

An Overview of Pedagogical Piano Repertoire by

Contemporary Korean Composers

by JeongSoo Kim

Piano teachers continually search for new and exciting repertoire pieces tailored to match each student's personality, background and interests. Diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the United States is greater than in many other countries.

Over the past decades, music educators have increasingly attempted to incorporate multicultural experiences in their curricula for students.

Throughout Western musical history, and especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, composers have integrated elements of each of their own musical heritages into compositions. Among the many occurrences of this practice, two of the most striking examples are the integration of nationalistic Polish

dances in Chopin's writing and Hungarian folk tunes in Bartók's compositions. The nationalistic character of the piano works written by such composers often provides distinctive rhythm, harmony and scale systems. Despite numerous piano works written by Korean composers in the latter part of the 20th century, they've rarely been heard outside South Korea. Many of these piano pieces are suitable, and sometimes specifically designed, for elementary- and intermediate-level piano students. Korean composers' piano works can be an innovative addition to students' recital programs. Through the study of this unique repertoire, students can explore both a wide variety of contemporary compositional styles, as well as interesting melodic, rhythmic and harmonic qualities characteristic of this music. Teachers will benefit by acquainting themselves with this lesser-known repertoire through introducing Korean composers' piano compositions to their students.

South Korea's Music

To provide a backdrop for teaching this music, a brief description of the South Korean music scene since the introduction of Western music in the late 19th century is necessary. Korea has its own rich musical history of court, religious and folk music. Furthermore, its musical language

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is totally independent of Western music in structure, melody, harmony and rhythm. There are more than 20 different instrumental and vocal musical genres, and more than 60 traditional musical instruments have been used in both traditional solo and ensemble music. Since the time American missionaries introduced Catholic hymns to Koreans in the late 19th century, Western music quickly gained tremendous popularity and soon dominated the musical scene in South Korea. Enormous interest in Western music among Koreans resulted in a rapid increase in the numbers of musicians, orchestras and opera companies, as well as the construction of concert halls to house performances. By the second half of the 20th century, world-famous composers such as Isang Yun and Nam-June Paik, and other internationally recognized performers, had made their presence known. Many young Korean musicians stand out in the international musical world by excelling in major schools of music and winning prestigious competitions around the world, including the Queen Elisabeth International Music Competition of Belgium and the Tchaikovsky International Musical Competition.

Unfortunately, as Western music gained even greater popularity during the 1960s and '70s, resulting partly from the westernization of Korean society, traditional Korean music gradually became more remote and less known to the general public. This genre of traditional Korean music eventually became a symbol that represented an old ideology, while Western music implied a new trend. Indeed, the musical history of the 20th century in South Korea can be defined as a constant conflict between these new (*yangak*) and old (*kugak*) musical traditions.

Although there seems to be an obvious separation between Western and traditional Korean music, Korean composers who received Western musical training have consistently tried to connect the two musical worlds in their works. Yun, who served as a professor at the Hochschule der Künste in Germany, has exerted powerful influences on young Korean composers. In his compositions, Yun seeks to amalgamate Western music, the Asian philosophy of Taoism and his Korean musical heritage. His works have gained great acknowledgment in the West.

Following the footsteps of Yun, many young Korean composers went to Germany to study with him, while others went to the United States. These composers returned to Korea with contemporary Western compositional styles, techniques including serialism and genres including electronic and computer music. Yet many of them have sought to retain their Korean musical heritage, combining musical elements and styles found in both Korean and Western musical traditions.

Korean nationalistic movements in music became pronounced in the late 1970s and early '80s under the influence of sociopolitical movements that rejected the West and searched for Korea's own heritage. A number of composers

and performers with Western musical training formed a group at this time called "The Third Generation," strongly urging composers to stop merely imitating Western music and, instead, create music that fully integrated elements of Western and Korean traditional music.

Contemporary Korean composers have written works in almost every genre, including numerous solo and ensemble piano pieces. Unique elements of traditional music have been adapted and transformed by contemporary Korean composers into a musical language accessible to pianists. Musical elements that occur most frequently in their works are traditional scales and modes, melodic references to Korean folk songs and dance music, as well as unique rhythmic patterns and innovative ornamentation. Although numerous piano works exist for the concert stage, this discussion specifically focuses on elementary to early-advanced teaching repertoire. The following repertoire presents an overview of many of these elements through the introduction of selected piano compositions written by contemporary Korean composers.

Elementary Piano Repertoire

Koreaneasche Klang für Vier Händen (1996) by Guk-Jin Kim¹

Many Korean composers have adapted traditional Korean folk songs in their compositions by transforming the original material to varying degrees, from simple harmonic elaborations of monophonic melodies, to a more complete assimilation of the folk idiom into the contemporary Western style. Guk-Jin Kim, for instance, composed a number of solo and duet piano works with native musical elements, many of them written for children. This collection includes his 11 pieces in Opus 240 and four pieces in Opus 245. These 15 pieces range from elementary to intermediate levels. "Der Blauen Vogel" ("Blue Bird"), Op. 240, No. 3, uses a simple but famous Korean folk song of the same name ("SeyaSeya" in Korean). It is accessible to any elementary-level student who can play five-finger position patterns. These five-finger patterns are presented in two different registers, and the melody is paired with another piano part that can be played by the teacher or another upper elementary-level piano student.

Example 1

The musical notation for Example 1 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in bass clef and contains a simple melodic line with quarter notes and eighth notes. The lower staff is in treble clef and contains a more complex accompaniment with chords, arpeggios, and some grace notes. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4.

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The folk song "SeyaSeya" is built on a three-note scale.

Example 2

The musical notation for Example 2 shows a single bass clef staff with a three-note scale: a quarter note G, a quarter note A, and a quarter note B-flat. This represents the three-note scale mentioned in the text.

Traditional Korean music often is based on a pentatonic scale, and, as in "SeyaSeya," three- or four-note scale fragments are derived from the pentatonic scale. Although some works by contemporary Korean composers utilize only the pentatonic scale and its derivations, the majority shows some combination of Western and Korean tonal systems. Many composers have borrowed intervals widely present in folk music. In the same way Bartók used many seconds and sevenths found in monophonic Hungarian folk music, contemporary Korean composers have frequently used seconds and fourths derived from the pentatonic scale in both melody and harmony.

Small World on the Keyboard (1993) by Dong-Il Shin²

Dong-Il Shin is one of the few young composers who has produced a whole collection of piano works solely designed for elementary- and early-intermediate-level students. Inspired by "The Third Generation," he has been actively involved in the Korean National Music Institute and has promoted many children's concerts featuring his nationalistic piano works. His collection, *KunBanWuiEui JakEunSeSang* (*Small World on the Keyboard*), contains 20 short pieces in which traditional Korean rhythmic and melodic elements are joined with Western structural principals such as binary and ternary forms.

The third piece of Shin's collection, "HaGyoKil" (On the Way Home from School), uses simple and charming melodic and rhythmic features. Instead of the usual teacher's accompaniment part, the composer suggests that the teacher clap or stomp one of the traditional Korean rhythmic patterns, which is repeated every four measures.

Example 3



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Much of traditional Korean vocal and instrumental music employs a metrical rhythmic system based on a series of accompanying patterns known as *jangdan*. Usually a drummer plays these rhythmic *ostinatos* throughout a section or a whole piece, and then repeats them using improvisatory variations.

To become familiar with the rhythmic pattern in Shin's "HaGyoKil," the student may clap the *jangdan* rhythm with both hands a number of times before playing the piece. Once the student can tap the underlying *jangdan* rhythm fluently, the teacher can play the music while the student plays the rhythm or vice versa. This will help the student strengthen his or her rhythmic sense by simultaneously experiencing two types of rhythmic patterns: the rhythm of the piano part on the score and the implied recurring rhythmic pattern of the *jangdan*. In addition, it enhances the students' understanding of larger metrical units and phrasing, since the four-beat unit of *jangdan* ties two measures into one phrase, thus helping the student

experience both the compound meter of 6/8 and larger duple meter groupings.

Example 4



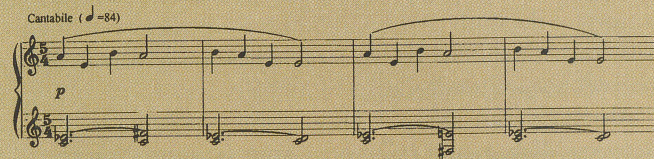
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Intermediate Piano Repertoire

Six Pieces for Piano Nori (1996) by Chung-Sock Kim³

This set contains six movements. Similar to many traditional Korean vocal and instrumental suites, the first movement starts off with the slowest tempo and each movement progressively increases in speed. This work provides a strong Korean musical flavor as it contains native rhythmic characteristics, pentatonic tunes and well-known Korean children's folk songs. Chung-Sock Kim again employs the folk song "SeyaSeya" in the third piece, yet unlike Guk-Jin Kim's simple version, Kim adds more harmonic complexity with many dissonant chords, passages of parallel thirds and fifths and chromatic passages. This movement is accessible to intermediate-level piano students because of its relatively slow tempo and easier technical prerequisites. It also gives them a chance to experience harmonic characteristics of 20th-century Western music combined with a traditional Korean melody.

Example 5



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Five Pieces for Piano (1983) by Seung-Joon Choi⁴

Written while Seung-Joon Choi was studying at the American Conservatory in Chicago, this work has frequently appeared in recent Korean pianists' solo recitals. The set successfully employs many native elements including a pentatonic scale, dotted rhythms prominent in traditional Korean music and references to folk songs. The second piece, titled "Lullaby," shows the use of a pentatonic scale C-D-E-G-A and the recurring rhythmic pattern, *jangdan*, corresponding with the two-measure sub-phrases.

Example 6



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Yet, it also shows the composer's intention to highlight characteristics of Western music. In addition to many dissonant notes, mainly in the chordal accompaniment, the melody of the middle section (left hand, mm. 9–16) almost is an exact inversion of the right hand melody in the first section, a practice commonly found in Western music.

Altestimmung (1981) by Jung-Gil Kim⁵

One of the leading musical figures in Korea, Jung-Gil Kim's music is widely performed and includes many symphonic and chamber works, ballet, dance and film music, and solo instrumental music. *Altestimmung* (*Antique Style*, subtitled *Reminiscences of Childhood in Old Age*) was written in Germany in 1981, and consists of four pieces, the subtitles of which refer to such old Korean artifacts as an incense case ("Hyang-Hap") and wooden shoes ("Na-Mak-Shin"). The third piece of the set, titled "Okbynyo," refers to an ornamental jade hairpin. It is written in folk-song style using a 6/16 meter and greatly evokes Korean sentiment. The simple melody derived from a pentatonic scale and the prevailing dotted rhythm in compound duple meter elicit the feeling of a slow, graceful Korean traditional dance. This piece also shows the influence of the genre of Korean folk vocal-ensemble music traditionally employing an antiphonal style with solo and chorus. The composer adapts the antiphonal structure by alternating sections of linear two-voice writing with those of chordal textures, the latter serving as multiple refrains.

Example 7

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Theme by Folklore and Eight Variations (1987) by Sung-Ki Kim⁶

This work, in a romantic style, reflects 18th- and 19th-century piano writing incorporating many standard compositional techniques of the past, including variation, fugato and four-voice writing. Despite the title, the theme is not an actual folk song but rather uses Korean folk style. Both the melody and harmony share the same pentatonic scalar basis, and the intervals of perfect fourths and major seconds derived from the pentatonic scale are frequently used both linearly and vertically in all eight variations. The entire set is very accessible to the intermediate-level piano student.

Example 8

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Early-Advanced Piano Repertoire

Drei Bagatellen (1973) by Byung-Dong Paik⁷

Traditional Korean music does not feature functional harmonic progressions. Instead, traditional Korean musicians have focused more on melodic line and highly developed melodic ornamentation, rhythm complexity and various tone colors produced by the combination of different instruments. Ornamentation—*nonghyun* in Korean—is an essential component in almost every genre of Korean traditional music. Numerous kinds of ornaments include vibrating and bending a single tone, as well as extremely elaborate ornaments placed before or/and after a tone.

Many contemporary Korean composers have attempted to simulate the effect of *nonghyun* in their compositions. The first of Byung-Dong Paik's *Drei Bagatellen* (*Three Bagatelles*) presents the essence of traditional Korean ornamentation in a contemporary musical language. Its relatively thin texture and short length make this bagatelle accessible for intermediate- or early-advanced-level students. Many of the ornaments added to the top melodic line simulate the effect of vibrating or curving a tone on traditional Korean string or wind instruments. The composer also brings out the improvisatory character prevalent in traditional Korean music by removing bar lines and metrical rhythmic structure. Thus, playing this piece can be a new and stimulating experience for both a student and a teacher who are used to the more functional Western musical system.

Example 9

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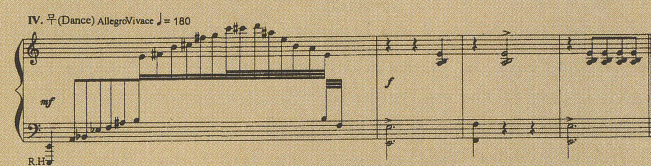
Piano Suite "Korean Dance" (1970) by Hoe-Gap Chung⁸

Four movements of this set—"Skill," "Ritual," "Humor" and "Dance"—were inspired by the unique Korean peasant folk music and dance ritual *Nongak* and were written after the composer's three years of extensive field research of the genre. Hoe-Gap Chung not only incorporated transcriptions of *Nongak* rhythms and modal and pentatonic scales, but also employed 12-tone serial technique. This suite is one of the most frequently nationally and internationally performed Korean compositions.

"Dance," the fourth movement, characterizes the music and dances by a group of performers who specialize in the

Nongak ritual together with excited village spectators. The overall structure of the piece exhibits the arch form, ABCBA. Section A features triplets accompanied by *Kutgori jangdan*, a lively metrical rhythm in 3/4 meter. Section B utilizes constant running 16th notes accompanied by a quasi-*ostinato* bass line with plenty of syncopation through irregular rhythmic accents. It also sounds heavily dissonant due to tone clusters and many tritones. The meter, complexity of rhythms created by dotted rhythms, triplets and irregular accents manifest the spirit of Korean peasant dance and music.

Example 10



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Obtaining the Music

Contemporary Korean piano compositions exhibit a great diversity of styles and individuality, and they deserve the attention of piano teachers and performers. The unique blend of Korean musical traits and Western compositional styles can appeal to any level of piano student, and these works will broaden both teachers and students' appreciation for the music of other cultures. Although some of these works have been published in Europe,⁹ most are printed in Korea and can be imported from the country. Eumag Chunchu Edition, one of the major music publishing companies in Korea, has published three volumes of *Contemporary Korean Piano Works* and two volumes of *Pieces for Piano by Korean Women Composers*. In addition to individual composers' collections produced by a number of Korean publishing companies, *The Piano Music*, the most widely distributed piano and piano pedagogy magazine in Korea, presented a series of contemporary piano works by Korean composers.¹⁰ ♪

Editor's Note:

The works featured in this article can be obtained by contacting the following agencies:

Eumag Chunchu Edition Publishing Co. at chunchu@hanmail.net or by phone at 011-822-2231- 9001/9002/9003.

The Piano Music magazine at eumyoun@nownuri.net or by phone at 011-822-547-3231

DaiHan Music (the most reputable music store in Korea) at dhmusicco@freethal.com or daihanmusic@yahoo.co.kr or by phone at 011-822-776-0577

Correspondences in English are welcome.

Bonus Byte

To view the accompanying bibliography and a chart listing techniques and other features of the Korean compositions from this article, go to www.mtna.org and click on "American Music Teacher." Then click on "Bonus Bytes" from the drop-down menu.

NOTES

1. Guk-Jin Kim, "Der Blauen Vogel," Op. 240, No. 3, *Koreaneasche Klang für Vier Händen* (Pusan: DongJin Music Publishing Co., 1997), 8.
2. Dong-Il Shin, "HaGyoGil" ["On the Way Home"], *KunBan WuiEui JakEunSeSang [Small World on the Keyboard]* (1993), (Seoul: YeSol Publishing Co., 2000), 30–31.
3. Chung-Sock Kim, *Six Pieces for Piano "Nori"* (1996), *Korean Contemporary Piano Collection Vol. 2* (Seoul: Eumag Chunchu Edition, 1999), 4–12.
4. Seung-Joon Choi, "Lullaby," *Five Miniature Pieces for Piano* (1983), (Seoul: Fabre Editorial, 1999), 4–6.
5. Jung-Gil Kim, *Altstimmung* (1981), *Korean Contemporary Piano Collection Vol. 2* (Seoul: Eumag Chunchu Edition, 1996), 58–74.
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