

Tuning in Korean Music

The Year of Traditional Korean Music

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The Korean government has designated 1994 the "Year of Traditional Korean Music." Many special programs focusing on various aspects of Korean music are being planned. "Korean music" here refers to the traditional musical genre of this country and excludes any other form of music currently being performed and created in Korea.

The "Year of Traditional Korean Music" is part of the government's program to promote, support and celebrate one particular artistic genre every year. The program started several years ago when the "Year of Drama" was designated for the first time by the Culture Ministry.

This year's project takes a slightly different turn from previous years. Unlike the "Year of Drama" or the "Year of Dance", the target genre has been narrowed down to "traditional Korean music." Why "Year of Traditional Korean Music" instead of "Year of Music"? The answer to this question lies in the unique situation that this country is in at this point in time.

At the start of the 20th century, most of the music performed, written or taught in this country was traditional Korean, which was also true of other arts. But drastic changes took place through the years with the arrival of foreign culture, especially Western artistic genres. Now most of the musical works performed in Korea are foreign works or pieces written in the style of foreign music. This imbalance in the field of music has been the cause of much concern.

In countries like India where the traditional cultural heritage is well preserved



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or Europe where contemporary music has developed from classical music, it is hard to imagine the government designating a whole year as the "Year of Traditional Music." But in Korea, oddly enough, universities name the departments teaching the Western style of music "department of music" and those teaching Korean music "department of (classical) Korean music." It is almost as if Korean music were a mere part of the broader concept of "music," or the Western music genre.

But recently, its popularity has been on the rise, with the number of students and fans of traditional Korean music rapidly increasing. This trend was underlined last year by the record-setting box office success of the film *Sŏpyŏngŭ*, a drama depicting the lives of *pansori* (traditional solo narrative song) singers. The demand to bring the familiar sounds of old Korea closer to its people is higher than ever both within music circles and among the general public.

The "Year of Traditional Korean Music" program was set up as part of this effort. Although the project was initiated by the government, it is being carried out by the musicians themselves with full support from the Culture Ministry. The organizing committee for the year-long program, comprised of musicians and other experts, held various discussions last year to set goals and lay out plans. With so many improvements to be made in such a short time, opinions varied on the project's priorities. But everyone seemed to agree on one thing: Festivities and gala concerts should of course be held to celebrate the heritage of traditional music, but there is also an urgent need to focus on making



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innovative changes in the music education system and music circles in order to make Korean music better known and appreciated at home and abroad.

The "Year of Traditional Korean Music" was kicked off earlier this year with the usual fanfare of music festivals and ceremonies, and most important of all, the announcement of the organizing committee's schedule of programs to be held throughout the year.

A major part of the plan is to improve the overall cultural climate in order to create a place for traditional Korean music. In the past, music was an essential part of ceremonies, rituals, feasts, parades, village

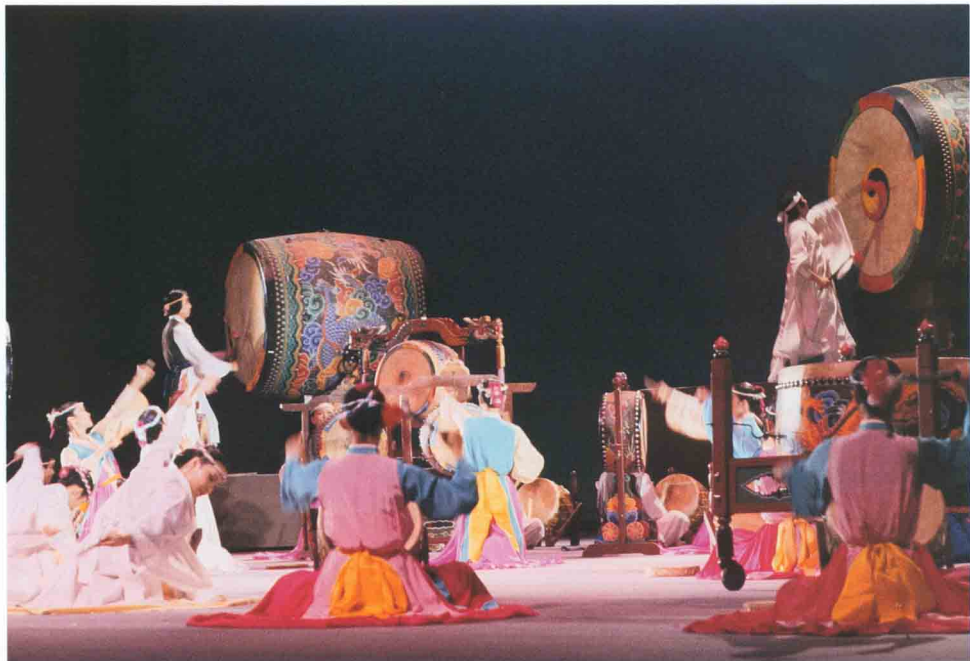
festivals and games. Music and the performing arts supplemented each other and were presented in a uniquely Korean fashion. But today, traditional music is staged on its own as a separate genre. It has lost its connections to other forms of traditional performing arts, and therefore cannot be fully appreciated in its original form. We cannot turn back the clock to a traditional farming and country life, but we can look for ways to stage traditional music as it was performed and enjoyed by our ancestors.

Prof. Hwang Byung-ki, chairman of the Year of Traditional Korean Music Organizing Committee, stresses that in order

to achieve this goal, the most urgent task is to bring traditional music closer to our everyday lives.

"Interest among Korean people in traditional culture is higher than ever. This increase in public interest has led us all to look back at our heritage. This was the driving force behind the government's decision to designate 1994 the Year of Traditional Korean Music. With this year's programs, we all hope to make the genre better appreciated by the people," he said.

Many traditional musicians believe that the best place to start is the music education system. It has been almost a century since the modern school system was in-



introduced in Korea, but the country fell under Japanese colonial rule before traditional music was included in the music curriculum. The Japanese prohibited teaching Korean music at schools as part of their policy of destroying Korean culture. The only music taught under colonial rule was Japanese and Western music. Korea was freed from Japanese rule at the end of World War II, but by then the importance of traditional music had long been forgotten. Schools now focused only on classical Western music and Korean musicians' works created in the style of Western music. Koreans never had a

chance to receive basic formal education in traditional music until recently, when public interest in the nation's cultural heritage increased and pushed the government to include Korean music in primary and secondary school curriculums.

But this new drive faces many obstacles. Since traditional music has been unfamiliar to the Korean people for so long, music teachers themselves are strangers to the genre. It is not easy to find people qualified to teach traditional music, nor is there substantial material to use as textbooks for Korean music classes. That is why the Year of Traditional Music Orga-

nizing Committee has made plans to compile and publish an updated Korean music textbook for schools this year. By doing so, they hope to establish some basic standards in teaching traditional music for teachers with ears trained only for Western music.

The committee plans to support schools dedicated to teaching traditional music by providing instruments and textbooks. Support will also go to the Traditional Music Education Council which will promote the teaching of Korean music to music teachers around the country.

Providing a wider variety of stages for

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traditional music performances is another area to focus on. The public lacks opportunities to learn to appreciate and enjoy Korean music. In the course of Korea's modernization, little attention has been paid to the traditional arts, and artists in this field have not had enough opportunities to give public performances. This has resulted in ignorance of traditional music among contemporary Koreans.

Various plans are underway in order to overcome this odd phenomenon. The Year of Traditional Korean Music Organizing Committee will form touring troupes to bring traditional music to audiences all around the country, even the most remote towns where Korean music performances are seldom held. It will also help various locally-based traditional music orchestras and performing arts troupes hold regular performances for local audiences. Large-scale traditional music festivals, concerts at workplaces and nationwide tours by famed musicians designated "human cultural treasures" are also part of the plans. As for public promotion, the committee is working on putting out various publicity materials on traditional music including records, brochures and audio and video tapes.

Efforts will be made to promote academic study of the traditional music genre. A series of academic seminars will be held and an award will be established to honor outstanding research on Korean music. Various reference books on traditional music, including a directory of musicians and performers and an anthology of past and present writings, will be published.

Traditional Korean music has yet to be accepted and enjoyed by international audiences as Indian, Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and other traditional music of Asian countries have been during the past decades. One of the biggest reasons for this is that Korea has not been involved in many overseas promotion projects until now. That is to change during the Year of Traditional Korean Music. An internation-

al folk music festival, a joint performance of traditional music troupes from various countries and a festival of the world's folk songs are to take place in Korea during the year. These performances will hopefully open doors for Korean music. The organizing committee is also working on



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founding the "Asia-Pacific Folk Music Society" that will focus on cooperation among Asian-Pacific countries in holding international conferences and joint performances.

Traditional Korean music has changed and evolved with time, but these changes mostly involved new interpretations and performing techniques. Strictly speaking, almost no new compositions created in the traditional style of Korean music have come out since the nation's modernization. But traditional Korean music can never become a part of contemporary culture unless new works in traditional music styles are composed and performed, expressing contemporary thoughts and reflecting the emotions of contemporary people. Koreans have been composing Western-style music since the turn of the century, but it was not until the 1960s that traditional musicians tried writing new compositions. Thus, the Year of Traditional Korean Mu-

sic Organization Committee is setting up various plans to encourage young composers of Korean music. A festival featuring new compositions written and performed by members of major traditional music orchestras is also being prepared.

Last but not least, the Year of Traditional Korean Music has an endless array of grand performances in store for audiences. While concerted efforts should be made within music circles to improve the cultural atmosphere for traditional music and its fans, there is no doubt that the highlights of the Year of Traditional Korean Music are the many festivals, concerts and other performances to be staged all year long. The festivities started earlier this year with the official opening of the Year of Traditional Korean Music in a series of gala performances by prominent figures of Korean music. Many of these stars have volunteered to appear in the benefit concert "Spring Traditional Music Festival." All profits from this event will go to charity. It will be followed by a music festival featuring the religious music of various traditional religions, a special presentation of the annual Traditional Music Festival, and many more.

The organizing committee hopes that this year's festivities will help promote cultural exchanges between North and South Korea, especially in the field of traditional music, a heritage that both sides share and cherish. Special tours are also being planned for the millions of Koreans living abroad, from the United States to Russia, in order to bring traditional music closer to the people who have long felt nostalgic for their homeland.

But most of all, the Year of Traditional Korean Music has finally given traditional musicians an opportunity to revive Korea's great musical heritage in the modern world. It is their hope that this year will be a milestone in the history of traditional Korean music—a year in which all Koreans learn to love their own music all over again. ♦