs or phrases which rarely match the full length of the rhythmic pattern. Each motif consists of one to three pitches composed with intervals of perfect fourths or narrower. Although *sinawi* musicians are unaware of the number of viable and variable stock melodies, they often create new motifs spontaneously. These motifs and phrases are freely intertwined, interwoven, and interspersed against

each other as shown in Example 1.

Example 1. An excerpt of a *sinawi* performance.⁽²⁾

The musical score consists of six staves, each representing a different instrument. The instruments are labeled on the left: Taegum, Haegum, P'iri-1, P'iri-2, Kayagum, and Changgo. The music is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 12/8 time signature. The Taegum staff has a melodic line with a slur over the first three measures. The Haegum staff has a similar melodic line. The P'iri-1 and P'iri-2 staves have rhythmic patterns. The Kayagum staff has a melodic line. The Changgo staff has a rhythmic pattern. The score is labeled '- 150-152' at the top.

According to Patrick Kim's analytical study of the recordings of several different *sinawi* by different groups, there appears no regularity in the sequential organization of motifs throughout the performance of the respective examples (1980). There is no sense of leadership in the *sinawi* performance as we find in Western chamber ensemble or wind ensemble. Neither is there prescribed placement for the recurrence of the same motifs in the same rhythmic framework. Practically, one motif may recur at any beat of the rhythmic pattern or run over the cycle irrespective of other performer's motifs; it has virtually unlimited possibility of melodic and rhythmic variation and extemporization. On the surface, the *sinawi* may sound spontaneous, a free-for-all music, but, fundamentally the musical performance is achieved by the cohesive events of the multipart through the unplotted coordination among the musicians. The musicians are always alert to the rhythmic pattern and attempt to juxtapose their materials in appropriate relation to others. But there is no prescribed rule of the juxtaposition.

(2) This excerpt was transcribed by Patrick Kim from *Anthology of Korean Traditional Music: Dance Music*, 12" 33 1/3 rpm disc (Sinseki Records 1240-28), side 2, band 1.

The first system of musical notation consists of five staves. The top staff is a single melodic line. The second staff is a more complex line with many beamed notes. The third and fourth staves are rhythmic accompaniment with many sixteenth notes. The bottom staff is a bass line with many eighth notes. There are two asterisks (✱) at the bottom of the system, one under the first measure and one under the second measure.

The second system of musical notation consists of five staves. The top staff continues the melodic line. The second staff continues the complex beamed line. The third and fourth staves continue the rhythmic accompaniment. The bottom staff continues the bass line. There is one asterisk (✱) at the bottom of the system, under the second measure.

The third system of musical notation consists of five staves. The top staff continues the melodic line. The second staff continues the complex beamed line. The third and fourth staves continue the rhythmic accompaniment. The bottom staff continues the bass line. There are two asterisks (✱) at the bottom of the system, one under the first measure and one under the second measure.

As the music progresses through this intricate interweaving, the tempo increases subtly and musicians achieve a momentum of perfect coordination. Psychological tension builds up steadily inducing supernatural power in the *salp'uri-ch'um* dancer. "The dance conveys a joyousness and an abandon that one associates with the singular thrill of religious

ecstasy, an ecstasy that has here become also one of sensual delight (Heyman 1964:40).” Here, the prime medium for attaining the ecstacy is the intensified performance of *sinawi*, and the music hightens the effect of ritual content. “As the dance progresses, one can feel the presence of something indescribably different, an exotic apparition, perhaps, a kind of vapor animating the body of the dancer and causing her to take the form of



The first system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is a vocal line with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second staff is a piano accompaniment with a treble clef. The third staff is a piano accompaniment with a bass clef. The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment with a bass clef. The fifth staff is a piano accompaniment with a bass clef. The system is divided into two measures by a double bar line. There are 'x' marks at the end of the first and second measures.



The second system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is a vocal line with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second staff is a piano accompaniment with a treble clef. The third staff is a piano accompaniment with a bass clef. The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment with a bass clef. The fifth staff is a piano accompaniment with a bass clef. The system is divided into two measures by a double bar line. There are 'x' marks at the end of the first and second measures.



The third system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is a vocal line with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second staff is a piano accompaniment with a treble clef. The third staff is a piano accompaniment with a bass clef. The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment with a bass clef. The fifth staff is a piano accompaniment with a bass clef. The system is divided into two measures by a double bar line. There are 'x' marks at the end of the first and second measures.

spirit—a gay, beautiful, bewitching spirits, whose joy seems boundless (Ibid.).” In discussing the effect of using music and dance in curing rituals Boilés states that they are used “to generate power for benefit of curer, to increase potency before performing magical acts or to protect against possible adverse influence (1978:170).”

The esthetic quality of the *sinawi* is, therefore, based on how well the performers can interweave their art instantaneously with such limited models for extemporization and how well they can intensify the ecstasy of the dancer through their artistic creativity. A truly satisfactory *sinawi* performance is possible only if the participating musicians have been playing together for a long period of time and thoroughly understand each other’s idiosyncretic musical behavior. To some extent the style of *sinawi* performance resembles Terry Riley’s “In C,” but the contemporary American composition presents fifty-three fixed motifs that cannot be altered and the composer suggests numerous rules for performance. In this sense, the *sinawi* is a unique form of improvisatory music which may be comparable to some of the Dixieland jazz at the basic level of performance practice, but one cannot imagine the simultaneous jam by all players throughout the jazz performance as happens in *sinawi*. In short, the individual performers’ musical coherency, sprung out of spontaneous intuition and intertwining itself in a rational order, is the most important artistic aspect of *sinawi*. The art of cohesively patch-working the instantly created motifs opened a way to the birth of a highly sophisticated musical style called *sanjo* (“scattered melodies”), an improvised instrumental solo music accompanied by *changgo*.

The structure, form and performance practice of *sanjo* are coincidentally close to that of Indian *raga*, Arabic *maqam* and Iranian *dastgah*, except that *sanjo* lacks the support of conspicuous drone. It is a common belief among the Korean musicologists that as “*sinawi* players perform solo versions, they seek more melodic character and organized beauty, displaying virtuoso techniques. This sort of solo *sinawi* could be considered a primitive form of *sanjo*. Combining this with important rhythmic patterns and melodic progressions taken from *p’ansori*⁽³⁾ yielded a powerful body of musical material from

(3) *P’ansori* is a form of narrative epic drama sung by one singer to the accompaniment of a barrel drum called *puk*.

which a gradual artistic development took place, resulting in *sanjo* (Hwang 1974:282).” The literal meaning of *sanjo*, “scattered melodies,” allusively supports foregoing theory of the genetic origin of the music.

It is no coincidence that *sinawi*, *sanjo* and *p’ansori* had all been rooted in Cholla Province’s shaman music. Furthermore, most of the earlier and some of the present musicians of these genres are from that region; they have lineal relationships or occupational ties with shamans. In traditional context, most *sanjo* players participate in *sinawi* performance, too. These musics also share common idiosyncretic musical dialect of tense timbre and subtle microtonal shadings of the southwestern region, which is distinct from other parts of Korea.

The crystallization of the present form of *sanjo*, stringing together *p’ansori*, *sinawi* and other folk music materials of Cholla Province, was established in the second half of the 19th century by Kim Ch’ang-jo (1867 ~1919), first on the *kayagüm*, the 12-string plucked zither. Since the late 19th century other instruments, such as *kömun’go* (6-string plucked zither), *taegüm*, *ajaeng* and *hojök* (conical double-reed pipe), have also been used to play *sanjo*. Nevertheless, the *kayagüm* remains the most popular instrument for *sanjo*.

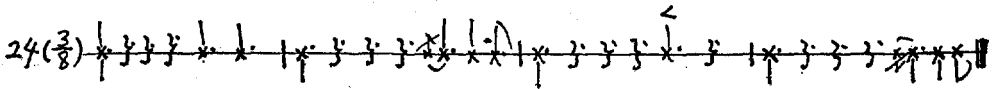
The term *sanjo* is usually preceded by the name of the adopted instrument (e.g. *kayagüm sanjo*, *taegüm sanjo*, etc.) much the same way as piano sonata or violin sonata is used to indicate the particularly featured medium which plays the music. When the *sanjo* is played either by wind or bowed-string instruments, the indispensable ones of *sinawi* ensemble, the term *sinawi* is interchangeably employed with *sanjo*, e.g. *taegüm sinawi* for *taegüm sanjo* and *haegüm sinawi* for *haegüm sanjo*. This interchangeability of the terms also supports the common genetic relationship of *sanjo* and *sinawi*.

The basic structure of *sanjo* is delineated by three to six independent rhythmic patterns out of the eight possible rhythmic patterns as shown in Example 2. These are apparently borrowed from *p’ansori* and other folk musics. The names of the rhythmic patterns also represent the actual formal movement of *sanjo*.

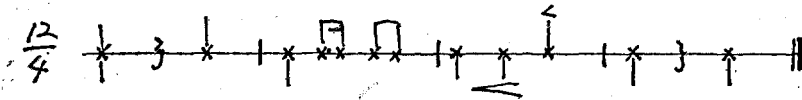
As a common rule the rhythmically divided movements of *sanjo* are performed without pause in progressively faster tempos, except that Song Küm-yön, one of the living

Example 2. Eight Rhythmic Patterns of Sanjo. * indicates right hand stroke with a slim bamboo stick on *changgo* for sharp percussive sound; x for bare left palm stroke for deep bass sound.)

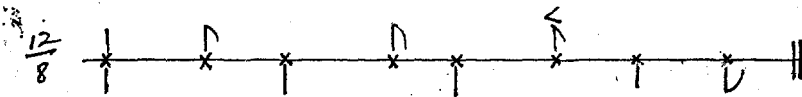
Chinyangjo (M.M. \downarrow = 35)



Chungmori (\downarrow = 84-92)



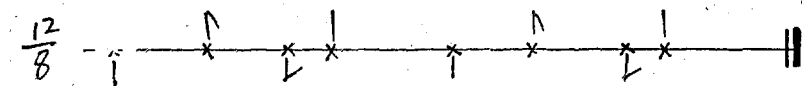
Chungjungmori (\downarrow = 64-76)



Kutgöri (\downarrow = 112-120)

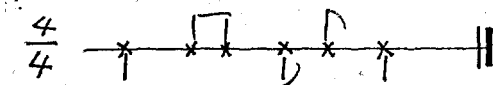


Chajinnori (\downarrow = 120)

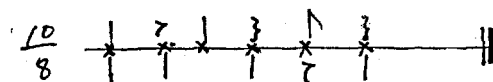


Hwimori (Faster version of Chajinnori, =)

Tanmori (\downarrow = 208-230)



Önmori (\downarrow = 112)



exponents of *kayagŭm sanjo*, concludes her performance with a couple of *ŏnmori* rhythmic pattern after following slow-to-fast principle.⁽⁴⁾ This formula resembles the Indian *raga* performance where the music concludes with a brief *alap* section following the fast *gat* section. The tempo also increases in the course of each movement steadily building up the tension.

Each *sanjo* school selects the rhythmic pattern differently; the particular arrangement of rhythmic patterns is one of the characteristic identifications of the *sanjo* school. However, *chinyangjo*, *chungmori* and *chajinmori* are requisite components to form a complete *sanjo*. There can be another reason for varying organization of the rhythmic patterns depending upon the capability of the instruments for executing the faster rhythms. For example, such instruments as *taegŭm* and *ajaeng* are incapable of playing *hwimori* and *tanmori* patterns. The most common selection of the rhythms of a *sanjo* includes *chinyangjo*, *chungmori*, *chungjungmori*, *hwimori* and *tanmori* patterns.

The rhythmic accompaniment of *sanjo* is provided by a *changgo*, an hourglass-shaped drum. It should be noted here that one should not expect to hear the basic rhythmic patterns of the drum as notated in Example 2 the same way throughout the performance. Variation on the basic rhythmic patterns is unlimited. A skilled drummer should be able to follow the melody player's varied rhythmic nuances and variations much the same way the North Indian *raga* player and *tabla* drummer interact. In addition to providing the rhythmic accompaniment, the drummer serves as a main source of inspiration for *sanjo* player by interjecting such exclamatory words as "*choch'i!*" or "*chot'a!*" meaning "good!" at the appropriate moment. A similar interaction may be seen in the Spanish *flamenco* performance.

Although it is no longer a common practice, Hwang Byong-ki states that *sanjo* performances used to begin with a non-metered warming-up section called *tasŭrŭm*, without drum accompaniment. In this the player examines the tuning and scalar tunes, and establishes a proper mood of *sanjo* to be followed (Hwang 1974:279-80). Its function, thus, is quite similar to that of *alap* of North Indian *raga*. The present use of *tasŭrŭm*

(4) Cf. Song Kŭm-yŏn's *kayagum sanjo* performance in *P'ansori: Korea's Epic Vocal Arts & Instrumental Music*, 12" 33 1/3 rpm disc (Nonsuch H-72049), side 1, band 3.

technique in *sanjo* is scant,⁽⁵⁾ but its concept exists in *kagok*, a classical song cycle.

The corpus of *sanjo* consists of composed melodies grouped according to the modal configuration, spontaneous melodic and rhythmic variation on the composed melodies, and extemporization of new materials. The common types of mode of *sanjo* include *kyemyŏnjo*, *ujo* or *p'yŏngjo*, *kyŏngdŭrŭm* and *kangsanje* whose arbitrary structures are shown in Example 3 in the order of musical importance. They derived from the modal configuration of *p'ansori*, classical music, and other regions' folksongs. These modes require understanding beyond the peripheral display of the intervallic relationship of the tones and the characteristic approach and progression of the particular tones. They also feature functional characteristics such as Indian *rasa*-like understated mood and stereotype melodic contour. *Kyemyŏnjo* associates with melancholy, *ujo* with heroic character, *kyŏngdŭrŭm* with passionate and lively mood, and *kangsanje* with solemnness and dignity. Especially, when these modes are set to the *p'ansori*, the vocal counterpart of *sanjo*, the textual content and its music embody this descriptive mood vividly.

Example 3. Four Basic Modes of *Sanjo*.

The image displays four musical staves, each representing a different mode of *sanjo*. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are written in a simplified notation where 'b' represents B-flat and 'o' represents a whole note. Underneath the notes, wavy lines indicate the melodic contour or phrasing.

- Kyemyŏnjo:** The first staff shows a sequence of notes: B-flat, B-flat, B-flat. The contour is a slight rise and then a fall.
- Ujo (or P'yŏngjo):** The second staff shows a sequence of notes: B-flat, B-flat, B-flat, B-flat. The contour is a steady rise and then a fall.
- Kyŏngdŭrŭm:** The third staff shows a sequence of notes: B-flat, B-flat, B-flat, B-flat. The contour is a steady rise and then a fall.
- Kangsanje:** The fourth staff shows a sequence of notes: B-flat, B-flat, B-flat, B-flat. The contour is a steady rise and then a fall.

(5) A rare recording of a *sanjo tasurum* is included in *Kim Chuk-p'a Kayagum Sanjo*, 12" 33 1/3 rpm disc (Sung Eum SEL-100 102), side 1, band 1.

The point of reference for variation and extemporization in *sanjo* is the prescribed rhythmic patterns and the composed melodies. Therefore retaining original stock melodies is vital. A gifted *sanjo* player of the present-day is judged according to his ability for intuitive selection and rational arrangement of the materials and spot improvisation throughout the performance which may take half an hour to one hour traditionally. Song Bang-song's analytical study of a *kömun'go sanjo* proves that the composed melodies, transmitted orally, are interspersed throughout the performance; they also serve as the main source of model for elaboration and extemporization (1975:267-97). It should be noted that variation too occurs in other traditional music where it lies mainly on different intonation and embellishment of the melody and on rhythmic subtlety, which are all predictable musical events. The variations in these musics are accepted by fellow musicians and audience as personal renditions, not subject to criticism for deviation. However, in *sanjo*, such flexibility of variation greatly exceeds that of other traditional Korean music. There are often unpredictable surprises when the characteristic tension-repose formula of the music is re-enforced.

As has been hinted here and there previously, the idea of extensive improvisation is mostly based on some sort of model. The studies by Song Bang-song (Ibid.) and Catherine Gjerdingen (1980) reveal extremely few cases of newly created materials. Most of the materials can be traced to an original point of reference. Therefore, the extent of the improvisatory activity of *sanjo* is far more limited than *sinawi*. There was, as an exception, one eccentric *kayagüm sanjo* player named Sim Sang-gön (1889-1965), who improvised his *sanjo* completely each time he performed. His *sanjo* was totally unpredictable and bore no lineal relation to the orthodoxy of Kim Ch'ang-jo, the innovator of the present form of *sanjo*. Because of his ever-varying style of music Sim Sang-gon did not have followers; consequently, his style of *sanjo* disappeared after his death.

The conventional method of becoming an established and recognized *sanjo* musician used to require roughly four stages of long painstaking apprenticeship. First of all, the student was expected to master the difficult playing techniques of the instrument mainly by playing folk tunes, a stage of internalizing instrumental idioms. After building up the skills, the student learned *sanjo* by rote, imitating his teacher. Upon completing the

learning of his master's *sanjo*, the student incorporated other southwestern musical materials (e.g. *p'ansori*, *sinawi*, folksong, etc.) while polishing his performance. In this third stage it was an unstipulated rule that the student was not supposed to depart from his teacher's style and form drastically, preferably, until the teacher's death. There were sporadic incidences of deteriorated relationships between the teacher and student following violation of this rule. Eventually, the accomplished student will append his own individual materials to what he learned and modify it rationally, from which he establishes his own personal style or school. Unless it is a radical departure from his teacher's style, which is very rare, his teacher's musical identity is always retained. Each school features a different kind of rhythmic organization, stock melodies, degree of vibratos and intonation which contribute to the formation of distinct style of the school.

The improvisatory aspects of *sanjo* have gradually been disappearing with the constraints of modern performance (e.g. the limited duration of performance in the mass media, and the teaching of *sanjo* from transcription since the 1960s). The process led to standardization of the once flexible style of music (Lee 1980). Today, it is common to see that each *sanjo* musician has a number of versions whose layout formula is prescriptively set in accordance with the duration of performance (e.g. 7-minute *sanjo*, 15-minute *sanjo*, etc.), and it is extremely rare to see the live performance of the full version of a *sanjo*. Materials of the abridged versions are re-arranged from the preexisting stock melodies of the performer's own personal *sanjo*.

In summing up this paper, we have learned from the two representative improvisatory genres of Korea that the common sense of improvisation is to create a new musical piece on the basis of the framework of the traditional models. The improvisatory aspect will be greater if the music has fewer available traditional models and points of reference. Here the high level of the musician's artistic creativity is challenged. As in the case of the *sinawi* and Sim Sang-gŏn's *kayagŭm sanjo*, prescribed rhythmic patterns and modal configurations are the only point of reference, although a series of other stereotypes will eventually be built up in performer's mind in the course of performance.

The author is not convinced that the performance of composed and improvisatory pieces, for example folksong vs. *sinawi*, requires the same kind of creative process and

behavior. Neither are they required to make equal amounts of psychological provision both for the artist and audience. Composition and improvisation, therefore, contrast extremely in creative and responsive mechanisms. In a composition, be it a folksong or symphony, written or memorized, neither the performer nor the audience anticipate a radical departure from the identity and rules that govern the piece. It is an explicitly prescribed sound organization. Such a prescription is a definite factor for recognizing the stylistic and formal identity of the "composed piece." The composition is a sort of finished product with a certain degree of predictable variables within the tightly organized framework. It has limitation for change, however. In most cases of composition the plot is clearly materialized.

On the contrary, as we have learned about the nature of improvisatory process of *sinawi* and *sanjo*, the improvisation is an open-ended process which presents far less reference of musical predictability. When the performer takes off on an extensive extemporization, the rules of the musical identity will be reduced to the minimum, and the performance turns to a process of unpredictable infinite change. Not like composition, the improvisatory music is free of consistent order of juxtaposing the materials. The *sinawi* and, to a lesser extent, the *sanjo* styles have room for infinite change and thus are distinguished from other "composed pieces" of Korea. Therefore, the theory that the composition and improvisation are based on the same idea of process needs more convincing investigation; in the meantime, the Korean understanding for separation of improvisation from composition is yet persistent.

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