Sonus is a semi-annual music journal

One year subscription:
- $30.00 Institutions
- $25.00 Individuals
- $20.00 Students

Single copies:
- $15.00

Readers are invited to subscribe and submit manuscripts to:

24 Avon Hill
Cambridge, MA 02140
Phone/Fax 617 868-0215
USA

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ISSN 0739-229X

Printed by Persuasive Press
2449 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02140-1120
email: PersPress@aol.com

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In May of 1996, American composers Robert Cogan and Pozzi Escot were invited to give lectures at Hanyang, Yonsei, and Sooknyung Universities in Seoul, Korea. It was at that time that they asked Prof. Jae-Sung Park of Hanyang University, to undertake the preparation of an issue dedicated to current writings in the field of music in Korea. SONUS appreciates his initial effort and extends a very special thanks to him for overseeing the final preparation of this issue.
KOREAN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, 
A BRIEF HISTORY

JAE-SUNG PARK

A century ago the names of Beethoven or Mozart meant nothing to the Korean people. Foreign missionaries, who came to Korea in 1885 for the first time after Korea opened its doors at the insistence of Europe and America in 1876, introduced European music through their Gospel hymns. Two of these Methodist missionaries were Mr. Underwood and Mr. Appenzeller. In 1896 the Methodist church published a hymnbook which is known as the first music published using European notation in Korea. In the 1890's the Choson Dynasty (the last dynasty before the Republic of Korea was established) hired a German composer and conductor named Franz Eckert to set up the first European style military band. But the band provided only a taste of marches and certainly the national anthem. Yet, this was the very beginning of European-style instrumental music in Korea. By 1909 the Department of European music was founded in Choyang Club, the first formal institute teaching European music and traditional Korean music.

The Japanese Colonization, 1910-1945

After colonizing Korea in 1910, Japan employed a policy to destroy traditional Korean culture completely and transplant Japanese culture. Traditional Korean music was not allowed to be taught in schools; instead Japanese music was forced to be taught. However, there were composers who struggled to keep the national spirit alive through music.

Nan-Pa Hong is one of the leading composers during this period. His book *Umak Manpil* (1938) is the first book on
European music written by a Korean. In this book he compared traditional Korean music with European music and suggested a way to create new Korean music, “A new (Korean) music should be built based on our thoughts and emotion and by taking advantage of both Asian and European music (Umak Munpil, p 108)”. Even though Nan-Pa Hong proposed to take advantage of both the Asian and European musical styles, his songs sounded more like European songs. Nevertheless, his songs are now generally regarded as Korean national songs due more to the texts than to the musical style itself. The song “Pongsonhwa”, for instance, especially played an important role in providing Koreans with a unifying national spirit during this dark period of coloniziation.

**Turning Point: Independence and Trusteeship (1945-1948)**

The year 1945 was an important turning point in the history of Korean music. This year marked the restoration of freedom, the most basic prerequisite for artistic creativity, and an end to the psychological suppression and cultural restraints of Japanese colonial rule. Korea became independent, but since the independence was not obtained by Korea’s own strength but by the aid of the United Nations forces, it resulted in a trusteeship by the United States and the Soviet Union in South and North Korea respectively. Along with the political partition, it also caused economic and cultural divisions between the South and North.

In North Korea, all art associations were unified into one group under the Communist political system. Members of the group were forced to support Communism using Marxist or proletarian aesthetics. In South Korea, on the contrary, the situation was complexed. When Korea became independent from Japan, the most urgent task was to eliminate Japanese colonial culture and establish national culture with a Korean identity that had been destroyed during the coloniziation. Many of the music associations were organized during this period, sharing the same concern about establishing Korean national music. However, before long, the organizations split into two wings, the Leftists and the Rightists, according to their political tendencies and standpoints. This conflict became more and more serious.

Restoring national identity through music was expressed in various ways. Composers on the Right side wrote songs inspired with the spirit of independence such as “March for Independence”, “March for Foundation of a Country”, “Song of Dawn”, others applied Korean folk music. The Leftists tended to describe their ideology through such titles as “Song of Resistance of the People”, “Song of Warriors of Independence”, “March for Civil War”.

The history of Korean contemporary music in the 20th century is frequently divided into three generations. The first covers the composers who appeared in the period of colonizaton, 1910-1945 and the military administration, 1945-948. The second covers the period of 1950-1970 and the third after 1980. Composers of the first generation wrote songs mostly using European musical materials, especially a simple tonal system. Some composers such as Soon-Nam Kim and Geon-Woo Lee, adopted expressionism and non-tonal styles and led the movement for national music as well.

In the 1940's Korea was influenced by the new cultural movements of the early decades in Europe: Futurism, Dadaism, Expressionism and Bauhaus. In 1946 the establishment of the Department of Composition at Kyungsung
College of Music, the forerunner of today’s College of Music at Seoul National University, was a momentous event. This school provided a place for young people to study composition and soon became the birthplace of the creative talent which made contemporary music possible in Korea.

The Republic of Korea, 1948-1970’s
In 1948 South and North Korea formed independent governments and their political division brought out differences in every aspect of the two systems. Although creative activities were sharply reduced by the Korean War, 1950-1953, the composers’ interest in contemporary music was growing day by day. Korean composers may have lacked any direct experience with the new styles including total serialism, concrete music, and electronic music that were growing in popularity in Europe and America at that time, but they were immersed in twelve-tone music by studying the available theoretical textbooks. The compositions which came out of this period can hardly be viewed as high-level serial or twelve-tone music, but by the late 1950’s Korea was producing works using these techniques.

In 1952 composer Un-Young La founded the Korean Contemporary Music Society, and in 1955 the Korean Composers Club was formed. In 1957 the Korean Music Association provided the first regular venue for the performance of contemporary music by establishing an annual composition competition. Although neither of the concerts offered by these groups was exclusively dedicated to contemporary music, they did provide a long awaited opportunity to present contemporary works by Korean composers including Isang Yun. In 1957 also, Korea became a member country of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM).

In 1958 the Contemporary Music Society in Seoul (Chang-Ak-Hoe) was organized by Sung-Jae Lee in an attempt to promote the formulation of a theoretical basis for national music and create a place for Korea within the international musical world. The CMSS, as it became known, contributed enormously to the development of contemporary music through concerts where new works were presented. It has also sponsored competitions where young composers have been introduced, and lecture series where internationally well-known scholars and composers are invited. We can say that the over 40-year history of CMSS is the history of Korean contemporary music. Nam-Soon Paik was one of the leading composers in Korea during this period and who later became a world-class intermedia artist.

By the 1960’s access to information on musical trends overseas greatly improved, but the contemporary music presented in Korea during these years was mostly by Korean composers. Composers who graduated from the Department of Composition at the College of Music, Seoul National University, played a part in activating new music in Korea and in introducing European/American contemporary music to Korea. Two composers, Sukh Karg and Byung-Dong Paik, played an important role in this respect. By the 60's also Hanyang and Yonsei Universities established Schools of Music with emphasis on the Departments of Composition.

In 1969 two important musical events took place, the Pan Music Festival which provided the Korean contemporary musical community with a crucial source of information on trends in contemporary music of the world, and the Seoul Music Festival.

By the 1970’s Korean contemporary music improved rapidly as
Korea rejoined the ISCM in 1972 and Korean composers were chosen for performance at the ISCM Festivals almost every year after that. Composers like Chung-Gil Kim and Jun-Sang Park were two of the first Korean composers to be performed by the ISCM World Music Days. In 1973 the Asian Composers’ League (ACL) was founded, and in the same year Sung-Jae Lee, who had also founded the CMSS in 1958, organized the Korean National Committee of ACL (KNC/ACL), and Korean composers have been participating since 1974 at the Conference Festivals taking place every year and held primarily around Asian countries.

**Bloom of Contemporary Music in the 80 and 90's**

Entering the 1980's, after striving for wealth for thirty years, Korea overcame poverty, and was economically stable. People could now turn their attention to other matters. Political independence and democratization gained an advantage over economic stability. People awakened to the significance of national sovereignty. In the field of music, the identity of Korean music emerged as a subject of discussion. The social and ethical functions of music, as well as the aesthetic value, were of great concern. While some composers kept the line of the Second Generation, some composers formed The Third Generation in opposition. This generation was based on the Third World consciousness which did not accept the value system of advanced societies. They felt the need to have their own music imbued with a national and cultural identity. Getting rid of European/American imitation, they tried to establish proper Korean music with a national and cultural identity. They also focused on the social function of music and social situation because they realized that musical culture and society were inseparable from each other.

In 1981 the increasing population of women composers made it possible to found “The Korean Society of Women Composers”, and it soon became one of the most active composers’ organization. Today this society offers the “Women Composers Forum in Seoul” twice a year along with academic seminars. This decade was also marked by a changing attitude toward foreign compositions, as exchange programs made it possible for many Korean compositions to be performed overseas and foreign works were likewise introduced to Korean audiences. Contemporary music was also stimulated by the return of performers from overseas studies. These young musicians had experienced a wide range of musical trends during their studies abroad and they took an active role in the promotion of contemporary music in Korea. This was a most encouraging stimulus to local composers.

In the late 1980's and in the 1990's we find significant developments composer Sukhi Kang serving as vice-president of ISCM for six years (1985-1990), Sung-Jae Lee elected as the chair of the Asian Composers League (1991-1993); and myself serving as Secretary-General of ACL (1994-1996). We now have a series of annual contemporary music festivals, lasting three to ten days, such as the Pan Music Festival, ACL Korea Contemporary Music Festival, Festival for all-Korean Composers, Forum Neue Musik, Youngram International Contemporary Music Festival, Contemporary Music Festival by Festival Ensemble. Today we are indeed part, through our composers and performers, of the world contemporary music scene and we have achieved our own efforts towards a genuine contemporary Korean music creator.