

Songs for 'Great Leaders' – Ideology and Creativity in North Korean Music & Dance

Keith Howard

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We know pathetically little about the hermit kingdom of North Korea, yet no country is more pivotal in our precarious geo-political balance. Keith Howard's book is a heroic endeavour: he may only have been allowed two visits, but with tenacious and sympathetic research, and despite huge official obstacles, he has written a book which has far-reaching resonance. North Korea, he says, treats its territory as a theatre: songs are the soundtrack to daily life and musicians are instruments of



the state. He also reveals the roots of contemporary classical music, as a meld of Japanese, Soviet-Russian and Chinese elements. Leading Korean

musicians and composers studied in Japan, while their successors went to Moscow – Shostakovich replaced the 19th-century Russian romantics as a composing model. The detail is fascinating as Howard dissects symphonies and operas; he lifts the curtain on *p'ansori*, Korea's remarkable home-grown operatic form in which everything is done by a lone performer with a fan, an attendant drummer and a Protean voice. *Michael Church* ★★★★★