



**MUSICAL
INSTRUMENTS:**
Conveying the Korean
Spirit Through Nature

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Taegŭm, a bamboo flute

EVERY ONE UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE of tonal quality in music. Musical tone is generally classified into four different areas and inseparable qualities—pitch, duration, identity and color. Different qualities result in different outcomes; different tone colors produce different music. A song sung by a male is not the same when sung by a female. There is vivid difference when the same melody is played on the piano and then on the violin. In short, tonal quality plays a vital role in music.

Classicism and romanticism are considered the two major trends in the history of Western music, which began with ancient festivals, passed under the eaves of churches, crossed the pasture of the Renaissance and the stream of Baroque music to reach the alleys of modern-day streets.

The origin of both classicism and romanticism can be traced back to the rituals of Greek worship—Apollonian cults and Dionysian cults—which were accompanied by music. The Apollonian cult used a string instrument called the cithara and the Dionysian cult a pipe instrument called aulos. Here we can see the importance of instruments in both trends.

Classicism is described in terms such as clarity, simplicity, balance, objectivity and restraint, while romanticism conjures up words like passion, ecstasy, and subjectivity. What then was the basis of these two very distinctive trends? Perhaps it was the different tone color produced by the two instruments; the stringed cithara produced a clear tone while the pipe aulos was sometimes banned from public performance because of the erotic mood it created.

Musical tone plays an important role not only in music itself but also in the emotional and spiritual aspects of human life.

One of the outstanding characteristics of Korean musical instruments is that they are usually made out of natural vegetable materials. Traditional instruments such as the *kayagŭm*, *kŏmungo*, *haegŭm*, *taegŭm*, *piri* and *changgo* are all made of non-metallic materials. Even the strings for the *kŏmungo* and *kayagŭm* were made of silk, not metal.

As wood is softer and more flexible than metals, the sound of wooden instruments is softer and warmer than that of metallic instruments. This difference in materials also results in varying degrees of warmth and coldness. The warmth of non-metallic materials represents human emotions and gives birth to emotional music. The coldness of metallic materials represents the mind and logic and gives birth to rational music. One can then say that the rational Western culture and music is the fruit of its preference for metallic materials and that the emotional Korean culture is the result of its preference for natural non-metallic materials.

The two kinds of materials also differ in their utilization. Natural vegetable materials need little alteration in form while metallic instruments must go through a process of analysis and composition as steel is extracted from ore. One can simply cut a bamboo tree and make it into a flute, *taegŭm* or *tansŏ*, thereby bringing nature to life. In the case of metallic instruments nature must be changed. The former harmonizes with and follows nature while the latter challenges and conquers it.

Customarily string instruments are divided into bowed instruments and plucked instruments. In Korean traditional music, however, only plucked instruments, such as the *kŏmungo* and *kayagŭm* were considered genuine string instruments. Bowed instruments such as the *haegŭm* and *ajaeng* were considered pipe instruments.

Our ancestors liked plucked string instruments for the "margin" or "empty space" they conveyed, something professional musicians call the "rest" of the sound. The "cry of silence" created by Korean plucked string instruments is overwhelming in solo performances, especially in slow movements. The silence following the last vibration of a note is nothing less than imposing.

The very essence of Korean music is this emphasis on the "rest" of the sound as much as the sound itself. The harpsichord, which preceded the piano in the West, produced a similar effect. However, the music of the Baroque era, when the harpsichord was used, filled in the

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Traditional instruments were made of natural materials. Clockwise from near right, the nagak, a conch shell trumpet, the haegŭm, a two-stringed fiddle played with a bow, the kayagŭm, a twelve-stringed zither with moveable bridges, and the kŏmungo, a six-stringed zither



Korean music,
like the Korean people
themselves, may seem
irrational, but deep
warmth and generosity run
beneath the surface.



Above, The ajaeng is a seven-stringed zither played with a resined bow. Right, top, Piri, a small vertical bamboo flute. Right, bottom, Pak Tong-jin, one of Korea's foremost p'ansori performers

voids or the space with secondary sounds rather than convey the "rest". In Western music the "rest" is secondary while it is essential and absolute in Korean traditional music.

A similar phenomenon is found in painting. In Western painting the whole canvas is filled; there is no empty space. But in Korean painting, the empty space is as important as the part that is filled. Both in the rest and the empty space the imagination is unlimited.

Failure to understand this concept can give the impression that *kömungo* music is nothing but a boring melody. However, this is only true if we approach it with the modern attitude that music is sound only. Greater joy lies in the space left after a note. It is often said that the

ringing of a mountain temple bell reaches to the heights of the universe. Our mind unfolds in a vast landscape of imagination during the silence of a *kömungo* note.

Most people agree that one cannot understand artistic and cultural trends without fully understanding the era which produces them. Nowhere is this more obvious

than in Korea's ritual music. One of the most pronounced social phenomenon behind traditional Korean art theory is the "five flows of *yin* and *yang*". The twelve notes within one octave were classified into six *yin* and six *yang* which were classified again into the twelve months. The five major sounds, *gung sang gak chi* and *woo*, were compared to the five elements, metal, wood, water, fire and soil, or the five colors, five tastes, five virtues and five vital organs of the human body.

According to historical records from the Silla period, the *kaŷagām* was modelled after a Chinese instrument. The resonance box is round, symbolizing heaven, its bottom flat, symbolizing the earth, its twelve strings the months, and the hole at the bottom the six directions: north,

south, east, west, up and down. The composition of the instrument was clearly linked to philosophical beliefs.

In ritual ceremonies, two instruments were used: the *chuk* and *Ŏ*. Perhaps they are the best examples of the theory of *yin* and *yang* in our instruments. *Chuk* is a percussion instrument made of wood and shaped like a mortar. It was always painted blue and placed on the east side, the left, where the sun rises. *Ŏ*, also a wooden percussion instrument, is shaped like a tiger on a box. It was always painted white and placed to the west, the right, where the sun sets. In a concert, the *chuk* was only played at the beginning and the *Ŏ* at the end. A ritual concert began with the *chuk* repeating the same melody three times. The concert came to an end with the *Ŏ* repeating the same melody three times. Both instruments were played only once. The mixture of philosophy and music shows that the artistic characteristics of a people should be understood within the overall framework of their culture.

Pansori is representative of Korea's traditional folk songs. On the other hand, *sijo* and *kasa* have been considered forms of classical court music. A close look at the two will reveal vast differences in methods of vocalization. *Pansori* uses the natural voice to the maximum while in court songs a high-pitched falsetto is employed.

Historically, *pansori* has been the song of the commoners and was handed down through clowns and entertainers. Court songs were loved by intellectuals and the ruling class. Naturally, *pansori* is filled with the emotions of the common people while court songs reveal those of the ruling class. One of the chief characteristics of the commoners is frankness and thus the rejection of hypocrisy. The ruling class on the other hand was reluctant to show naked emotion, especially during the Chosŏn Period when Confucianism ruled.

Consider this old *pansori* song: *Don't bother to take out the straw mat, I can sit on the leaves. Don't light the pine candle, last night's moon will rise again. Hey, child, don't say you have nothing rough wine and vegetables will be fine.*

The lyrics show our ancestors had learned to be content with what little they had. In the life of the commoner, human emotion and feelings were emphasized. Life was full of laughter, cries, obscene language and humor.

The life of the ruling class was characterized by restraint, affectation and artificiality. They seldom laughed and their dialogue was often in an indirect form, as if a servant were relating the conversation to two noblemen. In their music the difference between the natural voice and the falsetto was the difference between nature and artificiality. It was a difference that was also extended to performance venues. Concerts for the ruling class took place inside palatial or residential walls while those of the common people were held out in the open air.

How many friends do I have? Water, rocks, pine trees and bamboo So sang the yangban poet-painter Yun Sŏn-do. The world of classical court music was a soft mat, a room equipped with brush and ink and decorated with folding screens in a big house.

We can argue the merits and demerits of the natural voice. One merit was that it was an honest and true expression of emotion. A negative point was its roughness, like an unpolished gem. But perhaps this view reveals a biased and subjective attitude to culture.

A positive aspect of falsetto is that it is a refined form of art with artificiality added. However, it lacks a sense of real life and therefore fails to convey warmth.

Generally speaking, Koreans seem to feel uncomfortable with exact, fixed notes. In the playing of classical string instruments and the singing of songs, there is always a vibration note which lingers to be expanded and hidden at the same time.

In painting, the exact shapes of mountains and bodies of water are often hidden by screens of mist. This is also true in traditional clothing. Western clothes emphasize the shape of the body but Korean clothes hide it with several layers. The same can be said for architecture. You have to pass through several gates to reach the main house. This is even true of the Korean language in which subjects are usually omitted. All this reflects the Korean tendency to conceal the core of matters.

Thus, the Korean idea of flexible notes in music is connected to the unique culture of a people who wear layers of clothing, use no subjects in their language, and give vague, loose directions when asked. This may at first seem inefficient and irrational but beneath this vagueness lies the emotional warmth, sharing and simplehearted ways of the Korean people. ♦

