

# JIN HI KIM MEMOIR

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# **JIN HI KIM MEMOIR**

*Dual identity between ancient Korean roots and contemporary American society*

## **FROM KOREA TO AMERICA**

### **Korean Music Training**

My father showed me a newspaper with the excitement of someone who just won the lottery. The ad was about the establishment of the National High School for Korean Traditional Music (국립 국악 고등학교), which was recruiting 60 students and awarding each of them a full scholarship. The school was being opened in 1973, by the Ministry of Culture, and would be housed in the prestigious National Classical Music Institute. The institute, which had previously been called the Yi Dynasty Court Music Bureau (이왕직 아악부 - later known as the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts, and even later, the National Gugak Center), was dedicated to preserving the 1,500-year heritage of Korean traditional court music and dance. Court music (ceremonial music was performed at the palace) had lost its function after the Japanese occupation and Korean War, leaving the nation with a shortage of musicians who could continue its performance. The new high school was designed to remedy the problem. My father knew nothing about Korean music, but the news was enticing enough that he felt certain I should apply.

At first, it seemed almost shameful to apply to study Korean traditional music, because Western classical music received so much more respect and attention. At that time, primary, middle and high schools did not teach Korean traditional music, and all my instruction had focused only on Western music. Fortunately, the admission policy did not require any traditional musical experience and was based instead on applicants' middle school grades. My father was adamant that I apply. "Because you're doing Korean traditional music that others don't want to do, you will be unique and will have more opportunities than others!" he kept saying. "Let's give it a try." So I did. I got in. Once I had begun studying at the National High School for Korean Traditional

Music, my attitude changed immensely. Our teachers explained that we students would grow up to be “musicians for the nation,” tasked with enhancing the status of Korean traditional music. Our class was asked to perform for a number of national, government-sponsored events that fostered a sense of pride in us all. I was proud that I was one of the people who would carry past traditions into the present.

For centuries, Korean court orchestras only included men, and by the time I arrived at high school, many traditional instruments were still coded as male. The exceptions were *gayageum* (가야금), a 12-stringed zither, which women traditionally performed in folk music ensembles like *gayageum byeong chang* (가야금 병창), and as *sanjo* (산조) soloists. *Komungo* (거문고), the instrument I chose for my major, was seen as the domain of men. A fretted board zither with six strings, *komungo* was known as the Confucian scholar’s instrument. These upper-class scholars, highly educated and elite members of society, lived during the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910). They played *komungo* to cultivate their meditative mind in *jeong-ak* (정악 - rightful music). They shaped their lives in accordance with what they saw as philosophical rules for moral conduct. Though it’s hard to know for certain, they likely played *komungo* in a similarly austere way, emphasizing abstraction and form over, say, the expression of personal feeling that folk musicians brought to their playing of other instruments.

I was told that *komungo* was a difficult instrument to learn, and that to play it, one must be as intellectual as these scholars of old. I was drawn to that challenge. Besides, I questioned why a woman shouldn’t play it. In fact, six female and two male students majored in *komungo* in our class. Most men opted for wind instruments, such as the double-reeded *piri* (피리), and *daegeum* (대금), a horizontal bamboo flute with a membrane. These wind instruments were traditionally coded as masculine, because the piercing and forceful sounds lead the Korean music ensemble. Men played the main melody of music.

The beginning of my *komungo* training with my teacher Gu Yun Guk (구윤국) was very awkward. As beginners, we did not learn a *komungo* solo piece; rather, we learned a very slow *komungo* part in an orchestra piece. We used the *komungo* notation, but we never heard the wind parts of the main melodies in the ensemble. The *komungo* part was sporadic, like a bass part in the Western orchestra, so we couldn’t get a feeling of the music. My teacher did not explain what the

piece was about, he just asked us to imitate him. I had never even heard *komungo* before, and the very nature of the instrument seemed a bit unfriendly. The dark and muted tone quality was more abstract than any other Korean instrument. It was certainly not a melody instrument. The tuning is not fixed on frets, so the player must finger the notes by ear to make the accurate pitch. The low string *dae-hyeon* (대현) is so thick it does not produce the full pitch. The actions required to play it did not seem particularly graceful: using a bamboo stick to pluck the twisted silk string or strike the soundboard emitted a dull sound, as did pushing the strings with my fingers. I wondered whether the instrument was deficient because it had been played by Confucian scholars rather than musicians. I had no evidence, but supposed these scholars may have lacked musical imagination.

Beginning to learn any instrument is difficult at the beginning, but *komungo* was more difficult than others. Mostly, though, I learned *komungo* by listening to my teacher. He sang every note of every piece we played in *goo-eum* (구음), a stylized solfege that also indicated the proper articulation for left hand and stick. While he was singing, he also demonstrated the performing articulations of what I should be doing with my hand and stick. While we had notation, *jongkanbo* (정간보), for *jeong-ak* repertoire, there was no notation for the solos in *sanjo*, an improvisatory folk style. Elders had just begun to write those pieces down, but their work would not become available until I was in college. Not that the notation mattered much when I was first getting started: after my teacher sang, there was no time to read music—we needed to play. So, as I memorized whole pieces, bit by bit, I then realized that there was more than written notes to play.

For more than 750 years, until during the Japanese occupation in the 1930s, court music had been performed exclusively at the palace. None of us had heard this music before the 1970s. Most Korean professional musicians had not heard it either. The *komungo* parts of *jeong-ak* were easier to play than the solos in *sanjo*, and since our teacher couldn't single out one bright student for his or her superior performance, we developed a real sense of camaraderie. Our teacher did not go into great detail about each piece we learned; rather, practicing the whole piece was the goal. I sometimes asked how much I should bend a note, how much vibrato I should do on a note, what I was supposed to express through the music. My teacher used to say, "You will learn when you get older." Now I understand that the questions I had were not about techniques that I could improve by practicing. They were about how a musician expresses his or her soul. I had to find the answers for myself.

Playing *komungo* part in *jeong-ak* orchestra class was abstract enough that I was almost bored, and often impatient. My *komungo* parts were very slow and austere, and sitting on the floor with my instrument made my feet fall asleep. But the orchestra class was required for all students from freshman to senior year, and over time I grew to appreciate it. This was the first time I heard all other instruments and the main melody of the music through bamboo flutes in the orchestra. I began to understand how my *komungo* part worked.

Learning *Young-san-hoe-sang* (영산회상), a 45-minute suite of 12 orchestral pieces with no breaks between them, helped. The piece was inspired by Buddhism, and its title translates as “enlightenment of mountain spirit.” Unlike Western music, which uses a 12-tone chromatic scale, the orchestra music uses only a five-pitch pentatonic scale. We learned to make tone gestures—to me, “Korean spices” —on each note. There is no harmony, just a highly stylized tonality/tone quality and time sense, structured by so-called rhythmic cycles, *janggo jangdan* (장고 장단). *Young-san-hoe-sang* starts in a very slow tempo (quarter note = ca. 30), then gradually speeds up (to ca. 70). The suite includes many different stylized rhythmic cycles based, variously, on 12 beats, 8 beats, and 4 beats. The 12- and 8-beat cycles are very slow. Each beat is divided by three, and because not all 12 or 8 beats get counted, there are long silences between beats. As rhythmic cycles repeat and the overall tempo gradually increases, the time sense becomes riveting. At the beginning, the *komungo* part plays occasional and extremely wide-spaced notes, but toward the end of the suite it finally joins the rhythmic cycle with subtle melody.

My teacher rarely stopped the orchestra to make corrections, because it was more important to make it through the entire piece. We practiced it throughout high school, and I went on to practice it at university, too—seven years that helped me mature both musically and spiritually. I learned that the whole process of performing such long and slow music is an experience of meditation. Each of the 12 pieces of *Young-san-hoe-sang* has its own nuances and different rhythmic cycles. In the orchestra there is no conductor counting beats, so everybody listens to each other’s parts. Each musician follows the rhythmic cycles (*jangdan*) of the *janggo* (an hourglass-shaped drum), but the *janggo* drummer also listens to the main melody played by bamboo flutes. The music is heterophonic, and each instrumental part plays its own interpretation within the similar phrases. The traditional notation system, *jongkanbo* written in a grid, is designed for an elastic time sense. The notation system allows flavoring around notes and doesn’t lock the space up against that.

We learned all the details of musical nuance during the orchestra rehearsals, by listening to the older students practice outside of class, and in classes on our own major instruments. My *komungo* teacher helped, but my real growth as a musician came from performing with the orchestra. Instead of just focusing on my own part, I learned to listen to the many sonic layers of others, like different bamboo flutes weaving through the melody. This was the nature of *komungo* in *jeong-ak*; compared to the other instruments, it played very minimally that there is no story to tell on *komungo*. Yet it was also the primary instrument of the court orchestra, functioning almost as a timekeeper. The chief master, or concert master, traditionally played *komungo*, and the entire orchestra began with a very brief prelude, just three phrases long, for *komungo*.

*Komungo* was even more central to *gagok* (가곡), a form of lyric song historically performed and appreciated by the elite. The *gagok* originated in Koryo Dynasty songs. Playing in a *gagok* ensemble was the most musical experience with *komungo* I had. The *komungo*, bamboo flutes, and voice have their own individual parts, but they co-exist naturally within a slow *janggo* cycle. Playing in a *gagok* ensemble, I can hear some melody in the *komungo* part. In some ways, *gagok* song resembles *pansori* singing, in that musicians create individual tonal qualities for each note. But whereas *pansori* songs are the dramatic stories of the folk, told with passion and sorrow, the slow *gagok* songs are akin to poems, performed and appreciated by an upper class. *Gagok* is associated with Confucian aesthetics and the inner calm of Koryo Dynasty celadon pottery. Now, our teachers were working to ensure that we learned it too.

The instruments in a *gagok* ensemble, assembled to accompany a solo singer, include *komungo*, *se-piri* (soft piri), *daegeum*, *haegeum*, and *janggo*. Sometimes the ensemble added *gayageum* and *danso* (단소), but only as support, respectively, for *komungo* and *daegeum*. The *komungo* is the leading instrument in a *gagok* ensemble, and its part is much more melodically and rhythmically sophisticated than in orchestra pieces. The tonal gestures articulated by pushing and bending the *komungo* strings are masterful and varied, and it was *gagok* that taught me most about *komungo* sonic quality. *Gagok* also taught me about the unique, timbral-textural bouquet that is one of the most important elements of Korean music.

Even though I played *komungo* in *gagok*, I still learned to sing *gagok* songs in class, which enlarged my understanding of how the ensemble structures the song together. The vocal part and stylized *janggo* rhythmic cycle introduce the musical phrases, and each instrument expresses the melody differently within the phrases. In the heterophonic structure of musical phrases, the tuning



of voice, *daegeum*, and *komungo* need not match each other completely. When they play the same phrases, their individual tonal gestures, *sigimse* (시김새), create very interesting tone color/textures all together. Sometimes, each instrument has its own phrases within the *jangdan* (rhythmic cycle), such that the *komungo* and *daegeum* parts are almost separate pieces. The tonal manipulation of notes and the subtle interpretation of phrases designed to create personal melody fragments are essential for making the music work. The music floats without obvious rhythmic patterns or pulses. The result feels timeless and awe-inspiring.

Playing *komungo* in a *Yong-san-hoe-sang* orchestra and a *gagok* ensemble was a profound experience, and I was lucky to have it—particularly since, when I was training, the *jeong-ak* had nearly disappeared from public view. It was only performed publicly at the National Classical Music Institute, which most students from my high school later joined. Others became lecturers at Seoul National University. It was the best university in the nation, but its faculty positions were already filled, so becoming a full professor there was a long shot. The rest of us were told to create our own opportunities by establishing new schools to teach Korean music. It was clear that we were being instructed so as to continue a tradition. Given how little ordinary people seemed to care for *jeong-ak*, it was hard to see a bright future in performing it. Yet we were taught that this music mattered far more than folk traditions, because it was noble and sophisticated, the stuff of the upper-class. National High School, National Classical Music Institute and Seoul National University essentially ignored folk music. That attitude continued until the 1980s, when the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts (as the National Classical Music Institute had been renamed) started hiring folk musicians.

### **Western Music was Superior to Korean Music**

My homeroom teacher, *piri* teacher, was proud to tell us that, during the 1960s, Lou Harrison—whom I would study with years later—had visited the National Classical Music Institute to learn about traditional Korean music. Harrison even composed a piece for *piri*. The fact that some Western musicians liked Korean traditional music was a point of great pride among Korean musicians at that time. They believed that it was important to introduce the Westerners to the traditional music. The National Classical Music Institute sought to cultivate this kind of Western interest in traditional Korean music. In the 1960s, they began creating scores of

instrumental Korean music using Western notation. The traditional court orchestra music notation goes back to the Chinese system of the 12th century, but several other Korean notation systems had also been introduced over the ensuing years. My teachers depended upon two of the newer versions, *jongkanbo* and *hapjabo* (합자보). These traditional notations are written in the shape of a grid. Each square box displays both the pitches and the length of each pitch. One square box is counted in elastic time, because Korean music has fluctuations in the length of each note. Because the melody is structured heterophonically, not vertically, each part exists independently and co-exists in the ensemble, supported by the *janggo jandan* (circle of time).

The *hapjabo* notation system includes more than one part for some instruments like *komungo*, *piri*, *deageum*, and *janggo* in the orchestra, but it does not cover all instruments either. It is an ensemble notation, but it doesn't include instruments like *haegeum* or *danso*. These instruments had been orally transferred. However, the *komungo* was the leading instrument, so its part was written, and *piri* and *daegum* parts were notated as well, because they are the main melody. But the details about the melodies for bamboo flutes had been orally transferred through the generations. Thus, those notations missed the detailed melody embellishments. Older, master musicians had often played from memory. Now, my teachers were writing down more details of what they knew and remembered of the full court-music repertoire as much as possible. Meanwhile, other musicians were writing it down in Western notation. By the time I was a college student, full orchestra scores in Western notation were published, and many others have come out since then. Despite that effort, our teachers instructed us orally, requiring us to memorize music by ear. I still believe this approach works best to learn Korean traditional music, because written notation fails to capture performers' individual expressions. In fact, the National Traditional Music Orchestra performance of *Sujecheon* (수제천) was different from the music written in Western notation, because that system simply cannot represent the "rhythmic soul," and tonal gestures, or *sigimse*.

Even as the National High School for Korean Traditional Music was steeping us in Korean art and history, its location was making it easier for me to learn about Western classical music, too. The school, at the time I attended, was located right next to the Tower Hotel, a place for many foreign diplomats to visit, and just below Mt. Nam, the National Theater of Korea and National Classical Music Institute. We often saw government events take place at the National Theater, and they went to the Tower Hotel across the street for a reception. Sometimes we were invited to attend

the event to fill out the house. Once I heard President Park Chung Hee (박정희) speak at the National Theater. Every student in the high school could go to every performance held in those theaters for free, which struck me as an immense privilege. Not all my peers seemed interested, but I went to as many events as I could.

After school at the National Theater, I saw Western classical opera, symphony orchestra, and ballet performances, along with recitals by famous classical musicians from the West. During lunch breaks, I went to the small theater of the National Classical Music Institute to watch the National Traditional Orchestra rehearse. At the time, their main purpose was to revise Yi dynasty court music, which was usually accompanied by dance. The stage set was a beautifully designed palace court, thus the costumes of dancers and musicians looked very expensive and gorgeous. Here I got to see and hear so many new music repertoire and dance forms that I never get to learn during High School period.

While the National Theater, the venue for foreign performers, was almost always packed with the paid audience, the small theater, the venue for traditional Korean traditional music, was attended mostly by senior citizens who had dropped in from the Jang Choong Park nearby, and who could watch the shows for free. Whenever there was a *pansori* (판소리)-epic drama song performance, this elderly audience would sing along, passionately and rhythmically. The professional singers seemed to appreciate this enthusiastic response; but once, the theater manager interrupted the *pansori* performance and demanded that the audience pipe down. They were, he said, being “impolite.” Evidently, he wanted them to follow the Western style of sitting quietly throughout a performance. The folk music had been performed informally outdoors until the 1960s. The village people were used to responding to the performer with cheering or singing along. When the folk music performance was moved to the formal stage indoor concert hall, the elder audience was very uncomfortable being quiet during the performance.

Even at age 15, I was already witnessing the turning point of a new Korea, and deeply agonized at this sight of Korean traditional music being trampled and on the verge of disappearing after the Japanese occupation and Korean War. During Meiji Period, Japan had already adopted Western culture into their society, and they tried to do the same thing with Korean people during Japanese occupation (1910-1945), after Korean War American pop culture came into Korea. Educated people embraced European classical music; they would listen to Western piano, violin,

orchestral music and aria opera songs. As long as people were so fascinated and passionate about Western music, the Korean music didn't seem to have a hopeful path. I knew I was lucky to receive the education I did, but I also felt insecure in my identity as a Korean musician. What did it mean to learn about a tradition that might be dying? Was there a path forward for me?

When I told my father about my concerns during my junior, he decided that we should meet with the school dean, Seong Kyong Rin (성경린), for some advice. At that time in Korea, absent some special, personal connection, meeting with the school dean in person was unheard of. Dean Seong Kyong Rin, a master *komungo* player, was as reserved as a classical Confucian scholar. When we interrupted him at his work, he did little to answer my father's concerns. When my father asked whether it was wise for me, as a female, to pursue *komungo*, the dean agreed that it was a male instrument. He did not ask me a single question. The meeting was short and unproductive, overall, but I still felt honored to have met him, and I enjoyed catching a glimpse of what he had been working on, obsessively, before we barged in: he was notating the *komungo* parts of *jeong-ak* pieces, which he had committed to memory, into *jongkanbo*. Later, my *komungo* teacher and former Dean Kim Kisu (김기수) published scores for all the *komungo* parts of *jeong-ak*, which had been orally transmitted and practiced during many years at the Yi Dynasty Court Music Institute.

During my senior year of high school, I decided that it did not make sense to pursue a career as a *komungo* performer. The Korea Society was dramatically changing. During the Japanese occupation, the Korean Yi Dynasty court had been completely demolished. After the Korean War, Western classical music began to overpower the ancient Korean music. By the 1970's, older male musicians, influenced by the Western classical orchestra music, were composing a new repertoire for the traditional Korean orchestra. It was a sensation with audiences. While the traditional Korean orchestra sat on the floor, musicians were now rearranged to perform on chairs, and a conductor—never before present—was directing time. They adopted Western orchestra system, but new sound on Korean traditional Korean orchestra was like Chinese modern orchestra. It was corny to me. The skills I was learning at high school—to perform from memory, to follow the cues of the group, to find my way as an individual within a collective—no longer seemed relevant. No woman musician had yet composed such new music for Korean orchestras, but perhaps, I thought, I could help shape this new repertoire. So, I applied to major in Composition

Theory in the Korean Traditional Music Department at Seoul National University, the nation's top university.

My grades were good, but the application process was daunting. Students majoring in Western music did not need to demonstrate any knowledge of Korean music, but to join the Korean Music Department I needed to show proficiency in both domains. That meant I would be examined on the topics of Western harmony and piano, which I had never studied. I asked a trainee teacher at my school who had majored in Western Music Composition to teach me harmony, and I practiced a Beethoven Piano Sonata I had been playing in childhood.

All the students hoping to study Korean composition also needed to audition on *komungo*, since it was the traditional instrument of scholars, and to take an exam on Korean music theory. I felt confident about both my *komungo* audition and Korean music theory. But when I found out that some wealthy students from regular high school were paying for both private *komungo* instruction and private lessons in the music theory from professors at Seoul National University, I was worried. My parents could not afford private lessons. It seemed impossible to compete with students who were already being taught by the professors at the very university we were all applying to.

My homeroom teacher Seo Han Beom (서한범) generously arranged a meeting with his own teacher, Dr. Chang Sa Hun (장사훈), who taught Korean Traditional Music Theory at Seoul National University. When we walked into Dr. Chang's office, my teacher announced, "This student is a top student and diligent in class. She wants to study Korean Traditional Music Theory. Her major is *komungo*, and we're here to meet you and hear you play your *komungo*." My teacher's intention was to establish a personal connection, so that Dr. Chang would remember me during the interview session, and perhaps to ease some of my own worries about the application process. But the meeting was a learning experience, too. Prof. Chang played a *Dasrum* (다스름) – a short prelude before the main song to warm up the performance conditions—in a style that was totally different from how my own teacher, Gu Yun Guk, had instructed us to play. I did not know which one was authentic, and I began to realize the same piece can be played in different ways. It was eye-opening for me to appreciate a freedom of individual performance. I was looking forward to expanding horizons at college.

At my graduation from the National High School, I received a Ministry of Culture Award for being the best student. This was a real honor, as was learning that, despite my fears about the

exam, I had been admitted to the Composition Theory major at Seoul National University. About two-thirds of the 25 incoming students were from my high school, while the rest had taken private lessons from professors. I was one of two students selected for the Composition Theory track, and the other had spent a year taking private *komungo* and theory lessons from the professors at Seoul National University after failing to gain entry as a piano major. I felt like a rising star among Korean national musicians.

When I got to college, the politics in the music department surprised me. Two-thirds of the students in the music school were majoring in Western music, and the Western music professors were responsible for most of the decision-making processes in the department. Korean music seemed to be considered “inferior.” Most of the traditional Korean music professors were part-time, and those who were full-time seemed to have stumbled into the position; as students, they had been failed to get in the Western music major, taken private lessons from the nation’s senior masters for a year, applied the following year as Korean music majors, and became professors when the university opened in 1958. I also learned that until 1973, students from my high school had not even been eligible to apply to university. As the Yi Dynasty Court Music Institute, the school had been dedicated solely to training musicians to perform traditional music, but not to providing students with the academic credentials required for university entry. When the school was renamed just before I attended, becoming the National High School for Korean Traditional Music, it also changed its curriculum to include subjects outside of music. Finally, I understood the tension between SNU and the National Classical Music Institute. The musicians of National Classical Music Institute were real Korean musicians who had practiced authentic music for several years, but professors at SNU were short term trained Korean musicians. At the NCMI musicians made music, and at SNU the professors talked about the music. The music masters at NCMI wished to teach at SNU, but the professors at SNU asserted their superior status over those musicians.

These were disappointing realities. Professors were more highly respected than individual performers, so even the most masterful older musicians—if they played traditional instruments without having earned academic degrees—could be seen as second-rank. As I saw the bright newcomers who had essentially taken over the Korean Traditional Music Department, I felt for these older performers. But I also felt that I had chosen wisely to major in Composition Theory.

Since this was a new area of study, the university politics around it seemed likely to be less entrenched. And in the years after graduation, I believed, surviving as a *komungo* soloist or teacher in Korea would be more or less impossible.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed my classes in Korean music, which included the History of Korean Music, *Ak-hak-gwe-bom* (악학궤범 15th-century court music treatises), and Ancient Notation. Learning to trace the origins of musical forms was fascinating. For example, the *Koryo-gayo* (고려가요) that we play today comes to us from transcriptions long after the Koryo dynasty had ended; songs were set down for instrumental music, but the music became instrumental without the songs by the 17<sup>th</sup> century. While we have evidence that these songs existed much earlier, there are no actual notes of the songs. And while I had learned folk ritual performances that merged music with dance, literature, and song, I now learned that similar combinations had once been part of Korean court music, too. This helped me a lot in forming my own perspective towards performance later on. At the present time court music is performed on stage as a concert program, so it is often performed separately without the dance and song.

My composition classes were not productive. At the time, for both professors and students, Korean musical composition was under experiment. My professors had never studied abroad, but they were heavily influenced by Western classical music. No one taught us about the time sense in Korean music, or about Korean musical structure or tonal quality. What's more, the faculty kept changing. During my first year, Professor Yi Song Chon (이성천), who came from outside the circle of the National Classical Music Institute and was one of leading composers of Korean music, coached me as I created my required piano sonata. The following year, when I was expected to compose for Korean instruments, he left to study on his own in America.

Meanwhile, outside the university circle, a new generation of composers was changing the direction of Korean music. They assembled a traditional orchestra similar to the Western one. They arranged a large string group, a large bamboo flute group and added a variety of percussion instruments in the Korean instruments' orchestra, making the orchestra sound powerful. The orchestra was conducted with a baton, so the individual tone fluctuation was less presented in the music. They also worked to remedy what they saw as a problem with the limited range of traditional Korean instruments, most of which have less than two octaves. They introduced a new

model of *gayageum* adding movable bridges that could extend the strings and thus extend the pitch range. This was an easy enough change for the *gayageum*, and though it would take more time and research to alter other instruments, the trend took hold. The more strings, the more impressive—especially when played with the youthful energy of a modernized orchestra. They altered other instruments too; the length of *piri* is extended with more holes and *ajeng* (아쟁) with more strings, both extending the pitch range.

Yet conductors and musicians did not seem enthusiastic about westernizing changes, and neither did I. Even as a young person, I found the new style awkward and pretentious. Traditionally, Korean court orchestras were led by a concert master who signaled the beginning and end of a performance by playing a *bak* (박) clapper. Within the performance, he gave the orchestra cues about tempo changes, and he could adjust the duration of the music as needed for a given ritual or ceremonial purpose. But he never had the kind of mechanistic control of a Western orchestra leader. Instead, all the members of the orchestra based their playing on the rhythmic cycles set forth by *janggo* cycles. Korean court orchestras established a time sense together, with an organicism that seemed close to breathing. All this disappeared with the adoption of a Western musical mindset. Now, a conductor dictated the time sense for the entire orchestra. Instead of articulating melody, and rhythm individually in strings and winds, musicians had to advance a singular, dynamic expression. What's more, the new generation of composers simplified both Korean rhythmic cycles and the traditional pentatonic scale. They westernized the melodies of old, familiar folk songs. The energy that had seemed to float throughout the pieces of traditional orchestra playing was gone. What remained sounded almost like Western music on Korean instruments.

It seemed to me that the kind of in-depth knowledge of Korean music I had spent years learning was, professionally speaking, nearly worthless. In both metropolitan and national orchestras, western musicians earned twice as much as traditional Korean musicians. There was no independent orchestra for both Korean and Western music at that time. And if I wanted to get a teaching job in a Korean middle or high school, I would have to pursue a second degree in Western music, the only kind taught in schools.

I remained passionate about Korean traditional music, but I was also deeply disappointed. As graduation approached, I also sensed that, as a woman, I would never be a leading composer. The entire musical network ran on patriarchal authority. Without a powerful male teacher to advocate for me, I would be ignored. At the time, individual musicians did not apply for grant



funding or take commissions to create new music, and the composers who were successful had institutional connections to government or orchestras. Society was still under the shadow of Confucianism, valuing men, and especially older men, over young women like me. I worried about the direction of my future. Korea was the only place I'd ever lived, the place I felt rooted as a person and as a musician. But it might not be possible for me to be the best there as a musician.

### **America is my Platform**

By the time I graduated from Seoul National University, I had decided I needed to study Western music in depth, not in Korea, but in the West from real Western people. I was tired of seeing Korean traditional music treated as inferior to Western classicism, and I wanted to create music that combined both Korean and Western instruments, and treated them equally. I had good reason to think I was up to the task. I was a rising young composer in Korea, and my composition *Yeopo for three daegeum and yang-geum* (여포 - Brave Warrior for bamboo flute with membrane and hammer dulcimer) won the *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper's New Musicians Festival Award. The composition was broadcast on the Korean National Television Broadcasting (KBS-TV). During my college years, I had composed new pieces for Korean traditional instruments as well as a combination of Korean and Western instruments. But while older, male composers received commissions from their older, male conductor friends, I, as a young female composer, was on my own. I had to hire musicians to perform my works when I premiered them outside of the college. I was very interested in combining both Korean and Western instruments in a small chamber ensemble, but I knew I needed to leave Korea to do it.

Most Korean musicians who decided to study abroad went to Germany, which has a rich musical history and free university tuition. However, I wanted to go to the United States. It had risen as the dominant force in the world politically and economically. I was also curious to experience a broader variety of cultures, since the US is known as an immigrant country. Studying ethnomusicology would have helped me do that, but I wanted to study composition instead. I wanted to create new music. I thought that only a new type of music would make both Korean and Western instruments treated equally. I told my theory professors, Dr. Chang Sa Hun and Prof. Hahn Man Young (한만영), about my decision. Their responses were unanimous: No. They “kindly” advised me that it was impossible for a woman to become a successful composer. But I

had not been asking for their permission. “No one can stop me anymore,” I told them. “I want to try.” They were shocked to hear that from me, because up until now, I had not been known to push back against authority. My father worried too. How, he asked, could I be successful overseas if I had not been successful in Korea? I explained that I felt hopeless that I won’t have the best opportunity to become successful inside of Korea, and the whole society doesn’t care much about traditional instruments over Western instruments. I wanted to find out why the Korean music was a failure under the Western music. I needed look at Korean music from outside. My farther understood me, and he left me alone.

In 1980, when I graduated from college, it was hard to obtain a visa to the US unless one had a relationship with someone working at the US embassy. I had no such connections, and I found the application process—writing detailed responses to various questions about my intentions, proving financial documents, securing letters of recommendation, all in English—challenging. My own family was incapable to support my decision to study abroad, and they lacked the financial stability to vouch for my ability to pay tuition abroad. Fortunately, one of my father’s friends loaned him some money so that my father’s bank account temporarily looked good enough for my application. I also felt lucky when, while carrying my application materials to the visa office, I ran into an old boyfriend beneath the subway path. He was now employed at a government agency, and kindly handed my materials over to his friend at the embassy directly.

On the day of visa interview, I arrived at the embassy at 6:00 a.m. to wait in line outside, and stayed there all day, even when the embassy closed for lunch. I finally heard my name called from the interview window. The American consul looked at my financial statement and said that I would not be able to study abroad due to my lack of financial stability, because my father did not have a good income from his job. He couldn’t see the financial stability to pay my tuition for years in the US except the savings in my father’s bank account. I earnestly replied, “I will study hard to get a scholarship, even if I might not have enough money for studying abroad right now.” He and his Korean colleagues just laughed.

After the interview, I sat in an empty waiting room until one of the officers called me up to an open door, handed me a sealed document, and closed the office altogether. Standing outside, I nervously opened the envelope, and saw a student visa with an admission stamp. It was raining heavily, I had no umbrella, and I was soon soaked through, but I did not care. My heart was filled

with excitement; I would be studying in the US. I was so thrilled to think ahead that I would be on a right track to prepare for becoming a professional musician.

A few days after, I had a strange dream. I was standing alone, gazing out at the Pacific Ocean, and I looked like a small doll. Suddenly two huge elephants appeared, and walked miraculously across the ocean, until only their tails were invisible upon the horizon. When I told my mother about this dream, she told me her interpretation; the ocean signified my departure Korea, and the two elephants represented someone who would help me out during my time abroad. I had no relatives or friends in the US nor much information about where to go. I decided to head to San Francisco because I liked the name. I was single-minded about studying abroad, but as I boarded the Korean Air flight away from home, I was also insecure. The airline was owned by an American company back then, and even though most of the passengers were Korean, the Korean stewardesses were only speaking English. It was as though even to travel to the US, one needed to be able to speak English. My English was not good, and now—before I even landed in America—I was struggling with my lack of proficiency.

During a four-hour layover in Tokyo, I met Paul, an American soldier. He was about my age, and barely spoke Korean, but soon after he said hello, I found myself asking for his help on my trip to San Francisco. He said yes; he seemed a gift from God. Later, he waited more than an hour for me until I got out of Customs, and helped me take a bus to the city, where I found a motel near the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where I had recently enrolled. Paul's kindness helped me survive my first day in the US. That night, I pulled out a list of contacts friends had given me and started calling people across the US. Not realizing how big the US is, I called people in Los Angeles and Seattle who explained that, though they would like to help me, I was too far away. Fortunately, I eventually got in touch with a Korean family living in San Francisco, and they helped me find a small studio apartment.

Since the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM) was private, tuition was high, and I would need to economize. The apartment rent was too expensive to continue to pay for. I had to look for a cheaper place. The few other Korean students at the school, who were surprised to hear my story, were friendly and helpful. Some of them put me up for few days to months. Sometimes I played piano for a church's Sunday services, and a member of the congregation would put me up for months. One day I met a Seoul National University alumna. She let me live with her for some months and helped me to find part-time jobs. I worked at a wig store run by her in the downtown

Woolworth's. For almost two years, I lived like a nomad, finding work and lodgings where I could. My financial situation was dire, but I already had been poverty-stricken in childhood. This was nowhere near as bad as that, and I felt content because I was studying what I wanted. SFCM's rigorous admission process required me to start out as an interim student, taking courses like English, Musicianship, Sight Singing, Harmony, and Counterpoint. After completing these prerequisites, I could enroll as a regular student. I had wanted to study Western music from scratch in the US anyway, so I welcomed the opportunity. They did not end up being too hard for me, since I had audited many Western music classes in college at Seoul National University.

### **Studying with American Composers**

John Adams, the renowned minimalist-music composer, was my composition teacher at the Conservatory. I took three classes with him: 20th Century Contemporary Music, Orchestration, and Composition Seminar. I was a shy girl, and my English was so bad that it must have been very frustrating for him to be my teacher. I wish my English had been fluent enough to have a real dialogue with him at that time, because I know that I missed a precious opportunity to extend my study with him in depth. He looked at my compositions, but he did not offer much feedback. Perhaps he held back because of the cultural barrier, or perhaps he truly liked my different style. He had shown us his own minimalist scores, but compared to the Korean court music I had studied, they seemed mathematical and alienating. Although I respected his work, I was not interested in following his style. I held fast to my Korean training.

John Adams held an annual contemporary music concert with work by active local composers. San Francisco Conservatory faculty and students played new music written by Bay Area living composers. In the winter of 1980, at the end of my first semester at SFCM, he selected my chamber music composition *Yeo-woon* for the program. *Yeo-woon* (여운) means acoustic phenomena that is still hung over the ears after the sound decayed. I composed it for chamber ensemble: violin, viola, cello, bass, clarinet, flute, French horn, trumpet, percussion and soprano. It was the only student work presented at the concert, a great and unexpected surprise for me. Other works presented in the program were by my teacher John Adams, faculty at University of California Berkeley, and San Francisco State University. The audience loved John Adams' composition most. My music was obviously different from the rest, because it was Korean-style

new music on Western instruments. I treated each instrument with a series of short phrases, and there was silence at the end of each phrase, as the title of the piece implied. The music was poetic, with subtle and brief melodic gestures supported by gentle tone clusters. The soprano singer sang in Korean pronunciation. With my poor English I had a difficult time communicating the meaning of the title of the piece, and I couldn't describe the sounds I intended in the music. However, when the ensemble played my music on stage, I was emotionally overwhelmed. I knew this would help me to get my name known by local musicians, but I was not yet aware how important this opportunity would come to be later in my career.

At this concert I met Wade Greene, my ex-husband, and an avid supporter of my music. He came to me to say how much he loved my music. He also told me that his older sister was married to a Korean man who was the grandson in a royal family of the last empire known as *minbee* (민비). I was surprised by his connection to a Korean family. He told me that he knew where to hear alternative music outside the Conservatory. Together, we frequented venues for contemporary, world, and jazz music around the Bay Area. The range of live music I experienced was broader than what I was learning at the conservatory, and it made me want to explore all of them as much as possible. The most eye-opening event of all, though, was the New Music America Festival.

The New Music America festival originated in 1979, when a committee of 53 contemporary musicians from across the country gathered at the Kitchen Center in SOHO, for what was then called New Music New York. For over a decade, the festival took place annually, in different cities, and grew in size and influence. The content varied based on the host location, with local musicians usually playing a significant role in the programming, but whatever its locale, the festival focused on the variety of experimental music. It was a vital coming-together of musicians and audiences from around the country.

Wade and I first attended in San Francisco in the spring of 1981. We had a festival pass, and we attended every single concert during a week festival. Only six months after arriving in the US, I had already seen a wide range of American new music. I was extremely lucky. It was eye-opening. For a number of years, as the Festival took place in new parts of the country, over 300 contemporary musicians from across the US came to present their work at each festival. Most

years, the festival lasted 7 to 10 days, during which more than 60 concerts in various music genres are held from morning to night. In Korean traditional music, a single piece evolves gradually, over the centuries, as it's played by groups of musicians. When individual composers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century started working on new repertoire, they still turned to the past, creating new arrangements of folk tunes. The type of music I was experiencing now would not even be considered music in Korea: improvisation, minimal music, sound installation, electronic music, computer music, multimedia, conceptual music, contemporary chamber music, newly invented musical instruments, a car horn ensemble at a parking lot, a 20-minute score entirely on wineglass music, remote-controlled feedback sound on a large blimp floating above the stadium, sonic sounding of outdoor environment, and music created by visual artists. Audiences respected it, and responded to it, and so did I. I felt inspired to broaden my own sense of what music could do, and grateful to meet a number of avant-garde U.S. musicians who were happy to talk and share ideas. I saw how nationalistic it was for Koreans to claim that good music must be based on old tradition. Rather, in the US, one should pursue one's interests, wherever they might lead.

When the largest New Music America festival yet was held in Los Angeles in 1985, I decided to cover it as a journalist for a Korean music magazine, *Eumak Dong-A* (음악동아). At the time, Korean audiences knew little to nothing about Western music other than European classical music; at the university, students knew a little about German contemporary music that was imported by students of renowned composer Isang Yun (윤이성), who lived in Germany. I wanted to introduce this new, experimental music scene in the US to my colleagues back home in Korea. I went on to cover the New Music America Festival for *Eumak-Dong-A*, a magazine published by *Dong-A Daily News*, for several more years, and also conducted over forty interviews for the magazine with leading composers and musicians such as John Cage, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and La Mont Young.

The city of Los Angeles was home to two great 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers, Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky, and was renowned, more broadly, for its tradition of excellence in movies, theater, art, and music. Still, it was striking to see how fully L.A. threw its support behind the New Music America Festival. Twenty-five external institutions, including the LA Philharmonic, California Institute of Arts, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition, Inc (LACE), and the Japanese Cultural Center collaborated in the festival, which featured the work of 85

composers, played by more than 300 musicians. Composer Carl Stone was a director. The opening party, a masquerade ball, took place at City Hall, and was crowded with guests, some of whom had chosen to come in costume. The party was decorated with waving balloons in the sky. Over the next 11 days, the festival more or less took over L.A.'s performing centers, galleries, small theaters, museums, and parks. KUSC-FM, a radio station within the University of Southern California, broadcast every single performance, and a local TV station, KCET-TV, joined the effort by broadcasting films about great American artists such as Philip Glass, John Cage, Meredith Monk, and Robert Ashley. The new-music scene seemed very vital then in L.A.

The festival engaged the public with a dozen free, unique installations throughout downtown L.A. that used sound systems, electronics, visuals, and sculptures to create comprehensive artistic experiences. For instance, a microphone inside the garden of the Japanese Cultural Center amplified whatever was happening nearby, usually a sound of continuous calm that reminded audiences how very serene the garden was. A series of speakers in the outdoor concert hall in MacArthur Park, in front of the Park Plaza Hotel, played "poems in diverse languages," which included the diverse sounds of woods, winds, birds, cars, and non-speaking human voices. It resonated with my belief that any sound can be called music.

There were at least three performances every day, and even the strangest was often sold out. Renowned electronic/computer music composer Morton Subotnick performed an orchestra work, and the Daniel Lentz Ensemble performed on wine glasses with live multi-tracking. Lentz presented the four vocalists sitting around a table with wine glasses. During the performance, the vocalists facing one another, poured a bottle of wine in their glasses when they adjusted keys, drank the wine when they changed pitch, and played the glasses by circling around the edge of the glass top with a fingertip to produce a long sustained pitches, and sometimes hit the glass with a light stick. At the end of the performance, some of them seemed drunk and blew the empty bottles. Later, the piece was featured in a famous TV show, *Meet the Composer*.

At the Cal Arts Modular Theatre, I watched a "prepared piano" performance. About half a century before, John Cage had begun placing various objects on the strings of the piano to change its capacities; now, the Stephen Scoot Boot Piano Ensemble played "bowed piano," rubbing the piano strings with nylon fishing lines. Stephen and the nine other members of the group gathered around a single grand piano, with intense focus, and the smooth, droning sounds they produced created a beautiful harmony.

In another piece, Gordon Monahan swung three speakers from ropes, each at a different velocity. The performance seemed dangerous—what if the speakers went flying above the audience?—but the audience enjoyed it, and the different sounds produced by the speakers crated a song in themselves. The sine wave fed in the speaker was whirring like wind, when he turned them. The circling motion of speakers as he whirred them quickly created a fearful tornado-like sound around the concert space. And in another remaking of tradition, interdisciplinary composer/performers Carla Bley, Philip Glass, and Paul Dresher performed a “contemporary micro opera” in which the composer was also a performer, or singer. Unlikely the traditional opera, the voice was not predominant in the performance, and the instrumentation was minimal, consisting of electric guitar, synthesizer, keyboard, and computer/electronics. Experiencing that all these unusual music performances were welcomed by the enthusiastic audience, I got to believe in experimental music in America and I became very liberal myself for creating music.

During the second week of programming, the festival shifted some 40 miles away to Valencia, at the California Institute of the Arts, to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its contemporary music. I was particularly excited by the work that David Rosenboom and Lou Harrison, who were then my teachers in the master’s program I had enrolled in at Mills, performed. Rosenboom’s *Zones of Influence* for percussion and computer/electronics, performed by William Winant, introduced new virtuoso performance techniques along with real-time algorithmic composition and advanced interactive linking of percussion instruments with software. David Rosenboom was one of the pioneers using Hierarchical Music Specific Language (HMSL); he had influenced me to study electronic music at Mills. (Later years I co-designed an electric *komungo*). I took a break from being a journalist in the audience to play in the Bay Area New Gamelan with Lou Harrison and Jody Diamond. Lou Harrison and Bill Colvig built the new American Gamelan, a reimagining of the Indonesian form, made of bronze and iron, influenced by Javanese *gamelan*. I rehearsed in the ensemble at Mills for this performance, and we played both Javanese and new music composed for the *gamelan* ensemble in the program. I played *bonang* and *peking* in the ensemble with Lou Harrison and Jody Diamond.

Later, we left the auditoriums and headed to the school parking lot, where 10 parked cars had been transformed into musical instruments. This was a performance of Robert Suderberg’s



*Freeway Concerto* for performers and automobiles. While some musicians played percussion and trombones on the backs of trucks, others sat in the drivers' seats in the cars, rhythmically honking the horns and switching the headlights off and on. The *Freeway Concerto*, as it came to be known, was a hilarious piece of performance art, but its novel approaches also gave the large and delighted audience a lot to think about.

Throughout the festival, I loved the enthusiasm of musicians and audiences, the dynamism of their interactions, and the depth and range of discussions that took place around the performances. I experienced so many unusual and liberal ideas that make music in America. How could they possibly be so free to do whatever they wanted and still call themselves composers? Nobody criticized them; in fact, every performance I saw was cheered by the audience. It was a marked contrast with my experiences with *Jongmyo* Confucian shrine ritual music and the 45-minute long *Young-san-hoe-sang* orchestra suite. At the same time, I saw that the strict dichotomy between Western classical music and Korean traditional music in Korea was meaningless. Experimental American composers were not wedded to a European classical music tradition, and had already turned to world music for inspiration. I had a sense that the types of traditional music I had trained in were not relics of the past, as the Korean university system had seemed to suggest, but could instead have a real future within the experimental scene.

Most of the professional musicians I met in the US were extremely open-minded. They welcomed anyone who was interested in experimental music and did not seem to care about my racial or musical training background. In fact, anybody could create music without musical training, as long as they had original ideas. I felt comfortable around them, like I belonged with them, but I still wanted to finish my master's degree, which I thought would allow me to finally call myself a "composer."

I thought about all that as I prepared to interview Isang Yun, a renowned Korean composer, for *Eumak Dong-A*, when he was the featured composer at the annual Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music in Santa Cruz. I listened to his compositions for a week before we talked. Yun had studied music in Japan during the Japanese occupation, and left Korea in the 1950s to work and study in Europe, eventually settling in Germany. He then was kidnapped by South Korean Secret Service from West Berlin due to alleged acts of espionage in 1967. Yun was released, returning to West Berlin in 1971. Later he began participating in the call for the

democratization of South Korea and the reunification of the divided country. The Korean government had censored his music, considering him a political “sinner,” and he told me that he felt deeply hurt.

Yun’s approach was serious and philosophical, based on both Asian and German thinking. He explained that his sound principle originates from Taoism’s “middle balance” and Yin-Yang theory. He described his music beginning in subtle quietness, which symbolizes the eternal continuation of sounds, fading away through its lifecycle, and lasting forever as quietness itself. Compared to the American experimental music I had been following, his music was authoritative and somewhat intimidating. His music is highly respected in Europe, but in the US such music is overlooked by the American liberal mind.

He was the only famous composer professors and students talked about at Seoul National University. If I were in Korea, I probably would not even have gotten to see him so intimately. In Santa Cruz, California, I spent time with him every day for a week as a journalist and musician. It was certainly my honor to interview Yun when he was the featured composer at the festival. Although I appreciated all his compositions performed during the festival, by then I had already been inspired by American new music, which influenced my choice to be freer than the serious German style of Yun’s work.

In the fall of 1981, after two semesters, I could no longer afford the expensive tuition at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and transferred to the San Francisco Music and Art Institute. Though the school was primarily known for being relatively cheap and thus for attracting foreign students, I was fortunate to meet an excellent teacher there, Gable. He had taken a position as an interim professor at SFMAI after receiving his Ph. D in composition (he is now a composition professor at Texas Christian University). Understanding my musical background, he gave me a semester-long assignment to identify the differences between Korean traditional music and Western music and put them into a chart. This was a really valuable project, for it helped me think hard about the uniqueness of Korean music, which I would build on in the years to come, to create my own method of composition, “Living Tones.”

Because of my growing interest in contemporary experimental music, I soon transferred again in 1983, to Mills College, where I finished my MFA in Recording Media and Electronic

Music. Over the decades, Mills College, with its astoundingly beautiful campus, had played host to artistic masters like John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Ashley, and Steve Reich. For me, the primary attraction was that Lou Harrison and Terry Riley were on the faculty. Both seemed quite interested in Asian traditional music, and I expected to learn a lot from them.

Ever since the composer Henry Cowell introduced Asian music to the American music scene in California, in the 1950s, a number of American composers had followed his interests. Lou Harrison, as my teacher in Seoul had proudly pointed out, studied Korean traditional music at the National Classical Music Institute, and Terry Riley was famous for applying his knowledge of Indian traditional music to his compositions. But by the 1980s, when I lived in San Francisco, large numbers of Asian immigrants had brought their cultures to America, and some were teaching and performing as well. Traditionally trained Korean musicians like me were rare, but the Bay Area boasted an Indian music school established by Ali Akbar Khan; a Filipino Kulintang Ensemble, a Japanese Taiko Drum Ensemble, and a Chinese Beijing Opera Group. Indonesian Gamelan Ensemble had become popular, and Asian instruments like the *shakuhachi* and *koto*, from Japan, and the *pipa* and *zheng*, from China, had been included in works by prominent US musicians. Even as I was studying with American musicians in my degree program, I was learning quite a bit from the wider Asian American musical community. I was lucky to be living in San Francisco when all these immigrants were tirelessly making musical contributions to the community and to the USA at large; and I was pleased that American audiences were not just open-minded, but legitimately interested in these contributions. I saw my Korean musical training could be another contribution to the community. Therefore, I felt I was very welcomed here in San Francisco Bay Area.

While I was at Mills, I learned Indian *Raga* from Pandit Pran Nath, who was Terry Riley's teacher. I studied with both during my graduate studies. The *raga* singing we did in class was a very ancient practice, and Pran Nath was a master of it. His voice was very old but very spiritual. I did not understand the meaning of the song we were singing, but it certainly calmed me down inside. I recalled my past practicing *gagok* singing in Korea. *Raga* and *gagok* singing are totally different styles; however, both helped to cultivate the mind.

I also took *bansuri* (transverse bamboo flute) private lessons at home from G. S. Sachdev for a year. Sachdev told me many times that I was wasting my time learning *bansuri*, and that I should stick with my *komungo*. He thought it better to continue to improve my *komungo* instead

of learning a new instrument. But I wanted to learn about Indian music actively, by playing it, not passively, by listening. I found it similar to Korean music. The songs begin with the *bansuri* playing a calm, slow rhythm, *alap*, similar to *jinyangjo* (진양조) in Korean *sanjo*. The *tabla* joins in and the rhythm speeds up, eventually hitting its peak, akin to the *janggo jangdan* (장고 장단), the main structure of the *sanjo*. Both forms possess a deep, philosophical aspect, as performers try to instill their souls in each note. In Korean music, this happens in *sigimse*, but in *Raga* it happens in *shrutis*, which are less dramatic. This was an amazing discovery, since I knew very little about Indian music before. I knew that one of the ancient Korean Buddhism monk chants was imported from India. In fact, during the Silla Dynasty an Indian princess lived in a palace; there must have been musical exchanges between India and Korea during that period. Ethnomusicologist Dr. Song Bang Song (송방송) wrote a thesis of comparison between *sanjo* and *raga*. Now I understood his argument. Later years I got to research more about Indian music and collaborated with Indian artists in my creative works.

At Mills, I also studied *gamelan* with Jody Diamond and played in Lou Harrison's American Gamelan. Harrison, in particular, helped remake Indonesian *gamelan* into an American form. Today, *gamelan* music is so popular that there are over 1,000 *gamelan* groups across the US, in a range of styles that include Javanese and Balinese. The American enthusiasm for *gamelan* makes sense. As a percussion instrument, it is easier to learn than other Asian melody instruments, but the variety of its rhythmic structures create elaborate and energetic melodies. There is variety in playing, too, because each player performs on different instruments within a single performance. Players are peacefully immersed not just in the tunes, but in the ensemble itself, a kind of supportive family, where everyone knows everyone else's part. I enjoyed playing *gamelan*. The *gamelan* music is much more straightforward compared to Korean melody. The rhythmic interlocking was particularly intriguing. Jody Diamond directed the ensemble most of time, but once in a while we got to play with Lou Harrison and his partner Bill Colvig. It was so special to spend time with the famous composer Lou Harrison. My high school teacher used to talk about him so many times in class that he came to Korea to study traditional music, and composed music for the Korean instrument, *piri*. During the Gamelan Ensemble practice, I never mentioned Korean music to him, because it was so obvious that he fell in love with *gamelan*. Lou and Bill's presence in the ensemble always made the rest of us look more professional than usual. We practiced

Javanese gamelan pieces, but most of the music we practiced was newly composed by American living composers. We were also encouraged to compose a piece for the ensemble to play.

My enthusiasm about learning about Asian music continued. For my own personal interest, I visited the Chinese Cultural Center in San Francisco Chinatown. I went there hoping to study *qin*, because the scholars said *qin* and *komungo* were related. I was curious about how it was similar to Korean *komungo*. It turned out that the *qin* teacher someone recommended to me had left, but I was introduced to an *erhu* teacher who also played *qin*. I bought his instrument and took lessons for a year. While the *qin*, like the *komungo*, was often played by scholars, I learned that its construction is quite different. The seven-stringed board zither doesn't have any frets, whereas my *komungo* has six strings and 16 frets. Both instruments require the use of the thumb on the left hand, but otherwise they have little in common.

Meanwhile, I continued attending a variety of live new-music performances, including every one of the Kronos Quartet's monthly concerts in San Francisco. I was so taken with their talent, and so influenced by their capacious approach to new music, that I decided to compose a piece for string quartet for my final project at Mills. I titled it *Linking*, to evoke the connection between Korea and America. During the first session of my composition class, I showed Lou Harrison my score, and asked for his opinion on my *Linking* (이음새). He told me that Korean music sounded difficult to him, and he liked Indonesian *gamelan* a lot. I sensed that unless I composed for the *gamelan* ensemble, I wouldn't get to learn much from him. I had enjoyed playing *gamelan*, but I knew that I was not going to compose *gamelan* music.

So, I brought *Linking* to Terry Riley. He told me that he did not write down music but created it by improvising. I understood that he wouldn't advise me about my composition. I decided to take his class instead. He taught Just Intonation, which is known as pure intonation, tuning of intervals as whole number ratios 3:2 or 4:3 of frequencies. Piano tuning is not just intonation. One full class was devoted to listening how the intervals on piano are unnatural and not pure. Back in Korea I learned Korean tuning system *samboon-sonik-bop* (삼분손입법, 12 notes produced based on ratios 3:2 and 4:3), which is written in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Korean court music treatises *ak-hak-gwe-beom* (악학궤범). I had been playing *komungo*, and my ear got accustomed to the natural tuning of my *komungo* strings. When I played *komungo* in Korean *jeong-ak* orchestra, I had to match my *komungo* pitches and intervals to bamboo flutes. In my experience,

the tuning had never been a fixed system; constant tweaking the pitches by ear was necessary. It also depended on which instrument I played. I never bothered to tune my *komungo* in just intonation. I imagined that the two famous composers would be my mentors. However, I realized that my work had nothing to do with their interests, so I was right about taking their classes to receive what they offered. Meanwhile, I had opportunities to hear their masterful works at various public concerts during my Mills period. While I appreciated these men's honest responses, I was also frustrated, and wondered who could advise me on my final project.

I finally went to the dean, David Rosenboom, to discuss the issue. He told me that he was sorry I'd been unable to find the right teacher. He encouraged me by saying that Mills College had a strong program for electronic computer music, and that I might find something useful there for my composition study. His comment made a lot of sense to me. I decided to learn about electronic computer music while pursuing composition by myself. Larry Polansky, who taught Electronic Music, advised me as I worked on a new project, *Su-wol-yong-yul*, for computer-generated sound. The title, from a 15<sup>th</sup> century song, means that the basic note (first note of the song) in a scale is chosen for the pitch corresponding to the month of performance in 12 months (12 notes). I designed various graphic symbols (gestures) of Korean tonal fluctuation to add the flavor in the song; and I generated the sound of each symbol one by one, using Hierarchical Music Specific Language (HLSM) by drawing the gestures with a computer mouse. HLSM was a pioneering computer music program at the time. I recorded the computer-generated sounds of the new song and asked Chris Brown to perform harpsichord with the pre-recorded tape. But I also finished *Linking* on my own and presented it at my senior recital concert along with my *Su-wol-yong-yul* (수월용율). Finally, *Su-wol-yong-yul*, computer-generated Living Tones Sounds using HMSL language, was premiered with harpsichord (Chris Brown) and cello.

For the concert, I also composed *X5 for Solo Flute* (1985), a prerecorded tape and live performance of alto and soprano flutes and piccolo. The composition was written for five parts, but four parts were prerecorded by the soloist who would play one more part in live while playing back the prerecorded tape. At that time, tape recording music was a new trend. The piece was premiered by Ann LaBerge for the Contemporary Music with Korean Influence program at Mills College, CA (February 22, 1985). The same year I composed *X4 for Solo Violin* for Mary Oliver,

which was premiered at New Performance Gallery, San Francisco, CA (September 18, 1985), and at New Langton Arts, San Francisco (November 16, 1985).

Additional Performances of X5 FOR SOLO FLUTE by Barbara Held at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation, New York (April 22, 1986); The Bowery Ensemble, New York (October 7, 1986); and Paul Taub at Cornish College and Western Washington University, Seattle, WA (February 1-3, 1997).

## LIVING TONES

이음새 *Linking for string quartet*

*Commissioned by the Kronos Quartet (1986)*

In my Korean traditional music training, I didn't experience music ruled by a controlled mindset, music created with perfect notes and mechanical time, as in the Western tradition. I experienced, rather, the silence and plasticity of time, the myriad spices of the notes. Each tone is produced with variety of vibration or specific articulation, so each musician develops his or her own spices on notes, which is called *sigimse* (시김새). The *sigimse* was not a skill to accomplish, but a representation of the soul of Korean people that was innate neither in the culture nor the background of Americans. Koreans, whose lives were not focused on "I" but "we," attempted to express their suppressed identity through playing music. Even if they played the same score, *sigimse* was different and those who performed with more unique *sigimse* were considered virtuosi. A performer could not impress the audience unless he or she had uniquely original *sigimse*. Thus, *sigimse* is the essence of Korean traditional music performance that represents each player's identity. Although the term's literal meaning is not known, in 1985 I began to use the term "Living Tones" to describe this attitude toward melodic material as I applied it in my work. It has become my compositional metaphor and signature. Thus, my compositions use newly developed forms of notation to indicate various types of vibratos, pitch bends, etc. As in Korean traditional music, each musical tone is given a unique expression and development.

When I graduated from Mills College in 1985, I received a Paul Merritt Henry Prize for my compositions, including *Linking for String Quartet*. But I was still not satisfied with the fact that I'd had no input from faculty about *Linking* and I wanted to have someone I trusted evaluate it. I attended every concert performance of the Kronos Quartet for years. Inspired by the quartet's performances, I attempted to link my Korean traditional music training to the American contemporary music landscape. After hesitating for months, I finally sent a letter to the music director of the Kronos Quartet, David Harrington. I wrote that I had been inspired by the quartet's performances to compose a piece and would greatly appreciate if he could give me any advice.

The Kronos Quartet was not then the superstars that they are now. I was lucky to approach them when they probably had a bit more time. Still, I certainly didn't expect to pick up the phone on the first day of 1986 and hear David telling me how interesting the group had found *Linking*. He said that he wanted to give me a commission, but the piece needed to be shortened to get performed from 20 minutes to 10-12 minutes. I was thrilled and I revised the piece. In *Linking* I drew on my years of Korean music training to transform Korean tone quality into a string quartet. Wade and I had attended every concert the Kronos Quartet presented for four years in San Francisco, so their sound characteristics of playing Western contemporary music were also embedded in me. Naturally these two sources merged in my *Linking*, which although it was not Korean melody but fresh material could not prevent the Korean traditional musical sensibility from pouring out of me for the four string instruments. This was the first string quartet I wrote in my life.

*The idea behind this piece is to make Living Tones, which is the conceptual basis of my composition method derived from the characteristic of Korean tone quality. Each tone is alive, embodying its own individual shape, sound, texture, vibrato, glissando, expressive nuances and dynamics. The life is partly given to the tones by gestures, which shape the tones and produce subtle microtonal fluctuations. By varying the articulation techniques, timbres are emphasized. The precise timbral persona of each tone generated is treated with an abiding respect, as its philosophical mandate from Buddhism, a reverence for the "life" of tones, including the color and nuance articulated from Shamanism expression. Phrases end with energetic gestures, and pauses (,) are important to their realization. The piece is developed heterophonically. The performers are required to play meditatively while creating dramatic Living Tones.*



On the first rehearsal day, while walking up on the stairway of the Kronos Studio, I could hear exactly what I wrote to express Korean tonal fluctuations with bending and dramatic vibratos on strings. I was amazed. I knocked at the door and the musicians greeted me with smiles. I was impressed by their stylized contemporary haircuts and clothes, but I was far more impressed, when we all got to work, by the sharp focus of their faces when reading music, and by the special energy of their hands moving on the strings. True musicians can concentrate deeply while remaining calm.

Their sound was already so pulled-together, and so precise, that all I needed to do was guide them through the unique articulation and embellishment of notes, the technique I called "Living Tones." I wrote graphic symbols over some of the notes on the score to indicate the appropriate Living Tones gesture, and I sang each symbol to help them understand. The Living Tones gestures are not Korean traditional articulations, but a method that I created to get elastic tonal gestures for the Western strings. As with Korean traditional music, these Living Tones are not easy to write down with western musical notation and must be learned orally. David Harrington, John Sherba, Hank Dutt, and Joan Jeanrenaud were very enthusiastic about this unfamiliar string vocabulary. I was amazed how quickly they adapted to create the Living Tones.

Before they premiered my piece in San Francisco, they played it at a small town in the Bay Area, and invited me to drive there with them. I was rather shy to be so close to them like this. I had just graduated from Mills, while they were professional musicians, but they were kind and unpretentious. They thanked me so many times for the beautiful piece. They were so concerned if I was comfortable sitting in a fully packed car. I was only a young fresh composer to get such attention from them. A few weeks later *Linking* was premiered at the Herbst Theater in San Francisco (September 12, 1986). I had not given much thought to how it might help my career. I was just proud of the fact that the Kronos Quartet was playing my piece. I traveled to see the Kronos Quartet perform *Linking* at UCLA and Brooklyn Academy of Music, where I met Philip Glass. When the Kronos finished performing my *Linking* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, I heard a thunderous applause from the audience, and I was spotlighted by the lighting booth to take a bow to the audience from my seat. The Kronos Quartet toured *Linking* in other

cities, and I got to see the press come in, praising the work and noting that I was its composer. I was surprised at how much I treasured this recognition, my first real press:

“An essay in integration which suggested a Takemitsu-like ability to hover between eastern and western traditions.”

—Paul Griffiths, *The Times* (London)

“The delicacy of her effects (and of the Kronos Quartet’s playing) was constantly riveting.”

—John Rockwell, *The New York Times*

“She applied the concept of “living tones” from traditional Korean music to the Western string quartet. The effect is a vivid one, especially in the high registers, where pitches slide in and out of consonances seductively. Kim is a composer to be watched.”

—Mark Swed, *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*

Additional performances by the Kronos Quartet at Darmstadt, Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival, the Warsaw Autumn Festival (Poland), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Institute for Contemporary Art (London), UCLA (Los Angeles); New Zealand String Quartet at Asian Pacific Festival, Wellington, New Zealand (December 3, 1992); Sonora Ensemble at Western Washington University, Seattle, WA (February 3, 1997)

**A complete manuscript is available upon request.**