

# Korean Music 1

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## 1. The Concept of Music in Korea

Korean music has developed with continuous influence from the Asian continent, yet it has never lost its unique individuality. Not only that, it has also had a considerable musical influence on neighboring countries such as China. This adaptation from and influence on other cultures is a unique characteristic of Korean culture.

Koreans like to refer to Korean music as "national music" (*gugak*). When the term "national music" is used, it generally refers to only Korean traditional music--more to the point, it refers to all music before the introduction of Western music. In reality, the music enjoyed by Koreans before the introduction of Western music contained not a few forms of Chinese and other foreign music. With the introduction of Western music, though, all of these forms of music were lumped together with purely Korean traditional music and called "national music," and Koreans saw no problem in calling such foreign music "national music." This opinion is still held today. Thus these foreign forms of music have come to be considered Korean music, and it is only natural that the Korean music discussed here should include these forms as well.

After the introduction of Western music, Korean music underwent a number of changes and was significantly influenced by Western music. During this time the creation of new "national music" was quite prominent. Up until that time, there had been very little creative activity in "national music." Since the introduction of the first new "national music" composed in 1939 through the influence of Western music, countless new works have poured forth. These works include numerous examples of traditional techniques, Western techniques, a combination of the two, and even avant-garde techniques. Any of these works that are created by traditional performance or vocalization methods are classified as "national music".

If Korean music is not called "national music" but simply referred to as "Korean music," it sometimes takes on a wider meaning. In this case it comes to refer to all musical phenomena within Korea. This includes "national music" as well as all forms of Western and other music. From the point of view of a non-Korean third party, Korean music is often interpreted in this way. Of course, third parties also sometimes refer to only pure Korean traditional music as Korean music. However, just as Korean history includes all of the historical changes that occurred in Korea after the introduction of Western influence, just as Western-style poems and a variety of literary works are included in Korean literature, and just as Korean architecture is not limited to only traditional styles but encompasses Western-style architecture as well, it seems proper to include in Korean music Western music and the variety of other forms of music

within Korea. Of course, in this case, all of the music referred to as Korean music must have been created by Koreans.

We will refer to this as the "broad definition of Korean music," and that discussed above as the "narrow definition of Korean music." Here we will mainly deal only with the narrow definition of Korean music, that is, "national music."

## 2. The Classification of Korean Music

Before the introduction of Western music, Korean music was classified according to origin and use as *hyangak*, *dangak* or *aak*.

### 2.1. *Aak*

*Aak* originally refers to memorial and ceremonial music used in the Chinese royal court. Chinese *aak* was first introduced to Korea in the Goryeo period, 1116 A.D. The *aak* received as a gift from Song China (960-1279) was called *daeseongaak*, and was immediately used in the Goryeo royal court for memorial services and ceremonies. However, *aak* of the time was still immature, and it was only performed in its mature form during the reign of King Sejong in the early Joseon period. The *aak* organized by Park Yeon during King Sejong's reign was used universally until the end of the Joseon period, but with the disappearance of various palace memorial services and ceremonies the only *aak* that remains is that which is performed during the memorial ceremonies for Confucius and his disciples, called *Munmyojeryeak*. This music belongs to ancient Chinese music and is one of the oldest forms of music in Asia.

### 2.2 *Dangak*

The Tang Dynasty (618-907) was one of the most powerful dynasties in the history of China, and *dangak* refers to the music of the Tang Dynasty. It is not known precisely when the music of the Tang Dynasty was first introduced to Korea, but it is known to have generally occurred around the beginning of the Unified Silla period (668-935). Although *dangak* originally referred to the music of Tang China, in Korea it also came to include the folk music of Song China as well. Song China folk music was introduced to Korea two years before the aforementioned *aak*, and at the end of the Goryeo period as many as 43 songs were performed in the royal court. This music was widely performed during the Joseon period, but almost all of it has now disappeared, and only *Boheoja* and *Nagyangchun* are still performed. In addition, these two songs have lost their originally *dangak* character and become Koreanized, so it is difficult to discern any of their original Chinese flavor.

### 2.3 *Hyangak*

*Hyangak* refers to purely Korean music, and is used to distinguish Korean music from *dangak*. In actuality, though, it includes all foreign music in addition to Korean music that existed in Korea before the introduction of *dangak*. This is similar to calling all music in Korea before the introduction of Western music "national music."

The aforementioned *aak*, *dangak* and *hyangak* music were generally used in the royal court and by the intelligentsia. Not included is the music that was enjoyed by the common people. Thus, the above method of classification is not suitable for this modern era. Furthermore, there are far more types of folk music, including folk songs, than

court music, and this folk music possesses a musical beauty different from that of court music and thus cannot be ignored. These days, therefore, the *aak*, *dangak* and *hyangak* performed in the royal court are sometimes simply called *aak* or *jeongak*, while the music enjoyed by the common people is called folk music.

There are those who deem this method improper as well, though, and they classify music according to genre. That is, if we classify music as either *jeongak* or folk music, we encounter the problem of how to classify music that may have originated as folk music but has come to possess great artistry. Also, Buddhist music belongs to neither *jeongak* nor folk music.

Considering these issues, classifying Korean music according to genre would seem proper, and that may be done as follows.

- 1) *Aak* or *jeongak*: This includes all music that was used in memorial services or feasts in the royal court, as well as music enjoyed by the *yangban* intelligentsia.
- 2) *Beompae*: A form of Buddhist music, this refers to the song and dance performed at services for the dead.
- 3) Shamanic music (*muak*): This refers to the songs and accompaniment music performed during shamanic rituals.
- 4) *Sanjo*: This is an impromptu instrumental solo form of music that originated 100 years ago through the influence of shamanic music.
- 5) *Pansori*: This was also influenced by shamanic music, and consists of one singer who performs a long narrative tale through song, spoken narration, and movements, and is accompanied by a single drummer.
- 6) *Changgeuk (changju)*: This is a combined musical drama art form similar to Western opera or operettas, and originated with *Pansori*.
- 7) *Japga*: These songs are of a slightly different nature from the folk songs that originated and spread in the Seoul and Gyeonggi-do Province regions, and are sung by members of the lower class.
- 8) Farmers' music (*nongak*): *Nongak* consists of music, dance and various performances used by farmers to cultivate a spirit of cooperation during farming, or during village memorial services.
- 9) New national music (*singugak*): This is "national music" that has been newly composed in the 20th century.

### 3. Sound Structure and Musical Scale of Korean Music

Just like Western music, Korean music uses 12 tones. Each of these twelve tones are composed of chromatic semitones, and they are calculated according to the *Sambunsonik* Method. The principles of the *Sambunsonik* Method are the same as the Pythagorean scale used in Western music.

This method works by first establishing a standard tone and setting the length of the pipe (or string). When the length of the pipe or string is reduced by 1/3, the musical instrument will produce a tone exactly five steps higher. If the pipe or string is increased by 1/3, a tone four steps lower is produced. In this way, the twelve tones are produced. These are, arranged from high to low, as follows: *hwangjong*, *daeryeo*, *taeju*, *hyeopjong*, *goseon*, *jungnyeo*, *yubin*, *imjong*, *iik*, *namnyeo*, *muyeok*, and *eungjong*.

These tones are known as the "twelve musical tones." The basic tone is *hwangjong*, and its pitch falls between C and E<sup>b</sup>. Chinese court music and the music of the Tang Dynasty is closer to C, while Korean music is closer to E<sup>b</sup>. The names of the twelve tones are not indigenous Korean terms; the terms were borrowed from China.

#### 4. Musical Notation and Scores

There are eight kinds of musical notation used in Korean music. These included a notation system similar to the ancient Greek letter notations, a system similar to the one used to record Western odes in the 10th century, and a system similar to the Neume notation used to record tablature and Gregorian chants. At present, though, the *jeongganbo* notation system is used.

*Jeongganbo* was invented by King Sejong (1397–1450) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It consists of rectangular spaces in which the first letter of each of the twelve musical tones is written to indicate pitch. From the late 15<sup>th</sup> century up until the present day, *jeongganbo* has changed with the times and been improved several times. Although scholars have different interpretations of the beat length represented by each space in *jeongganbo*, presently one space equals approximately a quarter note.

#### 5. Rhythm

Korean music has a fixed rhythm pattern known as *jangdan*. *Jangdan*, which is usually played on a drum, often serves as an accompaniment, but at times leads the music. Although, as mentioned above, *jangdan* is a fixed rhythm pattern, this rhythm pattern is not always repeated identically. In general, the basic rhythm is performed only in the first stanza, and numerous variations of this pattern are played thereafter. There is no fixed rule for these rhythmic variations; usually the person performing the *jangdan* draws on his or her skills to improvise. The syncopation and hemiola produced in this process of improvisation are a source of unlimited enjoyment in Korean music.

*Jangdan* accompanies most types of music, not just court music and folk music, but there are a number of types of music that do not use *jangdan*.

On the whole, Korean court music has not departed greatly from the basic *jangdan* framework, but there are numerous *jangdan* variations in folk music. *Jangdan* is usually performed by striking the drum with a stick in the right hand and with the bare left hand. The fundamental order of *jangdan* generally begins by striking the drum with both hands (known as *hapjangdan* or *ddeong*) and then striking the right face of the drum with the drumstick (known as *chaepyeon* or *deok*). Then the left face of the drum

is struck with the bare hand (known as *bukpyeon* or *kung*), and finally a drum roll is performed with the drumstick on the right face (known as *yo* or *deoreoreo*). This principle gradually deteriorated, though, and at times the right face of the drum is rapidly struck twice with the drumstick (known as *gideok*). Furthermore, in music with a slow tempo, *chaepyeon* and *bukpyeon* were performed first, and then the music began. This is known as a "split hit," and is sometimes expressed as "*gideok kung*." The length of the *chaepyeon* and *bukpyeon* sets the tempo for the music to follow.

*Jangdan* is one of the most difficult things for newcomers to Korean music to understand. However, Korean court music and folk music, as well as almost all other types of Korean traditional music, begin with a strong accent, and because *jangdan* begins with *hapjangdan* it is not difficult to determine when each *jangdan* begins. And, no matter how the music goes, since all *jangdan* begin with *hapjangdan*, if one pays close attention to this pattern one has taken the first step towards a greater appreciation and understanding of Korean music.

In the case of music like *pansori* and *sanjo*, *chuimsae* adds a unique additional element to *jangdan*. The drummer praises the singer's skill, making the performance more interesting with the exclamations and words of encouragement known as *chuimsae*. *Chuimsae* usually punctuates the end of a musical period or phrase. It is interesting to note that the audience, as well as the accompanist, participates in *chuimsae*. Court music, though, never uses *chuimsae*.

The drummer who sets the *jangdan* is called the *gosu*. The *gosu* has long been considered very important. The expression "the drummer is first, while the famous singer is second" shows that, even in *pansori*, the singer ranks below the drummer.

## 6. The General Characteristics of Korean Music

Korean music has many characteristics that differ from Western music. Of course, Korean music also shares numerous similarities with Western music. So if we are to talk of the characteristics of Korean music, we must carefully compare Korean music with Western music and various other musical traditions and select only those characteristics that are unique to Korean music. This task is exceedingly difficult. Therefore, we will instead discuss here the general characteristics of Korean music, and in doing so we will no doubt touch upon some characteristics in Korean music that can also be found in other musical traditions. This discussion, though, is not academic, but focuses on encouraging a better understanding of Korea's musical traditions, and thus is not that unreasonable.

As mentioned previously, Korean music can be roughly divided into two

categories: *jeongak* (court music) and folk music. The methods of musical expression in court music and folk music are quite different. Of course, they both have many similar musical elements and characteristics but their basic, underlying method of expression is entirely different. In court music, emotional expression is restrained as much as possible. Thus court music tends to be slow, without much variation in the melody. Sometimes court music gives such a simple and clear impression that it seems to lack musical beauty and flavor. This is because people believe that if music is fast-paced with a widely varying melody, the human temperament will follow suit. Originally, most court music was performed not for enjoyment, but for ceremonial purposes. Usually composed of ensembles, court music has the qualities of program music. In addition, if a court ensemble is composed of parts where only one instrument performs, these parts turn into solo recitals. On the other hand, emotional expression in folk music is straightforward and free. Thus folk music is fast-paced, and varies greatly in both tempo and melody. Free and unfettered musical expressions are used to fully express musical flavor and beauty. At times, the audience participates directly in the performance and solos are dominant.

The two forms of music may have these differences, but the instrumental music for both forms rarely originated as pure instrumental music. Most of the instrumental music originated in vocal music. Also, Korean court and folk music do not employ a conductor, who leads the performance, as in Western music. In addition to these, a few of the many common characteristics of Korean court and folk music are as follows.

- 1) Korean music is composed of single-line rhythms. Western music, on the other hand, is composed of double-line rhythms.
- 2) While harmonics in Western music is a vertical concept depending on the "height" of the notes, harmonics in Korean music is primarily a horizontal concept.
- 3) In contrast to Western music, which consists of straight-line melodies, Korean music employs more curved-line melodies.
- 4) To intensify these curved-line melodies, there is an amazing technique called the *Nonghyeon* Method. Although the *Nonghyeon* Method shares some similarities with vibrato in Western music, it's basic character is quite different. The *Nonghyeon* Method consists of three techniques: *yoseong*, which is the oscillation of a tone, *toiseong*, which is an oscillation from a higher to a lower tone, and *jeonseong*, which is an oscillation from a lower to higher tone, or a low note that is hit soundly and then rises to a high note. These three techniques

provide the basic tools necessary for producing Korean music's curved-line melodies and giving richness to music consisting of only three to five tones. Thus understanding the *Nonghyeon* Method, along with the *jangdan*, is the first step in appreciating Korean music.

- 5) More often than not, Korean music begins with a strong accent and ends with a weak accent. Western music is usually the opposite. The reason for this is the influence of Western languages and the Korean language on their respective musical traditions.
- 6) Descending cadence is much more prevalent than ascending cadence in Korean music. Here, also, the Korean language has influenced Korean music.
- 7) *Jangdan* may be seen as a variation of the rhythms of the daily lives of Koreans. In addition to the fact that *jangdan* begins strongly, the fact that approximately two-thirds of the way through it comes on strong again, can be said to have originated in the life rhythms of Koreans.
- 8) In Korean music, the rhythms of ♪ and ♩ are quite rare, while ♪ and ♩ are very common. Thus, Koreans are less skilled at performing successive ♪ and ♩ rhythms.

In addition to the above examples, there are many characteristics of Korean music that illustrate musical elements. Even a good knowledge of only the above-mentioned features will greatly aid in understanding and appreciating Korean music, though.

1. How can we distinguish Korean music from Gugak?
2. How do we classify "national music" (gugak)?
3. Discuss the scale of Korean musical tones.
4. What is the characteristic of rhythm pattern in Korean music?
5. What are the characteristics of Korean music?