Mike Heffley interview with Jin Hi Kim

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Jin Hi Kim is highly acclaimed as both an innovative komungo (Korean fourth century fretted board zither) virtuoso and for her cross-cultural compositions. Kim has introduced the Korean indigenous komungo for the first time into Western contemporary music scene with her wide array of pioneering compositions for chamber ensemble, orchestra, avant-garde jazz improvisations and multicultural ensembles. She has co-designed the world's only electric komungo.

Kim’s works have been presented on the main stages of significant cultural venues including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Brooklyn Academy of Music, The Festival of Asian Art (Hong Kong), Walker Art Center, Royal Festival Hall (London), Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin), the Warsaw Autumn Festival (Poland), Festival Nieuwe Muziek (Holland), Musique Action Festival (France), the Asian Pacific Festival (New Zealand), Nazuca Music Festival (Peru), Alternativa Contemporary Music Festival (Moscow), Art Summit Festival (Indonesia), Moers New Jazz Festival (Germany), and the Vancouver International Jazz Festival (Canada) among many others.

Kim received the Award for Music Composition from the Foundation For Contemporary Performance Art which was created by John Cage and Jasper Johns to support innovative creative work in the arts. She is a recipient of the residence fellowship for the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, Italy and the Asian Cultural Council fellowship in Japan.

Kim studied and practiced Korean traditional music with masters from National School for Korean Traditional Music, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Culture. She earned a BA degree in Korean traditional music at Seoul National University before coming to the United States. Subsequently, she studied with composer John Adams, Lou Harrison, Terry Riley and David Rosenboom, and received an MFA in electronic music/composition at Mills College, CA.

Joining the interview in progress at the point we want to retain, Jin is talking about her father seeing an opportunity to place his musically precocious daughter in a new special high school oriented to music...

JHK That's why when my father saw the special newspaper ad about the Korean government starting a special high school devoted to Korean traditional music, he was sure God was telling him that this was the place for me. He was so excited and happy to be able to tell me this.

MH Before we get there, tell me some more about your experience with this Catholic and Western religion when you were a child.

JHK I had no choice. I had little exposure to either shamanism or Buddhism. Both my parents had grown up in Catholic families. So I started out knowing nothing else.

MH But they didn't send you to Catholic School?

JHK Most of those were private, as in the West, and very expensive, so I was only in public schools; only my last year of primary school did I go to a Catholic school, which was really an incredible experience. Very different teaching approach; they almost taught us in the Western way, giving us enough freedom to speak out in the class. At 11 or 12, it was quite an experience to have the teachers constantly trying to get me to speak.

In the public schools, students never spoke or asked questions, just sat there passively and listened, very much like an army. For me, it was an experience of fear, that if I didn't sit still, I would be punished. I was a good student, and well behaved, but I couldn't help myself, I did want to speak out and talk about what I was learning, and it always caused me problems. Often I would even challenge them, because I thought they were incorrect. Plus, since I was always moving into somewhere new, the cliques and gangs of kids would give me a hard time. I mean, this wasn't in big cities like Seoul or somewhere, it was little villages in the country, which was the worst. After school, the boys would be already hidden somewhere, and suddenly I'd be getting showered with stones. When that happened, I remember going back to school instead of continuing home, which would have taken me over a big rice field for a long way; I went into the teacher's office, which was out of bounds for young students, but I realized there was no more class, and no other place I had to go. The school dean was there, and I told him, "I came from the big city, and now they don't like me because I was there, and they give me a hard time; you must punish them!" [laughs] I remember that. So the next day, they all got punished, in front of me. But that was a constant situation, until high school.

We had music as a subject in public school, but that meant Western music. After the Japanese occupation, and Korean war—well, during the Japanese occupation, Korean things disappeared, they didn't want you to have your own thing. And the Japanese brought in the Western influence, even before America occupied them; and then, right after Korean independence from Japan, it was most Korean people's desire to connect with Western culture. They went crazy for it, as a thing of freedom; they wanted to dance in the Western style; it was their way of celebrating the Independence, they didn't want to re-embrace their old thing, they wanted Western culture, to celebrate.

MH Is that generally how people received Western culture, as a symbol of freedom, rather than an imposition of power itself?

JHK Yes, then. But now, 50 years later, people want to learn their own thing again. The West was like a temporary solution for them, and I was raised in that period. But then I was also a student in the first year of the special high school started to reconnect with Korean traditional music.

MH So basically we have the story of the young child living through hard circumstances, and ending up in that high school. That's kind of the first segment of our story. Did you move out of home to go to this high school?

JHK No, I lived with them until I finished high school. In Korea, generally you live with your parents until you get married. In our family, some of us were split up simply because we couldn't feed everyone. In fact, there were a lot of other families suffering such difficulties; the country was generally poor, so our story wasn't uncommon at all. Maybe not the same reason as ours, but similar struggles.

MH And you never heard any jazz at that point.

JHK We never even had a radio; there was no radio in our house. Even when people in my middle school years had a radio or telephone, my family didn't. We just couldn't afford them.

MH You say most people were poor. Were you aware of that at the time, so that at least you knew you weren't alone in your struggle?

JHK Well, in primary school I remember the teacher doing a survey: raise your hand if you have a telephone, or a radio. Only one or two students would raise their hands. Then in middle school, there would be more hands, but I still wasn't one of them. Then, raise your hand if you have a refrigerator, and everyone was looking around, and no one had a refrigerator. It was incredible.

MH It's interesting to me, because my background in music scholarship is centered on jazz, and the African-American situation, so it's really kind of similar. It's similar to the things a lot of white people went through too, but that has less to do with the way the music came up. So it sounds a lot like the stories of some of the best African-American musicians.

JHK Yes, they went through those struggles; I'm very familiar with that, actually. It was not my choice, but I was born with that situation, you know? And

actually all those struggles, which could have pushed me in the wrong direction, instead gave me strength, and maturity at an early age.

MH That was the first time you ever heard real jazz?

JHK Yes. And I went crazy, because all I'd heard before, in Korea, what passed for jazz was more like pop, easy-listening music; they had a wrong concept about jazz. I first heard real jazz at the Keystone club in San Francisco, because i went to a gig with a great African-American friend, a bass player, who took me to the Keystone Corner, in Oakland. My God, what incredible music, you know? That was in 1980; I came to America in August that year. Then i realized, this is what jazz is. I don't remember the group—I was brand new in the country, didn't speak English very well—but I do remember on the way back in the car, with fellow conservatory students, talking about chords: "he was playing an A7, and 11 chords;" I remember understanding what they were talking about then. But I don't remember who was playing at that time. Because my education in Western music in Korea prepared me to understand the talk about the chords.

MH Do you remember thinking about why you liked it so much? did it connect somehow with what you knew about Korean music, or other Western music?

JHK No—but my impression was that this was the real Western music; Korean people can not do this. It was very foreign, and very virtuoso. Their way of making their music on the spot was so extraordinary. It was like a miracle. Before I was trained to do it like an interpreter of scores, and now suddenly it was like *that*. O my God! Discovery, big discovery.

MH Did you hear composers, like John Cage, when you were learning Western music in Korea?

JHK I had heard of Cage by name, but we never listened to his work. Actually, no one really knew about him correctly. They knew about him as a notorious kind of person, very eccentric; they didn't know him as one of the most important composers, more as an oddity. They were centered more on composers like Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart, and Bach. They went as far as Stravinsky, but that was the latest person they really paid attention to, in the 20th century. Rite of Spring, Bartok's string quartets. Cage, they had no musical examples. They

mentioned that he used the I Ching, but they said he didn't really understand it, just used it in his own way. That was the main spiel.

MH What about contemporary Japanese composers, like Takemitsu?

JHK They didn't mention him either; I didn't discover him until I came to America. Korea was very conservative then, before 1980; I don't think it's so much like that now.

MH When you started attending the National High School, life was still pretty hard, you were still poor. But you didn't have to move, you were there for the entire three years?

JHK That was a wonderful time. I didn't like it at first, because I didn't know anything about Korean music, and I understood that people's attitudes toward it were that it was inferior to Western music. It was, like, you're poor, that's why you go to that school. Because of that general attitude, I didn't want to go. But once I got there, I became very interested.

They were selecting only 60 students nationwide, for only one class, on a full scholarship. Now the school is very prestigious, and it costs a lot to get in, like Juilliard; you have to prepare a lot of things before you even get there. But at that time, they were desperately looking for students to get it going. So even if you didn't play kayagum or any other traditional Korean instrument, you could apply, if you had good grades generally.

So I passed the exam—on ordinary middle school subjects, nothing music-specific. Once we were accepted, they taught us not only the regular high school curriculum there, but also the special musical subjects. So we spent almost the entire day at school; we went earlier than public school kids, then came back later.

Also, since it was the first school of its kind, all the teachers they found were the best around for Korean traditional music. Now they are all national living treasures, or teaching at the best universities—but then they were not recognized

by the society at large that way, so this high school was able to hire them. And that's who my teachers were. So you can imagine the quality. I remember pansori class the famous pansori singer Park Dong-Jin teaching us; or famous folk singers coming to teach us.

MH You knew who they were at the time?

JHK We did know they were all great musicians, but about the time I graduated, these people were all leaving, because they were becoming recognized. Now the teachers there are not that great.

Anyway, our subjects were Korean notation, which was basically a sight-singing class, and also Western notation sight-singing. I still have the textbooks I used back then. Also ear training exercises, where you listen to music and then have to write it down. Also, everybody had to learn the bamboo flute, both vertical (*danso*) and horizontal (*joong-gum*).

Then you have to do two different singing classes: *pansori* folk style, and the court style of singing (*gagok*). Then you have to play the *janggo* drum, because all the music is based on the drumming cycle, so you must understand that. Then some history, and a little bit of theory, though not too much at that time. Also you're playing in the ensemble, and you have to pick a major instrument. That is the routine you're engaged with for all three years, the same things getting more advanced. It was incredibly tight.

This school was part of the National Theater, so the students are free to go to the theater, any time we want to. Normally students were just ready to go home after all the music classes, but for me I realized it was an incredible opportunity—not just for Korean traditional theater, but because of the great Western opera or theater groups that would come through. I would always mark those appearances down and go to them. Also I would go to the rehearsals of the Korean dance group, or the orchestra. It was right next to the school, like Juiiliard next to the Lincoln Center, so there was this chance to see all the best performances going on.

[I ask for musical details]

…People are fascinated with this way of making music now, where it connects with kind of a cosmic principle. That's why Korean traditional music sounds as it does. For instance, why it's so slow; there's abundant silence, in these long, long cycles, and very abstract, because it's not about human emotion. It's meditative; if you listen to it for an hour, it's a good meditation.

Also, especially the folk music is based on shamanism; and there's a reason we sit on the floor with the instruments…and all those things. People used to say our way of sitting was too primitive, but it isn't that, it's the real meditation position. Once you sit that way, you see how it directs your body's energy toward making the music. That's why even the Korean drummer is also sitting, not standing.

People here are very fascinated with all this material, so I thought "this needs to be published soon."

[we're talking about Jin's workshop-lecture materials]

MH Were you familiar with Korean traditional music before the national high school?

JHK Not much, but when I discussed the possibility with the middle school teacher, he said why are you, the smartest student, going to that school? if you had money, would you go somewhere else? He knew that I was very active in music at the missionary school—I conducted the chorus, and taught them new songs, arranged them into four-part harmony, all these songs I'd practiced with my sister when I was young. I was the only student able to do this at the time, because they didn't teach it in school, and I learned it at home. Our chorus was always the winner in local competitions, once a year and more. I was in charge of the weekly church service music, which was a regular responsibility. So I was quite active.

Since my middle school teachers knew all this, they sent me to the school dean to talk about this situation. There was this special high school that trained students for business—accounting, things like that—and the dean offered me a full scholarship to it, saying I could still do music there. I said no, because it was

clear in my mind that I didn't want to be a person working in an office. Absolutely not.

Otherwise, to go to any high school, you needed tuition; obviously, I knew my father had no money. So in the end I had to follow my father's wish for me to go there; but when I got there, I saw the other side. It wasn't horrible, something shameful or anything like that—I was rather meeting wonderful musicians, eye to eye.

MH Do you remember any teachers that you got especially close with?

JHK I think all the teachers came to like me very much; as it had always been, somehow I had the attention of the teachers. First of all, my entrance exam score was very high, so they already were curious about me. Then, interpersonally, we hit it off too.

MH So you knew very quickly that these people were good musicians—but you'd never heard of them before?

JHK Right. It was the same kind of experience as I had when I heard jazz for the first time when I came to San Francisco, hearing this traditional Korean music for the first time. I thought that their facial expression when they sang was sometimes very odd, and so remarkable—totally fascinating. And completely different from the Western music that I…I remember understanding immediately that it was nothing about expressing emotion. Sadness, joy, things you can express very simply, clearly. When I would play Mozart, it was all about joy; when I played Beethoven, it was something profoundly moving, and so on. But this Korean music was all about some kind of strange power coming out. I asked my teacher about what it was; I was the only one asking that for a long time, until I got the answer. I mean, I didn't understand why we were sitting in that position on the ground; and 45 minutes, in a 50-minute class, playing *komungo* part, which was not a melody part. I'm not playing flute, but *komungo*. So I strum one note—then lots of silence; then another note or two, you know? I wasn't sure what it was I was doing. I didn't know what this piece was about. I was asking the teacher, to try and get a sense of the joy, or the sadness I was supposed to be expressing, right? Because that was my past experience. But there was no such thing. For the first year, I never got an answer; my teacher said, just follow, just imitate, don't ask questions. That comes later.

I remember when I watched my teacher's hand when he played, he did this kind of shaking. Later I realized this was about shamanistic energy, that you had to do that; whenever you hear any Korean musicians shaking the sound, it's always about shamanistic expression. I didn't have that background at all; I never heard someone sing that way. My family was Catholic, and we didn't have that spirit in our family.

MH Did your father have any sort of suspicion of this music for that reason?

JHK We did run into that discussion. At one point my father believed that every other religion was an enemy of Catholicism, worshiping false gods. He felt that way for a long time. Now here I am learning all this music associated with Buddhism and shamanism. About that time, my father started thinking differently about religion; he'd go to temple just to compare it with the Christian church. So he was already changing his attitude; we had an argument very briefly once, that maybe I was dealing with false gods; but he didn't become adamant about it, saw it from a different perspective.

MH When you first started at the school, did you feel yourself to be getting in touch with something that was Korean?

JHK No; I felt rather that this was something I didn't have in my blood. Because I saw so many students playing so well, doing this shamanistic shaking thing, even though the teacher never really taught us how to do it. But they just picked it up, had it inside, in their blood. Some of them had family members who were in the music, or they came from South Province, where it was strong; actually, over half the students did come from there. Most of the smartest students were from Seoul, in the north, but their parents would never send them to this school. So I was an exception in that sense. If I had grown up around it instead of Western music, I think I would have felt it too. We had eight different provinces, and every one had a slightly different way of singing the same song. I just wasn't used to thinking of music in this way; I didn't have the soul for it that some did.

The first year felt completely foreign to me; I knew that I didn't have a talent for it. Maybe I had a talent for Western music, but not this. Then in the second year, I started getting better, because I started to understand what it was about: Buddhism, meditation—the whole reason I was sitting in that position so long and

doing not much…it was meditation. Music was for more than the expression of human emotions; once I got that, I started getting more interested in it. Plus, the teachers were just so much fun; wonderful, wonderful musicians. I would just wait for those classes with great anticipation. We were learning two different kinds of music, court and shamanistic. Court music was all about the meditation; especially for the *komungo* part, it was so abstract, and you play so little; you just sit there, and you have to know how to count, or feel the time, and space out with it. The Korean beat is not like a Western beat, so regular and precise; there's a rhythmic cycle that comes around and around, whether it's four or six or twelve beats—then you come in, to match the *janggo* [drum] pattern. Inside that, you have a freedom; you don't have to be together on the beat like a metronome, no one expects that. So it's like you don't really sit there and count. For the first cycle, I will just go around, with the music; you follow the flute, because it leads with the melody, which tells you where you are in the rhythmic cycle; they play with the time freely, but you know which point in the melody the beats you play on occur, and that's how it goes. You just have to listen to the whole ensemble.

I learned my part first by watching my teacher; but it wasn't about him counting and playing in time. It was like tempo rubato, he would stretch or shrink the time in his part according to how he felt like playing it. Also, the tuning. We have a pentatonic scale. When we learned this scale in the Western notation system, it was very precisely pitched, like a piano; but in these ensembles, no one played precisely at all, it was always slightly off, and strange things would be happening. I questioned that all the time; why did they do it that way, after I had trained my ear to a particular interval? It was just that the flute was made that way, a little off from the tempered scale.

The tuning of the other instruments was based off the flute. But of course, the tuning isn't fixed mechanically either; you have to find the intonation of each pitch every time you play it. This is true of all the Korean instruments; the process of doing that is where the actual music lies, not going straight to a target pitch, like on a piano. There is no correct target pitch, it all depends on when you're playing and whom you play with.

By the second year, I was thinking, okay, maybe I won't be a great performer, but I want to be a composer. I had that desire. I would finish my training in performance at the high school, but when I went on to the university in Seoul, I would learn the theory, and become a composer. They had two different departments, Korean and Western. I went into the Korean side as a major in theory and composition; I didn't go as a *komungo* major, I'd already decided not to be a player. I also audited, voluntarily, all the Western music courses as well.

But back to my second year in high school, this interest in theory started with my own readings apart from class. As soon as I got to college, I did lots of fieldwork in the real shamanistic ritual (*gut*), and temple ceremonies (*yongsanje*). In high school, we also did trips to a Confucian shrine ceremony (*munmyo-jereak*); that originally came from China, but it no longer exists there, Korea is the only country now where it is still performed. It was supposed to be an only-male ritual, but at the time they didn't have enough males to do it, so they hired students from our class. I did it in kind of a male costume, and hiding my hair in this ritual. That was a wonderful experience, because I started to learn, "Aha, this music came from *here*." I thought that music was just dreamed up and written down, like we learned in class, in the Western way; but now I saw that music came out of ritual, and it was a wonderful experience.

I understood too why we had no conductor in our traditional music, and why the music was so slow; by watching the ritual, I could see that there was no conductor, only players, and the motions and pace were what shaped the music. Three times, once each year, I had this experience. Also, there was another Confucian shrine, (*jongmyo-jereak*), in another place, and sometimes we did that too. This was the first Sunday of May, the other in September; school year was from March to December.

The reading I started doing in the second year is more accurately described as philosophy than theory; it had nothing to do with the music, but the music had everything to do with cosmology, I Ching, Buddhism. These were all written in Chinese, which I couldn't read. But when I went to college I finally read translations of many of them.

MH Were there any special teachers who influenced you more than others?

JHK Yeah, the *piri* **[a kind of oboe]** teacher (Seo Han Beom), not the *komungo*. He was teaching us more at college level than high school, more so than any others. He was actually the one who gave us the information on what this music was about and where it came from. Also, my *komungo* teacher (Gu Yoon Guk) was quite liberal compared to other instrument teachers; he never told us we played something wrong, that wasn't part of his approach. Also, even though he told us to learn by imitating him, he never played the same way two days in a row.

MH Your *komungo* was a traditionally male instrument.

JHK When my father sent me to this school, he made a point of how special I already was by being one of 60 out of a whole country chosen to be a student. So, he said if I was already special, why not do everything special? So when I chose my instrument, I deliberately did it because it was a male instrument; they didn't mind, because there were more girls than boys anyway. Boys were still favored over girls, because it was thought they'd be more serious performers, and it wasn't really ladylike for girls.

When I started it, I didn't feel it was me; later, I felt I had a very similar characteristic to the affect associated with it. We all have both yin and yang traits, and deal with that all the time throughout our lives; but I did feel I had a way with both the very delicate and the more focused, forceful style of playing *komungo. Komungo* can accommodate both thrusts very well, and I feel I have them both; *kayagum* is mostly just the yin side; whatever you do is pretty, there's no real gutsiness there.

By the third year I was thinking about my life, what I was going to do with this material, in my future. I noticed how much corruption there was in the music world in Korea, how Western music was so respected and supported, while the Korean was looked down on, with a lower social status. All our national ceremonies were celebrated with Western, not Korean music; salaries for traditional players were about half what Westerners got, and on and on. In my mind, I was trying to figure out why it was that way, and what I could do about it. why were they so stupid that they were not proud of this beautiful thing. I had an incredible anger. I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Any of us who valued our music had to always wonder why it wasn't respected or supported. it was a big thing. We were high school students, and our next step was the real world, and we had to ask, what is there for me? Many were bitter in this way, but not actively struggling for change. But I was determined to do what I could about it.

That's why I took both traditional and Western music when I got to university, because even though I loved the music, the Korean department was ghettoized there, and I hated that feeling. I wanted to be equally acceptable in both ways, so that's what I did. I audited everything in the Western part, no credit, but learning it all. Then I was continuously fighting with the professors over how, even in this best university in Korea, with the most intelligent people, why did we have this stupid, ugly situation? They couldn't say anything but yes, I agree with you, it's really a shame, but maybe your generation is the one to change it.

So I had a mission already.

I graduated from Seoul University in 1980; during my college years, I experienced a great disparity in terms of respect between Western and Korean traditional music in the professional music and academic communities. Even though I went to the best school in Korea—which would suggest that the university community should, of all people, have a better understanding of music and its role in society. Still, there was clearly a prejudice in favor of the Western music, even there. It had two separate departments: Western and Korean music. All of the power and focus was in the Western music department. It was a horrible experience, for me, after coming through the new national high school with such joy and pride—very uncomfortable and unfair. And everybody knew it, all the students and professors in the Korean music department. But that knowledge changed nothing.

MH Do you feel like the students who came out of the national high school, like you, were more sensitive?

JHK Maybe, because we were trained and groomed in the special young generation which was carrying the torch of tradition after so many years of neglect. It was a government-funded school, and we were all seen as gifted people, chosen for a full scholarship. It was very prestigious. But the bigger picture was still that Korean music was like a second-class affair.

MH Was there much resentment in this frustration against Americans? The military, and so on?

JHK That was the political scene, which didn't really overlap with the cultural. What happened in the music really started during the Japanese occupation. One way they tried to control the country was to deny us our identity; the way they did that was to Westernize us, as they were doing in their own country. Suddenly everyone knew Beethoven, Mozart, and Chopin—but not Stravinsky or anyone from the 20th century, only classical.

MH Why do you think the Western music tradition caught on in Japan, or any other Asian country that way?

JHK I think they were all just hungry for something new, being steeped in such a long, deep tradition. Change, fresh blood. The Korean court, or shamanistic music, was not for entertainment, but ritual; without that context, the music is really too serious and simple, at the same time. But Western classical music doesn't need that context; most of it touches you emotionally. Korean classical music is for meditation, or healing. We can't really blame it on the West, as though they forced it on us; it happened all over Asia then. Maybe it was just a big turning point, a need for something new. But the problem I saw was that there was no balance, no recognition of tradition at all. And by the time I got to university, I had learned a lot about why traditional music was as it was, the philosophy behind it—incredibly interesting history. But people just ignored it because of the power of Western music. That bothered me so much.

I felt I had to do something about it. Even as a young student, then, I got the idea to write a piece for both Western and Korean instruments. The idea wasn't that I was creating some nice little piece; it was more a political gesture. I wanted to present them as of equal stature, on the same level. It was a very unusual thing to do then. My colleagues found it interesting, but only in passing; it didn't really have any deep impact. Also, after I learned Korean traditional music, when I got to university, I really thought I should learn Western music as well. Because I didn't have much respect for it at that point myself, and I felt that if I did know it, then maybe they would respect me. Also, deep in my mind, I felt that I did want to make a balance between these two things, and in order to do that, I had to study Western music.

MH But you told me that as a child you mostly learned Western music, and didn't learn traditional Korean music until high school, so it must have felt sort of natural and easy.

JHK I didn't trust Western music I learned from Korean teachers. I thought should learn real Western music in West.

But the reason I came to America was that I had a mission. Somehow I would learn both sides. Then I would make some piece, which would put those two instruments on the same level—and if I do that in the West, it's better, because, I thought, Western culture has so much importance, is so awake, that if I bring the

Korean instruments in *to* the West and make them the equal of Western ones, I think it's more meaningful than if I try this inside Korea.

MH When did the idea of moving to the West first come?

JHK Right after I graduated; or maybe just before, I was already preparing. My plan was to find another school in America to go to. I had to pass the TOEFL exam.

MH Was it easy to survey the scene in America, so you could pick the best school?

JHK No, naturally this was just a random choice and kind of a casual decision. First, my family had no money to send me to America, it was my idea and I had full responsibility to do it. I went to the American Cultural Center and found a list of universities; I did limit my choice to the West Coast, because I knew I'd be a stranger alone in a strange country—scary, you know? I didn't want to go to the East, because I heard it was very difficult. But I had no idea what places were beautiful and what schools might be good—just went by the big city names I'd heard of—Seattle, San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco; the name of San Francisco jumped out at me. So I found several schools there, one being the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and San Francisco State University; I applied only to those two, and the Conservatory responded, very quickly.

MH Did you have any information about it before you got there, from a brochure or anything?

JHK Nothing. The story of the journey there is incredible in itself. But this was Western Classical music, not even contemporary music—well, I did study with John Adams—but everything else was really conservative. Later I learned that Mills College was better for me, and I had to transfer there.

I got an acceptance from the school, and had to take it to the embassy in Korea to get a visa. They questioned me: "You don't have any money, your parents don't either; how will you pay for tuition to this private school?" A good question. I

said, "I will do my best, and God will help me." They all laughed; I was 20 or 21. I also had to give the name of someone who would come to my rescue if something happened; one of my father's friends agreed to that. But of course, I was determined not to have to call on him.

To have this interview, you have to go there in the morning and line up. I was there at 6:30; they call you randomly, you don't know when your time is, so you have to just sit and wait, all day if necessary. Mine was last; everyone else was gone, I was there 12 hours, until 6 pm. I didn't eat, because I didn't know when they would call me. So they asked me their questions, and I smiled with them innocently when they laughed. Finally, they said okay, good luck.

So I got this visa. But another problem was where could I stay when I get there? I have nobody, no money; it would be an adventure. I brought $2000 for first-term tuition, and had little left over to live on. I was brave, that's all I can tell you; I also believed something would be worked out. When you are young, you have more hope.

This was 1980. I got on the plane. At the time, there was no direct flight to San Francisco; you had a four-hour layover in Tokyo, something like that. An American army soldier approached me and asked if I'd like a cup of coffee. It was maybe my first time of really dealing with English, and I understood, and said yes. I'm pretty sure he was interested in me and so on, but in my mind I was thinking, yeah, good, I'll get his help. I had to take every opportunity. I told him frankly, I don't have anybody in San Francisco; I don't know where to stay first night. In very broken English: "Don't have friend, help me," that kind of thing.

He was rather surprised, but he said "I promise; I'll help you." So we got to Hawaii next, which is where customs is. He's American Army, so he goes fast, through a whole other gate. So I think, okay, lost him; I'll have to do it again with somebody else. Then, when I finally got through Customs, he was there waiting for me. "I told you I'd help you." So we transferred all our luggage to the next domestic flight, and he was actually very good. When we got to San Francisco, he took me to the bus, got on the bus with me, took me to a motel. I told him I couldn't go to a hotel because it cost too much—so he took me there, signed me in and everything, then told me he had to go back to his base to report in.

That day I pulled out a list of telephone numbers that my friends gave me, friends in Korea who gave me *their* friends' names, Korean people living here. Out of

desperation, I called people in Seattle and Los Angeles (laughs) "Yes, we'd like to help, but it's too far." I had no idea about how far away these cities were. Finally, I called the one in San Francisco; I told them I graduated from Seoul National University, which was good to say, so they don't see me as some non-serious person coming in—that I came here to study, have no place to stay, can you help me? They said sure, and picked me up next morning; I stayed with them a couple of weeks, got started in school, then they arranged a room for me somewhere. But still, I had little money, was living out of my one bag, and the *komungo* in the room. So I'm still desperately looking around the Korean community for help. I went to the church, because that was like the community's center; they said "Since you're a musician, if you play the organ for services, we'll figure out something." So I played for the Sunday service, and lived with different church members, sometimes a few weeks, sometimes months. I kept moving around.

MH Kind of like when you were a child, huh?

JHK Yeah, but now I was doing it alone. So I played in several different churches, lived in different houses, for about two years. Meanwhile, going to school. I was at San Francisco Conservatory for only one year. I couldn't afford the private school tuition. In order to keep my visa, I found a small Institute (San Francisco Music and Art Institute) that had very cheap tuition, so i went there for a year, just to keep my visa. But I was lucky to meet a great composer, Gerry Gable. I really learned a lot from him. He'd just gotten his degree and was looking for a job; he moved to San Francisco, and was kind of working there temporarily while he looked for a better job. He was the one who helped me start digging out who I am: he made me question why I was here learning Western music if my background was traditional Korean music. We talked a lot—then he had me make a chart, showing what the characteristics of Korean music were; and, opposite that what are Western music's? He said this should be my specialty, to dig into my Korean roots, because it would be a new thing in the Western music scene. What excited me about that then was that someone in the West was telling me "your music is worth something." In Korea, no one was saying that; Western music was all.

MH But you came here to learn more about Western music too, right?

JHK Well, to make the synthesis, I did have to do that.

MH So that was your sole focus the first year or two, and Gerry Gable turned you back toward the traditional.

JHK Right. I don't think I was turning my back on it ever, but I definitely was focused only on Western music.

MH Did his influence make that synthesis come about faster?

JHK Maybe not, but it was just a wonderful confirmation of what I was really about, making me feel that what I had to offer was something of worth. That was very important. John Adams didn't give me that. I told him that I was trained as a traditional musician by came here to learn Western music so I could bridge the two together. His response was to advise me to learn Ragtime music, because that was American traditional music. It was like he was challenging me on how much I really knew about Western music. But Gerry had me make a chart, think about how to develop my own style, and what was different from Western music and so on, in every detailed aspect. So that chart was really the first step to the work I'm doing today. And he also knew nothing about Korean music at that time, but he had the right philosophical approach.

When I went to the Art Institute for that one semester, I didn't pay. It was big trouble. The dean was going to sue me and everything. I also didn't pay for the lodgings they gave me, the dorms. I just told him, "I tried to pay you, but I couldn't work because of my visa. I was working at Woolworths then under the table, in the wig department, for something like $40 a week, parttime. The owner was Korean, and she just paid me in cash; it was just enough to eat on. I told him that was the situation. He said, "I can sue you, because you're over 24." That Institute was a business that attracted many foreign students who just wanted to keep their visas.

Later Gerry Gable got a good job at Stanford, so I was lucky to catch him in that very tenuous situation, where my real work actually began.

MH So you began your work in this very precarious situation. Then you went to Mills?

JHK Yes. By then I had a boyfriend, Wade Greene. I met him my first semester as the Conservatory. John Adams had a new music program at that school, and he staged a concert with all the other schools in the area, Berkeley and the surrounding cities. Somehow, my piece was the only student piece included. It was very shocking, but he liked the piece. It was a chamber music piece; it has some early traits of the Living Tones, but I wasn't really conscious of that then; it was mostly just an exercise for class. That was 1980; I did have the idea for Living Tones back in Korea, but I can't say I really consciously developed it yet. I really want to clarify that the word 'Living Tones' is my own creation. There is no Korean word for this. In 1986 I began using the word 'Living Tones' in public to carry the attitude of manipulating the note in Korean tradition.

Anyway, that concert was where I met Wade; he introduced himself at the end of it. He liked the piece, suggested we might go to some world music concerts together some time. It turned out that his sister was married to a Korean man who was the grandson of the last emperor. So that's why he was interested in a Korean composer, I think. He kept following me around; it wasn't really much of a relationship, but we went to concerts together a lot. He was the one who told me I'd be better off at Mills College, for what I was doing. So I transferred there, and also married him. So finally I didn't have to struggle too much, but could settle down and just live more or less normally.

Mills was a real beginning for fully developing my real work. I was there two years, for my Master's. I had some complaints. The reason I went there was that I knew Lou Harrison and Terry Riley were there. When I was in Korea, Lou had come, in the 1960s, to do a piece he made for Korean instruments. So I knew his name. I assumed then that what they were doing would be very similar to what I was trying to do, that they were using Asian roots. So I expected that I would find good mentors in them, but actually that wasn't the case. I don't think I was influenced by them at all. I learned from their classes, but not from the individual composition lessons. I chose them as my advisers. I started by showing Terry Riley my string quartet, nothing to do with Korean instruments at that point. He told me that he never wrote music like that, that he improvised; he said he couldn't help me. He couldn't tell me any other people to go to, just bowed out. I didn't really know his work until later, but I felt that he could give me something because his music was based on Asian culture. There wasn't much chemistry with him, so I bowed out too.

Lou Harrison was very much involved in gamelan; my music, not at all. So that was also too far from what I needed. If I had brought a piece for Indonesian or gamelan music, I might have gotten help; but I had a Western-style score, with a little Living Tones beginning to emerge. They didn't know what to do with that.

Lou Harrison told me the reason he didn't use Korean music in his pieces was that it was difficult.

Then I talked to David Rosenboom, who was dean at the time. I complained to him about my dead ends; he suggested I look into another strong program at Mills, in computer and electronic music. That was what led me to make the electric *komungo*. So my MFA degree is in composition and electronic music.

David Rosenboom and Larry Polansky were my mentors then. They were wonderful, with a lot of assistance and practical advice that I didn't find earlier. I worked then at incorporating electronic and Korean music together. My thesis concert was built around a 15th-century Korean court ritual piece called Soo Wol Yong Yul. Each month has different notes, making a scale. The traditional notation has nothing but notes, no rhythm or anything. I thought that was great material to manipulate. I took it into the HMSL, the first music software just beginning then, around 1982. We performed with a mouse, and I was able to use it to make Living Tones, by sliding it around. So to that traditional music, I added all the Living Tones in my own way. It was all computerized. Then I had a harpsichord player, Chris Brown, sort of improvise with this tape. Even that early, I was never far away from Korean roots.

MH Was this the first time you became aware of the whole area of avant-garde music, John Cage, experimentalism and so on?

JHK In 1981, in San Francisco, there was a big festival, New Music America; it started a few years earlier, and went to different cities every year, until the last one, in 1990, in Montreal. I went to almost every one. Through the festival I met wonderful leading composers and musicians, heard many different kinds of music. That was my real study, I think. Since I went to all these important festivals, I decided to write articles for a Korean music magazine called Eumak Dong-A, published by Dong-A Daily News, a very important, serious monthly music magazine. I became their correspondent on new American music. I wrote over 30 articles, from 1982 or 3 to 88 or so. I interviewed John Cage, Phillip Glass, La Mont Young, Steve Reich, almost everybody. It was a great education, to meet all these best living composers and ask the questions I had. It was also a great excuse just to meet and get to know some of them. It was a wonderful way for us to come to understand what new music was, especially in America, and sometimes get my own creative inspiration.

MH But you weren't aware of any of them in Korea?

JHK No.

MH And you weren't thinking of joining them as a fellow composer until you found something that worked for you and your work, like the electronic angle at Mills?

JHK Interesting question. I knew that this new music, the avant-garde, was what was happening now in America, and that was the area I really did want to engage. But I realized I had too much Korean tradition, so I didn't know whether people would see me as an avant-garde composer of new music. But that is where I wanted to work. I didn't see myself as either a classical or Korean traditional musician, conventionally speaking, so this was the only community I saw that made sense for me. Also, it was very fascinating to me. I'd never seen even the possibility for such music in Korea, but now here, because of individualism, anything, if it's your own voice, could make sense. The connections with these composers, interviewing them and talking one on one, going to every concert of these very important festivals—and also in San Francisco at the time, there were so many important things happening. There was an ongoing symposium headed by Charles Amirkhanian, in which important American and European composers would talk with local people—"Speaking of Music." And the local public radio station KPFA, 9:30 in the morning had a morning concert series, including interviews with many interesting composers. I listened to all of those, and recorded them. This was around the beginning of the Kronos Quartet and their career, and they would always try out their programs there before they traveled. I caught all of those.

MH Having put so much of yourself as a student into learning all this, and wanting to join that stream as a composer, did you find that they didn't accept your Korean traditional roots as you feared?

JHK No, but it was very clear to me then that they didn't know me like I knew them, but that someday they would.

MH Tell me how jazz worked into this period.

JHK It was a very exciting experience for me. When I saw improvisers, when I strolled into their soul, I thought, "they aren't just improvising lightly, this is very serious," inventing new instrumental techniques to express their voices. That was what made them unique, special, and known. That really triggered my desire to create my own vocabulary, something very special, on *komungo*, which nobody else would do. I thought I was in a good position, with no competition; I felt so free, no one could criticize me.

MH Did you have any contacts with Korean traditional musicians or scholars here?

JHK Yes, with Sangwon Park, who came here 5 years before me. He played kayagum. He was "discovered" by Henry Kaiser, the guitarist, and they collaborated; he was my only such contact. I knew of some older colleagues, fellow alums, living in LA, but they no longer performed. They were great musicians back in Korea, but now were working in places like 7-11, so I didn't pay any attention to them at all. Actually, Henry Kaiser "discovered" me too, which made me go into improvisation. I thought that doing improvisation on *komungo* would be something very meaningful for my music; at the same time, in Korean music, all the folk music—Sanjo, etc.—used to be improvised, up until the end of the 18th century, after which no one improvised. They played music laid down by great masters.

MH That's just what happened in the West then too.

JHK All over the world, maybe. So I felt this was a way I could really dig up the roots of the real traditional music on that instrument.

MH Was it easy to have both influences coming in at once, the jazz and the avant-garde composers?

JHK Yes. After I'd seen so much variety in American music, I didn't see the point of focusing on one thing. I wanted to take in and do it all. When I left Korea, I had two choices: Europe or America, to learn Western music. Germany might have been much easier, because they offered full scholarships to anyone who

was accepted and passed the language course; so most Korean music students abroad did go to Germany. But in America, you have to pay your own tuition. But in my mind, I wanted to go to a big country; if I wanted to synthesize Korean and Western music, I felt I should go where there was the most power. Also, I thought English would be a more useful language to learn than German, to be more international. Most importantly, I wanted to know all the world's music cultures, not just Western European and Korean, but it takes too much time and money to visit each country. But America is the immigrant's country, so I imagined that if I came here I would see many different cultures in one place.

It was lucky I made that choice, too, because American music then was incredible. Right now, we're going downhill, but in 1980, it was really blossoming incredibly.

MH You described a string quartet and electronics-and-komungo piece [she has a tape]—After you wrote the chart Gerry Gable suggested, were you continuing to develop the integration of Korean and Western music?

JHK I think my Living Tone concept was ready to come out. There are a lot of ways of looking at Korean music, but the concept of Living Tones was just ready to come out. It's so much easier to use the Living Tones concept in my compositions than some others, like heterophony, or—well, come to think of it, they are all related anyway. In 1986, I composed the string quartet, which used Living Tones, for the Kronos Quartet, called "Linking." You can see from the title what I'm trying to do. When I look at this title now, it's clear that even then I was trying to link Korean and Western music. In this piece, I used Living Tones a lot, and I developed a special notation system [she pulls out a score to show me]; these symbols are all the Living Tones; basically, they're all performance articulations, gestures; they all relate to Korean music, but they aren't exactly the same as traditional; it is more like extensions on tradition. In Korean music, there are a lot of vibratos, microtonal shades. I extended that idea into Western strings. I notated it with conventional notes, with Western durations, to which you add all the Living Tone symbols. If you don't, very boring music. The Living Tone gestures bring in the real essence of the music. Each note has all these Living Tones. Looking back, it's clear I was trying to fuse these two musics.

So I wrote this piece and that piece (scores]—86…

MH I notice in your material you do use the word *sigimse*, a traditional Korean word; but you translated it into Living Tones. Does the translation itself suggest an extension, or a straight translation?

JHK Sigimse is a technical term. It is the term for performing articulation. Living Tones is not the English translation of sigimse. If you listen to Korean music, and then mine, you hear the difference. It's not an imitation, though there is a relationship. Also, those two pieces are written for Western instruments; I never ask them to play Korean instruments. My strategy is for Western instruments. It's like a bi-cultural thing.

MH When you wrote these pieces, did you work closely with the players who would perform it?

JHK Yes.

MH Did you have to coach them?

JHK Yes.

MH Did you play Korean traditional music and instruments for them? recordings of Korean traditional music?

JHK Some people wanted that. I sent them tapes, but for my score, they weren't expected to do the exact same thing as Korean music.

MH Did they pick up what you were trying to get across?

JHK They felt a little strange at first. Kronos did; it's like eating Korean food for the first time, it's bizarre; the second time you get used to it, then you finally like it. For one example, vibrato is very even in the West, a standard sound for every piece; mine is rather like asking for an act of calligraphy; each Living Tone starts

out with a strong attack in the beginning, and you have to finish the entire gesture in one stroke, like a black ink stroke. You don't do it twice, you just finish it, so naturally all energies begin at the beginning, flow to the end, with the end sort of dying out. Sometimes in my music I reverse that traditional arc, so that the more important gesture is at the end of the phrase. So sometimes I have to sing the players what they should play, to distinguish between one of my notations and another, that kind of thing.

These Living Tones are not pitches; I never specify precisely how wide or far from the initial sound someone has to play; except sometimes they don't even go as far as a minor third. I want them to go to the really wider extreme; but really, the idea of a Living Tone is not about pitch anyway, but rather gesture: how much pressure you put on the string to make the tone glissando automatically creates pitch, so you don't have to go for pitch, you just make this gesture, and pitch comes automatically; that's the idea in Living Tones. Because on *komungo*, I never think I'm going to make a minor third or second; in just physically shaking the string, I create certain intervals.

MH So you had met Henry Kaiser around then, and you were getting commissions as a composer; did you also start going for grants around then?

JHK Maybe 1987.

MH And you were still married, so your work was basically supportable. Since your Living Tone concept seems so rooted in the physical gestures of the *komungo*, and Western strings, tell me some more about your work with Henry Kaiser and the other guitarists.

JHK Henry Kaiser is one who's always traveled around a lot looking for the best in every culture. He's always been interested in non-Western music; so he asked me into his recording studio to do a session. I'd experienced what improvisation was all about by hearing American improvisers through the New Music America festival, and had decided it was something I wanted to do, but until then I never actually did it myself. When he invited me, that was just the beginning; he was very interested in what I was doing, and gave me a lot of supportive compliments. He's recording all the time, so I thought it might be a good thing to do. Then we traveled and played locally; it was through him that I connected with Derek Bailey, Hans Reichel, Elliot Sharp…so I started playing with them. That led to new concerts…then people who hadn't even heard me started calling to play

with me…they were all important people, how could I say no? It was a wonderful opportunity: Bill Frisell, Eugene Chadbourne, James Newton, William Parker, Oliver Lake, Joelle Leandre, Fred Hopkins, Hans Reichel, Derek Bailey. So I work in Europe, from festival to festival; sometimes I play solo, often with local musicians.

MH So that connection with Henry Kaiser got you into the improvising circuit, duo CDs, komungo guitar, No World Improvisation…

JHK The first CD was Sargeng, a duo series with Henry Kaiser and Elliot Sharp. Then Komunguitar, No World, etc. Many of the improvisations I did with other musicians were not what I wanted released commercially; I didn't want people to judge me by the CDs I produced. When my improvisational career would in fact be developed through other musicians besides those on these CDs.

MH So your work as a composer continued to develop through the commissions you were getting to make pieces for others, and that started around the same time.

JHK Yes. I did composition and improvisation simultaneously; some years I recorded more improvisation than composition, others the reverse.

MH I think this chapter would stop around the time of your first work with Henry Kaiser and first piece for Kronos; the next chapter would be the '90s, how it all developed; this one's about the development of your concept. Do you wish to add anything to that?

JHK I was also strongly influenced by John Cage. In 1989, I was invited to a Telluride composer residency, living for a week with Cage and other composers, talking about music, sharing meals. That was great inspiration, and I also interviewed him for the magazine. Cage was an inspiring model for a lot of people, and I was very interested in his musical concept as well, especially that anything can be music. That concept can be misleading, but for me, it gave me an idea of how a Korean musician could be meaningful in America. I thought it might work, because it was something new that they didn't have here; and it could be equally accepted in Cage's philosophy. That really motivated me to go on with my mission because maybe right now—then—people weren't all that

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interested in the idea of multicultural music, it was still mostly Western contemporary. They thought "new music" of necessity had to be Western…

MH But John Cage has always been famous for being influenced by Asian culture.

JHK Right, so his presence and influence as a Western new music person was like a big resource I could depend on.

MH Was he curious about Korean music?

JHK When I interviewed him for Korean music magazine, he mentioned about 'Korean Unison' in court orchestra music. At that time he was composing <Etcetera II/4 Orchestra> for Tokyo premiere. He told me that he had an inspiration from the Korean Unison for <Etcetera II/4 Orchestra>.

It was more that I was curious about why he, as a Western composer, got interested in Zen and all this Eastern culture. He said that sometimes Occidental people bonded with the Asian mind, and Asian people responded to Occidental mind.

MH I can see a commonalty between pieces of his, such as Ryoanji, and Korean traditional and your music, in the nature of both as music-as-meditation

Interview continued 5/9/07

MH Picking it up from several years ago, we were talking about John Cage's influence on your music...about the similarities between his music and Korean traditional music...

JHK Right, I remember.

MH So do you want to just start filling me in on what you've been doing since then?

JHK [laughter] This month was interview month, I've been interviewing everywhere. Radio, TV, whatever, all about my premiere. I really have to come up with it...

MH If we do it later, maybe I can think up some questions that will make it easier...?

JHK No, that's okay, I'll just start shooting it out, then you can refine it and go for more details.

I think in 2000 I had the multimedia performance, because I had just made the electric komungo in 1999. So in 2000 I was able to use it for Touching the Moons.

MH But you had done an electric komungo CD before that...

JHK Yes, that was the older version, a very funky, small version. At that time, in 1989, the computer was not available, and all the sound processing features, so it was limited to a kind of electric guitar, nothing very elegant about it. Small komungo, electric guitar gear. By 1999, Elliot Sharp introduced me to a friend who lived in Toronto, Yanuziello. He's really a professional guitar maker, and he helped me improve my instrument. My new CD *Komungo* is the one to hear this on. Especially the last cut, # 10, has been very popular with my audiences. Electric komungo solo...

So that was 1999. In 2000 I did a performance with a Korean *kagok* singer, playing electric *komungo*; Indian tabla and Indian *kathak* dancer and Korean

dancer, with the computer. This was done at The Kitchen, commissioned by The Kitchen, and performed at the Kennedy Center. The project is called *Dong Dong Touching the Moons*, a multimedia lunar ritual. It included digital images triggered by dancer and electric *komungo*. Dancers were triggering sounds with sensors. It won the Wolff Ebermann Prize for at International Theater Institute Conference in Munich, Germany.

In 2001, I had my first orchestra piece, premiered by the American Composers Orchestra, at Carnegie Hall, with the *komungo*. I was the soloist. I wrote a piece called *Eternal Rock.* Afterward, this piece was performed by seven other orchestras—Boston, Key West, New York again, Korea and other places.

Since 2001, I've spent a lot of time writing more orchestra pieces, for solo electric *komungo* and Korean drum. Once I had a successful premiere with the first orchestra piece, I felt confident to write more along those lines. Also, in my experience, the improvisation things kind of went downhill; it wasn't as active as it used to be. I had much less opportunity to do it, going to Europe, finding new people to create new pieces. At that time, in 2001, I remember the orchestra people having a struggle themselves with attracting enough audience for their conventional academic music, and looking for something new themselves, and one of the ideas they had was working with, you know, ethnic traditions, basically. So I knew that that was a new trend, so I jumped into that opportunity, and started writing a lot of orchestra pieces.

MH Did you use your Living Tones notation?

JHK Yes, I used all those symbols. They had fun with it. At that point, they were familiar with some contemporary music, and were open to something new—so they had a great time. It was a positive experience.

MH When we talked before, you were talking mostly about coming from Korea to the West. Then you mentioned having written a book in Korean. Have you had more exposure or presence as an artist in Korea since we spoke?

JHK Yeah, what happened in 2001 is that Korean TV station KBS—it's like BBC, national TV network—came to make a 1-hour documentary on my music history. After it was broadcast there, I started getting a lot of emails, and phone calls,

from ordinary people, some professors—they were suddenly interested in my work.

The following year, I was invited to Korea. I had a performance at a big festival also last year—I don't know all the details—I was invited by the Korean Overseas Foundation. They had me perform for a festival organized for the Korean people who live overseas. I did an electric *komungo* solo, broadcast by YTN, which is like CNN here. They invited me back again this year for another couple of concerts. So there is a lot more opportunity now from Korea.

MH So what kind of reception did you get? Was there a lot of interest in what you do?

JHK I think that 20 years ago they thought what I was doing was strange, but actually it was exactly what I am doing now, so they realize I was doing this for 20 years...and that what I have done is really nothing strange. It's the path they are going through also. The fusion of traditional and Western instruments in Korea now is much more common, in pop music and holiday music. Anyway, they are doing not only traditional music but new, what they call fusion music. So all of the sudden they have a great respect for me. Also, I released the book two weeks ago, and this is a big thing for them.

MH What exactly is the book about?

JHK It's called the *Komungo Tango*, it's about...the reason I titled it that is because tango is the love dance; and If I didn't love all these different people from all over the world, and if they didn't love my strange *komungo* sound, then I couldn't have done this kind of collaboration, with improvisation or composition in a cross-cultural way. Also, I did not pull them all in my way, and I was not pulled by them all the time. The collaboration has been a dialogue. It takes two to tango. So I called my work *Komungo Tango*.

MH So it's about your history?

JHK Yes, the 25 years of my musical journey. It includes all the musicians that I met—all the improvisers, and composers...John Cage, Phillip Glass, Steven Reich and other people I interviewed for Korean publications 20 years ago.

MH Do they have more people from other parts of the world now there than they used to too?

JHK Yes, a lot more from Asia and Europe, as well as the USA.

MH The new composers from there?

JHK Yes, They have international contemporary music festivals there, and composers around the world are invited to the festivals. They also have electronic/computer music festivals. The Korean government is specially supporting multicultural music festivals recent years. They have some interest in world music now; in the past, they didn't know anything about neighbors, only Korean traditional and Western classical music. European, not even American style. Now, they are much more open to the traditional music of their neighbors like Indonesia and India. I think mainly they do know a little more about China and Japan.

MH I remember you telling me about the revival of the traditional music in the high school that you went to. Can you briefly update me on what that scene is like now, in 2007, in terms of traditional culture in the schools like that?

JHK I think it's much healthier now. Traditional music is actually required on the primary school level—so much so that they are required to go to concerts and listen to it. All the children who come into the National Center for Korean Performing Arts—a place like Lincoln Center, a big complex for the music and dance; all the children are coming there, it's mandatory. They are learning a lot. Also, in Korea now they have designated radio stations that play only Korean music, all the time. It isn't all traditional; some can be fusion music...anything that relates to Korean instruments, they broadcast. And constantly interview all the artists.

So they have their own radio stations, and TV programs, especially in the morning and night, when it's not so busy. They play their traditional music performance for one hour, whatever. So I think the knowledge of people who play their own music is really high, and everybody knows about the music. Still, the really traditional music, say, left over from the 19th century itself is changing, because the musicians are of the younger generation now. So the music itself is changing. But they still preserve it. What is dominant right now is the fusion music.

MH Are you still involved with any kind of organization or scholarly research or advocacy of the music? I remember you were part of a group that was promoting Korean traditional music...

JHK I had a lecture series that was sponsored by the Korea Society. But that was on a Freeman Foundation Grant, which is over, so I don't have that going on anymore. But I do occasional things like that by invitation.