

Musical Profile of Korea

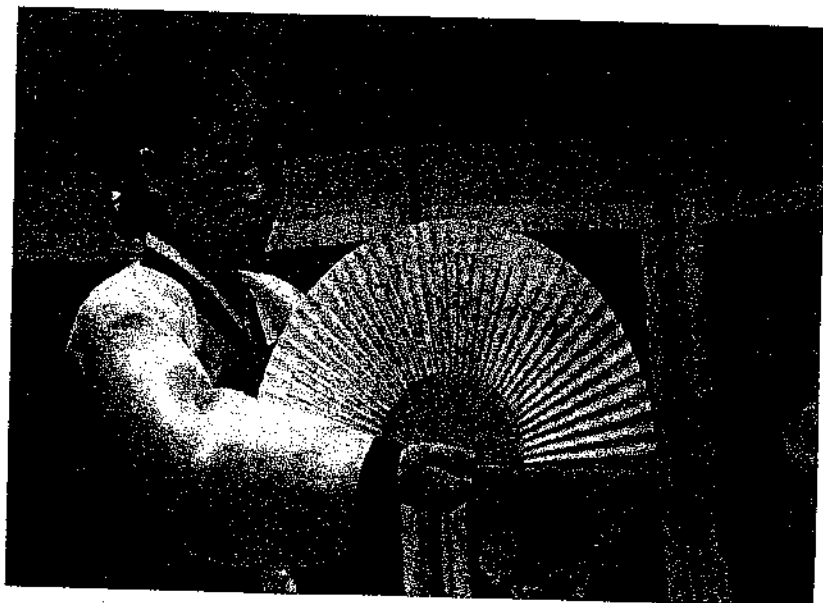
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Kugak: National Music

Historical Overview

If Korea is known to the musical world, it is not primarily for Korean music. Outside Korea, far fewer people recognize the name of the *p'ansori* singer An Suksŏn (figure 1) or the *kayagŭm* zither virtuoso Hwang Byungki (Hwang Pyŏnggi) than recognize the name of the Chung (Chŏng) family, which has distinguished itself so prominently in the performance of Western classical music—a family that includes the violinist Kyung-Wha (Kyŏnghwa), the cellist Myung-Wha (Myŏnghwa), and the pianist-conductor Myung-Whun (Myŏnghun). No doubt it is easier for Western audiences to appreciate the artistry of a musician performing in an idiom with which they are already familiar than to learn a new musical language and apply its aesthetic criteria; but this principle has not prevented the sitarist Ravi Shankar, for instance, from becoming more famous in the West than the Indian-born conductor Zubin Mehta. An equally significant factor is that in Korea itself, the dominant musical culture has

FIGURE 1 An Suksŏn. Photo by Keith Howard.



become Western, to the extent that the linguistically "unmarked" Korean term for music, *umak*, normally refers to Western-style music, whereas the minority interest area of indigenous Korean music is differentiated by the "marked" term *kugak* 'national music'. Most Koreans now living have had their musical taste formed initially by exposure to Western-style or Western-influenced music, both classical and popular, and even those who have made a career in *kugak* have often done so after previous training in Western music, making the change for reasons that were as much political as aesthetic.

KUGAK: NATIONAL MUSIC

In view of the wholesale embrace of Western ways, not only in music but in so many areas of Korean life, it is perhaps surprising that *kugak* has weathered the upheavals of the twentieth century as well as it has. In the Republic of Korea (commonly known as South Korea), varied programs of traditional music and dance are presented weekly at Seoul's National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts (Kungnip Kugagwŏn); and individual genres are performed to the highest standards in various other settings and are taught not only in university music departments but in hundreds of private institutes (*hagwŏn*) scattered throughout the country. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea, in everyday parlance) has pursued the path of politically driven development and modernization rather than preservation of traditional music, but there too, instruments and styles of indigenous Korean music continue to provide a major outlet for musical expression and creativity.

In neither state has this been achieved without substantial government intervention, leading to the charge that the traditions have been artificially manipulated instead of being allowed to evolve naturally in response to changing circumstances. But in Korea, as elsewhere in East Asia, governments have always sought to control musical activity, which they saw as crucial to the ethos and fortunes of the state, and it is perhaps only the degree of their ability to do so that has changed, extending beyond the immediate sphere of influence of the court to the music of the general population. Even today, government authority over indigenous music does not go uncontested, and if there is an "official" culture of *kugak* represented, for instance, by the South Korean government's underwriting of institutions like the Intangible Cultural Properties (*muhyŏng munhwajae*) system, there is also an "unofficial" culture that deploys traditional farmers' percussion bands (*nongak* or *p'ungmul*, figure 2) and masked

FIGURE 2 *Nongak* (*p'ungmul*) performance at the National Folk Arts Festival. Photo by Keith Howard.

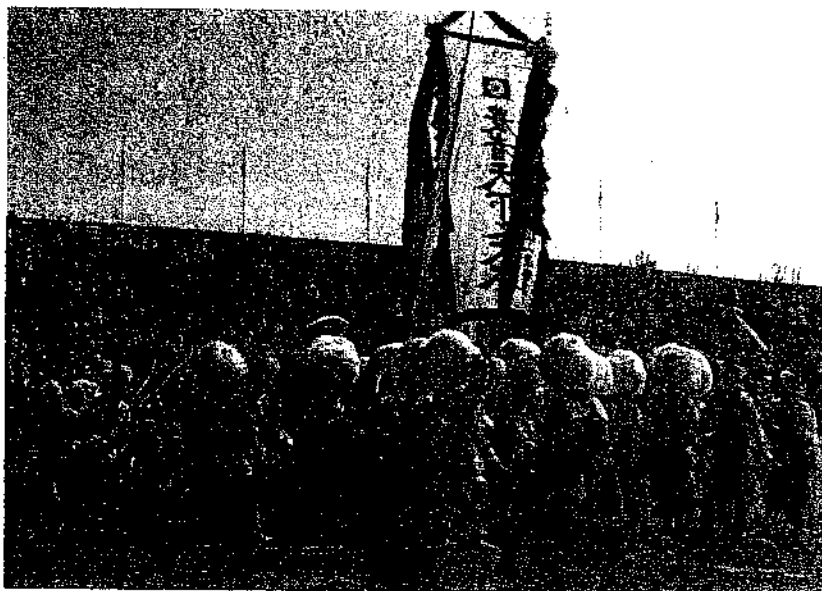


FIGURE 3 *T'al ch'um*—masked dance drama—outside the National Theater in Seoul. Photo by Keith Howard.



FIGURE 4 A *t'al ch'um* performer interacts with his audience outside the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts. Photo by Keith Howard.



dance-dramas (*t'alch'um*, figures 3 and 4) as expressions of grassroots nationalism, or indeed as a vehicle of protest against the very government that sponsors its own approved forms of these genres. Together, the official and unofficial cultures of *kugak* have maintained the traditions of Korean music in a more vital form than either one could have done by itself. To understand how this has happened, it will be necessary to review the historical formation processes of Korea's musical culture.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Since researchers have yet to encounter a society without music anywhere in the world, it seems reasonable to infer that in Korea as elsewhere, there has been musical activity for as long as there have been human beings, even though the archaeological record does not enable us to establish this as fact. The Korean peninsula was inhabited at least half a million years ago, and though our earliest sources of information on music making are tomb murals and ceramic artifacts dating from about the fourth century

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C.E., they indicate a degree of complexity (for instance, depicting chordophones with frets) that implies a lengthy earlier period of development.

They also indicate substantial influence from China, long recognized as the source of civilization in East Asia and still known in Korean as *chungguk* 'the central country', although it is sometimes unclear whether this influence has affected the actual Korean musical practices or merely the artistic conventions with which they are represented. Likewise, the surviving documentary sources on music, dating from the twelfth century onward, discuss Korean music in terms of Chinese theoretical concepts and models, as was perhaps inevitable, since Chinese was the literary language of Korea and Chinese authorities were constantly invoked, though this does not prove that Korean musical practice conformed to Chinese principles to the same extent. What is certain, however, is that instruments belonging to the Chinese-derived long zither family are found in the earliest iconographic sources, that many other instruments were imported from China at various times, and that at least some court music of Korea attempted to reproduce that of China.

At the same time, however, there was an awareness within the Korean court of a musical identity separate from that of China, as expressed in the distinction between *hyangak*, or indigenous Korean music, and *tangak*, which originally meant music from the Chinese Tang dynasty (618–907) but was extended to include Chinese-derived banquet music of later periods. Both *tangak* and the Confucian ritual music *aak* were substantially modified after being brought to Korea, and both exchanged influences with *hyangak*, yet awareness of their separate origins persisted even though all three are now included in the category of *kugak* 'national music'.

Hyangak apparently originated in the music of the earliest period of documented Korean history, that of the Three Kingdoms, Silla (? to 935 C.E.), Koguryō (? to 668 C.E.), and Paekche (? to 660 C.E.). Beyond the existence of certain instruments, not much is known about the music of the Three Kingdoms, except that all three contributed to the *komagaku* component of Japan's *gagaku* court music repertoire. Both Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced to the Korean peninsula during this period, each presumably with its own forms of ritual and therefore of music, which must have existed alongside native shamanistic rites and agricultural festivals, though we can only guess as to the character of the music involved in any of these contexts. There must also have been secular folk music, but on this subject too the record is silent, for it was not until the twentieth century that Korea's literate elite concerned itself to any marked extent with the culture of the common people.

By 668 C.E., Silla had subjugated the other two kingdoms and brought most of the peninsula under the rule of a single government. In this it was aided by Tang China, and during the succeeding Unified Silla period the category of *tangak* was introduced and the earliest court music institutions were established. Silla was in turn overthrown by the Koryō dynasty (918–1392), and since the country first became known to the Western world during this period, its name in European languages

derives from the word *Koryō*. The new dynasty inherited and developed the repertoires and institutions of the old; and although its official ideology was Buddhist, it continued to celebrate the country's traditional religious rites and also, increasingly, practiced those of Confucianism. In the latter regard it was encouraged by two enormous shipments of instruments for Confucian ritual music in 1114 and 1116, sent by Emperor Hui-tsung of China's Song dynasty as a gift or, less euphemistically, a bribe, to secure Koryō's loyalty and its assistance against the threat of an invasion from its northern neighbors, the belligerent Jurchen. The ploy was not a success: Koryō remained neutral, the Song capital fell to the Jurchen, and the playing techniques and the instruments themselves were both eventually lost. Nevertheless, some of the skeletal melodies survived, and the gift is seen as the origin of Korea's large-scale orchestral music for Confucian ceremonies, designated since 1964 as Intangible Cultural Property number 1.

The dynasty that supplanted Koryō, the Chosŏn (1392–1910), adopted neo-Confucianism as its state ideology and was concerned from an early stage with the restoration and reform of Confucian ritual music. The performance practices established for that music in the first half of the fifteenth century have been maintained with remarkable stability ever since, though the idea that they faithfully represent an earlier style of music performed in China is clearly a delusion, and it is not without justice that *aak* has been accorded a place of honor within the repertoire of *kugak*, which is largely the creation of Chosŏn. Older genres and even individual pieces were inherited from earlier dynasties, but in the course of centuries they were changed beyond recognition—for instance, by gradually slowing the tempo until a piece occupied several times its original duration and had split into a suite of movements, each with a profusion of added ornamentation. In some cases this process can be traced through multiple notations of the same piece. Surviving Korean notations begin with the early Chosŏn "restoration" of *aak*, and from the mid-fifteenth century they use a system called *chōngganbo* in which rhythm is precisely indicated by placing note names, fingering instructions, or other symbols within columns of squares read from top to bottom and right to left like East Asian writing, with each square representing one beat of the rhythmic cycle. Since Chinese and Japanese notations of this period give little or no indication of rhythm, the existence of this notation suggests that explicit rhythmic structure was more important in the court music of Korea than in that of neighboring countries.

The now extant repertoires of *hyangak* and *tangak* as well as *aak* were formed under the Chosŏn dynasty, and many other genres were either first created or first documented during the same period. These include the aristocratic instrumental suite *Yōnggan hoesang* in its multiple versions for different ensembles, as well as the art song genres *sijo*, *kasa*, and *kagok*, patronized primarily by the monied classes outside the court itself. Folk music is undoubtedly rooted in older traditions, but our earliest descriptions of it date from the late Chosŏn period. *P'ansori* musical storytelling, for example, appears to be related to ancient traditions of epic singing whose progeny is found all over Asia (some of the stories have cognates as far away as India), but is first noted in literary sources in the mid-eighteenth century and not described in any detail until the late nineteenth. The ancestry of farmers' bands and of masked dance-dramas is presumed to be of equally venerable if little documented antiquity; but other genres are known to have been created more recently and are sometimes ascribed to individual musicians—for instance, the *kayagŭm* player Kim Ch'angjo is credited with developing the first *sanjo* instrumental solo in the late nineteenth century.

By this time, Western music had begun to reach Korea through missionaries from Europe and North America, but it was only after the peninsula had been annexed as a colony of Japan in 1910 that westernization, in music as in most aspects of Korean life, began to make serious inroads. Japan itself had been through more than forty

years of frenetic westernization since the establishment of the Meiji (Meiji) regime in 1868, including a rapid dissemination of Western classical music, and the Japanese music education curriculum of Western and westernized music was soon extended to Korea. With the dissolution of the Korean monarchy, all the traditional occasions for the performance of court music ceased, while contexts for many other forms of Korean music making were gradually eroded by changes in lifestyle. It is clear, too, that the colonial authorities often discouraged or restricted the performance of distinctively Korean music and eventually sought to ban any public expression whatsoever of a separate Korean identity.

However, the Japanese regime did not suppress Korean music as consistently or monolithically as has sometimes been suggested by later Korean nationalist historiography. Various Japanese were interested in exploiting Korean music for their own purposes, either economically, by selling records of it to Korean audiences, or politically, by using the popular *p'ansori*-based theatrical form *ch'angguk* as a vehicle for pro-Japanese propaganda. But there were also more disinterested Japanese administrators and scholars who valued the Korean *aak* tradition (mainly because of its supposed historical relationship to Japanese *gagaku*) and induced the colonial government to maintain it, albeit on a reduced scale, in a new court music institution and training center, the *Yiwangjik aakpu*, whose graduates would include several leading figures of the postliberation *kugak* scene. Japanese enthusiasts wrote down *p'ansori* texts and helped found the Korean Folklore Society (Chosŏn Minsokhakhoe) in 1932. Far from putting a stop to traditional music, the colonial period witnessed its continued growth; for instance, the main schools of *sanjo* performance for various instruments were established. It was not until the 1930s that recordings of traditional music were outsold by Western-influenced Japanese-style popular songs.

With the defeat of Japan in World War II, Korea was liberated from colonial rule in 1945, but the power vacuum was filled by dividing the country into a Soviet occupation zone in the north and an American occupation zone in the south. Each side formed its own government, and the two fought to reunify the peninsula in the Korean War of 1950–1953; but the armistice left the dividing line much as it had been, roughly along the Thirty-Eighth Parallel, where it remains today. The communist government of North Korea has made both Korean and Western musical sources serve the ideological purposes of the state, selecting what seemed useful from either one, rejecting what seemed feudal or bourgeois, and radically modifying what remained of Korea's indigenous musical traditions. In South Korea, there has been more emphasis on preservation of traditional music in what is seen as an authentic form, although many of these forms have been reconstructed from sketchy sources or adapted for Western-style concert settings and mass media.

A new state music institution, the *Kungnip kugagwŏn*, was established in Seoul in 1950 and given the English name National Classical Music Institute—appropriately enough, since it was then responsible for maintaining the “classical” or elite traditions of the Chosŏn court and aristocracy. However, its purview was later extended to include all forms of indigenous music and dance, and its English title was accordingly changed to National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts (figure 5). The same broad scope was adopted by the Intangible Cultural Properties system introduced in the 1960s, which recognized folk arts like *p'ansori* and masked dance-drama alongside Confucian ritual music. Forms of music that had developed in disparate sectors of Chosŏn society, and would never have been performed for the same audience, were brought together for the first time under the umbrella term *kugak*—national music. This must be seen as part of the project of nation-building that was being aggressively pursued on many fronts by a series of authoritarian right-wing governments with heavy Japanese and American backing. The sponsorship of *kugak* was in part an attempt not only to rally the population around a symbol of

FIGURE 5 A staged performance of *Chongmyo cheryeak* at the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts. Photo by Keith Howard.



national pride but to legitimize the government as the upholder of national tradition and the national interest.

Meanwhile, a dissident movement was forming around university students, farmers, and disaffected laborers who felt that the economic gains of South Korea's rapid industrialization were being unfairly distributed while true democracy was being withheld. Protesters marched to the sound of traditional farmers' percussion bands and adapted the already satirical masked dance-dramas into topical political commentaries. By invoking traditional performing arts, they implied that the true upholders of the nation were the protesters themselves and not the government, which, for all its much-vaunted patronage of *kugak*, was in the sycophantic service of foreign powers. While the right to invoke *kugak* and that which it represented was hotly contested between the "official" and "unofficial" culture, what was tacitly agreed by both sides was that nationalism was a good thing and that "national music" was a powerful expression of it. Now that South Korea has acquired a civilian government and violent demonstrations have become relatively rare, these two axioms still seem to encapsulate, as adequately as any concise statement can, the position of "national music" in a society that has otherwise embraced a foreign idiom as its own.

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