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Introduction

A good jigsaw takes a devotee many hours to assemble. A complex jigsaw can sit for months before it is completed, and a novice will likely only get part way through before abandoning the puzzle. Still, three quarters of a century after the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter, North Korea) was founded, few accounts of its art, and fewer still of its music and dance, have seen the light of day. In respect to music and dance, like a jigsaw puzzle just begun, it would be a big ask to expect a single volume to provide a full account, slotting everything into place from the first to last piece. This may seem a defensive position to take in my opening paragraph, but commentators who write about North Korea routinely point out that they are attempting to read tea leaves, as the available data is partial, incomplete, and often contradictory. An archive may hold just one or two of what should be a series of volumes. Some records that ought to be present have disappeared from official accounts. Some composers, singers, groups, and musical activities are forgotten—that is, until someone unexpectedly stumbles on a dusty and previously unknown old text.

In addition, access to materials is often restricted. It is as if some materials have been stamped, for some mysterious reason, secret. In Pyongyang, finding a publication from just a decade ago can require a search worthy of a detective. To copy a recording may require initiating a campaign to gain the necessary permissions. One only suspects that certain documents exist; denied access, one is told that one has no need for a particular item, or that it will be provided tomorrow—but tomorrow never arrives. A text by a specific author may be republished in a very different form, reflecting ideological changes. One particularly pertinent example, *Haebanghu Chosŏn ūmak* (Korean Music after Liberation), with Ri Hirim as its lead author, was published in both 1956 and 1979, but whereas the first version has two chapters devoted to Soviet influence and to instrumental and orchestral composition (1956, 233–56), the second omits all mention of the Soviet Union, lists only song compositions, and starts with a discussion of Kim Il Sung's extensive involvement in cultural development. Again, collections of northern materials exist in the Republic of Korea

(hereafter, South Korea), but so does a national security law that limits not just access, but also much public discussion. Commentaries on northern music and dance by southern authors frequently explore the ties that bind—evidence of a continuing tradition and the remains of what is claimed to have once been a homogeneous culture—at the expense of ideology or difference. And although the Internet has brought greater access to some materials, go-betweens decide what is available. At all times, one must consider the motivations that lie behind what is presented, and should never ignore what is *not* available.

Meeting North Korean scholars and artists is not easy. Research in Pyongyang is heavily controlled, and permission to do anything has to be sought from opaque and unknown bodies. Visits to a school, to a children’s palace (where selected gifted children receive specialist training), or to a university need to be approved in advance. Visits will be scheduled that were not requested. Permission to record performances may or may not be given. Travel beyond the boundaries of the capital will usually be resisted. Academic research develops by following leads, but to do so is not possible in Pyongyang. Interviews, if allowed, will routinely be supervised, and it is sensible to assume that everything one does will be monitored. A foreign researcher can hardly approach people in the street or students in a university canteen and ask detailed questions. No researcher has free and unfettered access to a library or an archive, and tedium sets in when multiple sources reveal, as Scalapino and Lee (1972, 890) memorably put it, “unalleviated mediocrity and monotony.”

North Korea’s state apparatus means that, at the most basic level, potential danger accrues to those one works with, talks to, and sits with more than to the foreign researcher who, after a brief sojourn in Pyongyang, will be expected (and hopefully allowed) to leave the country. With this in mind, it is not surprising that an ethnography can dehumanize or deontologize, as it depopulates its pages of the people it purports to study. Here, the interviews I cite are “on the record,” but when a comment was made in an aside, or where a statement contradicted state ideology, I have carefully considered whether anonymity should be maintained or, indeed, whether I can include such a comment at all. The musicians, artists, and scholars I have met in North Korea have, even as they maintain the approved perspectives, proven themselves knowledgeable, articulate, and thoughtful; each is worthy of attention, and I have a responsibility to relay and interpret what they have told me. But in doing so I also have a responsibility not to create problems for the innocent. I am not blind to the well-documented reports of human rights’ abuses, but if I here refrain from criticism, it is because my aim is to assemble the

jigsaw that constitutes cultural production. I do not deny that cultural activities are, or can be, political. In North Korea, culture reinforces ideological structures that control people. At the same time, as Rüdiger Frank notes in his introduction to *Exploring North Korean Arts*, “a cowardly avoidance of the topic altogether might be safe, but is not helpful” (2011, 28). Hence, in this study I aim to offer insights into what is often said to be an unknown, reclusive, and secretive state, to offer an exercise in consilience¹ by fitting some of the pieces into the puzzle that is North Korea.

I was first permitted to visit North Korea in 1992, hosted by the Isang Yun Music Research Institute (Yun Isang ūmak yŏn’guso). Yun (1917–1995), whom I write about in Chapter 8, was Korea’s best-known composer in the international arena during the latter part of the twentieth century, and he helped me gain permission for my research. He had watched me perform (South) Korean music at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in 1988—where he was a featured composer—and had patiently listened to me introduce a *p’ansori* recital elsewhere; I had twice interviewed him in Berlin as I documented Korean composers (for two publications: Howard 1992, 1999). I returned to Pyongyang in 2000, as the United Kingdom (along with other European states) negotiated to establish diplomatic relations. For both trips, I negotiated work schedules in advance and was admitted to conduct specific research. I was able to conduct multiple interviews, take individual workshops on specific instruments and on dance (and dance notation), collect copious materials, and observe and record rehearsals and performances. I have subsequently met and talked with North Koreans in Britain, China, and South Korea, have sporadically received replies from Pyongyang when I have asked questions, and have tracked down and consulted materials in archives, libraries, and personal collections across East Asia, Europe, and America. Still, this volume is, and by necessity must be, far from a complete account. I have never freely traveled the North Korean countryside; my knowledge of private music-making is almost all secondhand; I have not visited all the institutions and places, nor met and interviewed all those I would like to; and I have still not found every score, recording, and journal article that ought to exist.

Songs as the soundtrack to North Korea

North Korea behaves as if its whole territory is a theater, and as if all performances of music and dance project the country, the state apparatus,

and the population. The theater is for both domestic and international audiences. In stating this, I acknowledge the account by Suk-Young Kim (2010), but let me go further: songs form much of the soundtrack to the theater of daily life. Songs embed messages that tell the official history, the exploits of leaders, and of the socialist utopia yet to come. To Thomas More, utopia was not real but a fictional place; hence North Korea struggles to position itself, in a recurring Groundhog Day sort of existence, between persistent shortfalls in the present and promises of abundance in the future. Song genres link to Korea’s past, continuing traditions known before 1945, and matching to Soviet and Chinese practice (for which, see Chapter 1). In ways that evoke parallels elsewhere, songs provide key pillars for state ideology, and function today with contemporary groups such as Moranbong, Samjiyŏn, and Ŭnhasu, just as they did with their predecessors, Wangjaesan and Pochonbo (Chapter 9). Songs form the building blocks of revolutionary operas (Chapters 4–6). Song aesthetics impact on instrumental soundworlds (Chapters 2–3), and song melodies structure instrumental and orchestral compositions (Chapter 8). Songs are rearranged in countless versions; they provide the musical background for mass performance spectacles that showcase gymnastics, dance, and more (Chapter 7). In Pyongyang, songs are constantly heard, from morning to night. North Koreans are daily reminded how their songs are beamed around the world, formerly (supposedly) by satellite, but today uploaded by Uriminzokkiri and by others—sympathizers and detractors—to the Internet.

Songs, and music and dance more generally, offer windows through which we can glimpse North Korea. My account spans the period from 1945 to 2018. Chapter 1 first introduces songs written in the northern part of the peninsula shortly after liberation, or which are claimed in the official telling to date from earlier, and Chapter 9 ends in 2018, when a North Korean troupe visited South Korea during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games and as a South Korean troupe, in return, visited North Korea, singing songs. By way of introduction, though, I must first look back to earlier in the twentieth century, when the Korean peninsula was a Japanese colony. Korean history is, of course, contested, as is the very legitimacy of the two Korean states set up when the peninsula was divided with the defeat of Japan at the end of World War II, and as is the uniqueness of ideologies and practices that then developed on either side of what became the dividing line—the DMZ.

Scholars have begun to chart how cultural production, including music, had begun to move in two very different directions by the 1930s, as

campaigns for localization and modernization became polarized. By then, Japan's colonialist "gaze" curated Korea's folklore and archaeology, and identified in Korea something of Japan's premodern past (Atkins 2010, 93–161; see also Pai 1994, 1998). By then, Korean folk songs and folk dances were being staged in new ways for new urban audiences (as would continue in North Korea; see Chapters 1 and 7). To many Koreans, traditional cultural production, including traditional music, was part of the past (and this would be taken up in North Korean rhetoric; see Chapters 2–3 and 5). But the past had failed: why else had the Korean peninsula, home to Chosŏn, the longest-lasting dynasty in East Asia, and home to a relatively homogeneous population with a claimed 5,000-year history, become the colony of an island state to its east that had always been distant to China, distant to the home of proper Confucian governance and social hierarchy? To many, it could not be imagined that traditional culture would in time assume the iconicity and high watermark with which South Koreans and many foreign scholars regard it today. So, a word of warning: do not consider "Korean music" to be just the music that emanates from South Korea, a construction that for traditional music (as *kugak*, literally, "national music") looks back from what music has become as a result of state patronage, academic study, and international performance and promotion to reinterpret history (Howard 2016, Hee-sun Kim forthcoming). Equally, though, be wary of assuming that the ubiquity and commerce of South Korean K-pop is part of the theater of Pyongyang's daily life.

I ask readers to picture Seoul or Pyongyang in the 1930s or early 1940s. During the dark days (*amhŭkki*, Poole 2014, 4–5) of colonial rule, Japan extended its control beyond Korea into Manchuria. Japan moved toward war and tightened its grip on its colonial subjects. Korean intellectuals, writers, and artists looked for potential ways forward. The present was when change and modernization could prepare for the idealized future. Japan, after all, had accepted the need for modernization, and since the Meiji Restoration it had become the conduit through which many Western ideas entered East Asia. But could Japan provide a model for Korea's modernization? Many Korean intellectuals, writers, and artists had trained in Osaka and Tokyo, since opportunities to travel to Europe or the United States were limited. After 1945 many migrated from the South to the North, sympathetic, as so many intellectuals and artists always are, to the socialist cause. There had, though, been few writers and artists among those in Manchuria who fought the Japanese as Korean guerrillas, who allied themselves to the Chinese

Communists in the 1930s and sheltered in the Soviet Far East in the early 1940s. How could the socialist ideas that swept across the region provide a way to reinvigorate cultural production when so many intellectuals, writers, and artists were familiar with Japan, and saw the West through Japanese filters? One solution was to match the familiar to the unfamiliar, so although, not surprisingly, commentators identify Korean and Japanese roots, or Soviet and Chinese models, I contend North Korea developed fusions of all of these.

In North Korea, music and musicians were, and remain, instruments of the state. Musicians were, and are, members of the military, and music was, and is, used to grandstand ideology and policy. Throughout the existence of North Korea, songs indicate the important role music has been given. Colonial era school songs (K. *ch'angga*) from, or modeled on, Japanese equivalents (J. *shōka*), were adjusted to become revolutionary songs, not dissimilar to Chinese and Soviet mass songs. Folk songs popularized during colonial times were recast to fit socialism. Songs helped create the official history, in which Kim Il Sung defeated the colonial Japanese in 1945, defeated America in the Korean War, and then led the reconstruction of a “socialist paradise.” Songs embraced the notion of the popular, in which the masses were regarded as the creators of everything, but never forgetting that the Korean Workers’ Party knew and, in its policies, fully reflected the people’s desires. Songs therefore create the arch that spans this volume. Chapters 1 and 9 map the two chronological ends as foundation stones, while Chapters 4–6 function as the capstone, discussing revolutionary operas—song operas—that intimately link the first two North Korean leaders, father and son Kim Il Sung (1912–1994) and Kim Jong Il (1942²–2011). The remaining chapters complete the arch. Chapters 2 and 3 explore instruments, isolating formative issues and ideologies that justified creating “improved” (*kaeryang*) versions of traditional instruments (*chōnt'ong akki*) as national instruments (*minjok akki*). Claims by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il that in North Korea, national instruments should match or exceed the abilities of Western instruments, while Western instruments must be made subservient to a Korean soundworld, are persistent undercurrents in this discussion. Chapter 7 shifts to mass performance spectacles and dance, and moves from the present—and from the intention to make people part of spectacles—back to the colonial era, when staged dances emerged, most notably through the choreography of Ch'oe Sūnghūi. Chapter 8 looks at how, with songs dominating public spaces, composers developed large-scale compositions based

on them for instrumental ensembles and orchestras. In Chapter 8, in order to ask how the avant-garde can be squared with the North's ideology laden policies, I look at Korea's most famous composer, Isang Yun.

Conventions

I conducted all the interviews cited, unless otherwise indicated, but where appropriate I have adjusted the grammar of quotations—everyone has the right for their words to be rendered adequately. The sheer quantity of speeches by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and the various forms in which they have been published at different times, can make a reference list unwieldy, so I cite speeches and writing by (or written for) the two Kims in the text. Quotation marks are used to signal claims made in speeches or in publications about music and dance, but also about historical events and other matters that can be disputed. Again, to avoid clogging up the reference list, Internet sources are cited in endnotes except where the source is a significant article or book; Internet addresses were operational as of December 31, 2018, unless otherwise stated. I give publication dates for North Korean sources based on the versions consulted. Much biographical information on composers and musicians is sourced from publications by Kim Tökkyun and Kim Tükchöng (1998), Chang Yöngchöl (1998, 2001) and Mun Söngnyöp (2001). Two journals provide a veritable treasure trove of materials on cultural, musical, and dance matters, *Chosön ūmak* (*Korean Music*) published between 1955 and 1968, and the still monthly *Chosön yesul* (*Korean Arts*).³ However, journal articles tend to be short and repeat material covered elsewhere, so I give full references only where an article has significance in its own right, otherwise using shorthand to give only the year and month of publication (e.g., 1963/11, 1964/1). A full discussion of these two journals is beyond my scope here; I will offer a more detailed consideration in a future article.

As with most publications by foreign scholars on Korea, I use the McCune-Reischauer romanization system for Korean terms, while Pinyin is used for Chinese, and Hepburn for Japanese. For clarity I add “K.,” “J.,” or “C.” to indicate Korean, Japanese, or Chinese, respectively. The accuracy of McCune-Reischauer is such that it allows the ready substitution of Korean script, and therefore makes a character glossary redundant; it enables researchers to find materials in library collections and music archives

around the world that other systems fail to do. It also has the benefit, despite the challenge presented by diacriticals, of allowing foreigners to make reasonable stabs at pronouncing Korean terms. It would be inappropriate to use the romanization system now in use in South Korea and approved by its government, and North Korea has not consistently applied a single system over its 75-year existence. Although I appreciate the sensitivities around individual preferences, I render personal names given in Korean in published sources in McCune-Reischauer, without hyphenation. However, I respect preferred spellings where these are printed; where a composition, publication, or recording is distributed in the international market; or where a person is well-known outside Korea. Hence Kim Il Sung [Kim Ilsŏng], Kim Jong Il [Kim Chŏngil], and Kim Jong Un [Kim Chŏngŭn]. In the reference list, I use square brackets to give an author’s name in McCune-Reischauer only where this facilitates cross-checking between sources in Korean and English (or other languages).

I use the internationally accepted “Pyongyang” and “Seoul” for the northern and southern capitals. Due to familiarity, I use “juche” (unitalicized) rather than “*chuchè*,” and, to reflect pronunciation, “shi” rather than “si” (*shin* rather than *sin*). I retain the North Korean preference for an initial “r” (Ri, rather than Lee or Yi; *rabal* rather than *nabal*). In Korea, both North and South, the family name comes first, followed by one or two given names (each usually of one syllable). I follow this convention, except where a person is well-known outside of Korea with their family name after their given name(s); hence, Isang Yun (rather than Yun Isang). To indicate where the author of a book or article gives their name in the Western way (with family name after given names), the reference list introduces a comma after the family name; the comma is omitted where the book or article gives the author’s name in the Korean way (that is, with the family name before given names)—as is always the case where a publication is in Korean. In the reference list, translations of titles from Korean are only given where these appear on publications. Titles of songs, compositions, and other works are given in quotation marks, with the Korean (italicized) preceding an English translation or transliteration on the first occurrence, while Korean journal and newspaper titles are given in italics, followed, on the first occurrence, by an English translation in brackets. I use English versions of song titles and lyrics where available, but otherwise offer my own translations. Some speeches by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il have appeared in many versions and, where possible, I give

the date of publication to identify which version I am citing; I make use of authorized English translations where available, noting, when appropriate, how these differ from Korean originals. I use the familiar Gregorian calendar, and not North Korea's recently instituted calendar (which counts from "juche 1"—Kim Il Sung's year of birth).