

Korean and Not-Korean

I am no longer trying to write Korean music; nor am I trying not to write Korean music. This is a remark that Hyo-shin Na made some five years ago. I consider this musical wisdom. Of course, the composer will never be able to forget her Korean background, much less her American education, because others will not allow her to do so. There is no escape. As soon as one writes for kayageum, the question arises what a kayageum might be. Nevertheless, this is not the question that one should ask in relation to a work of art. It is simply not relevant. Imagine a commentary on a Beethoven sonata that highlights the fact that the piano is a Western instrument. More important are the manner in which the material means are used and the end that they are used for, as well as what skills are employed to reach the intended goal. The inner freedom and the poetic subtleties in Hyo-shin Na's art music, for instance, can only be responded to by playing it and listening to it. The opposition between European-American so-called new music, on the one hand, and Korean so-called traditional music, on the other, is also not self-evident. After all, as she states herself, Korean music is constantly evolving, and European new music, I might add, has also emphasized continual renewal. Paradoxically, her position between two cultures is the one that seems the most natural to me. She may be Korean-American in the United States and American-Korean in Seoul, but she is after all just herself and surely will be recognized as such by future generations.

Ocean/Shore 2

Ocean/Shore 2 (clarinet, violin, viola and cello) was commissioned by the Zellerbach Foundation for Earplay for the celebration of the one-hundredth year of Korean-American immigration in 2003. The year before, she had written the first *Ocean/Shore* for chamber orchestra and *piri* (Korean bamboo oboe) solo. According to the composer, “. . . the *Ocean/Shore* series is a study on the use of diverse materials and on the coexistence, within a piece of music, of various instruments. As in the meeting and interaction of water and land, these instruments can have fundamentally very different characters (*piri* and violin, or clarinet and cello), yet shouldn't lose their basic nature in the interests of harmony, or even beauty. *Ocean/Shore* was made of diverse elements: sounds of the *piri* and the Western chamber orchestra, songs of the Indians of Northern California and impressions of the coast of California itself—water, rain, fog, mist, light, trees, grasses, hills and rocks.”

It was premiered at the 2003 San Francisco International Arts Festival. As in *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots*, the composer makes excessive yet at the same time exciting and excellent use of the open strings. The whole ensemble at the start of the piece is approached as a single instrument; one might perceive it as one big exotic plucked instrument. The subtle play of circling around one single note heightens the concentration on details. The ornaments, however, seem too coincidental for them to be fixed in memory. When they do become important, the listener is surprised, notwithstanding the logic of the development. After a while, one gets accustomed to this process. The entrance of the clarinet at the opportune time is a marvelous moment, unexpected as it is, and it is experienced as a revelation. All of this is very nicely executed—as a classical piece, one might say, if it were not for the sound. One does not recognize the clarinet as such, rather as a Korean *piri* or some unknown instrument. However, it soon plays the role of *primus inter pares*. Meanwhile, a more important shift has taken place in the stringed instruments. At first, they were perceived as one single plucked instrument; now, they are bowed with sustained sounds. The atmosphere consequently has shifted to the field of harmony, in which tonal subtleties start to play their role. Once more, the listener is surprised. This time it is more than a change in the system; it is radical—a rupture. One of the players, the cellist, starts reciting a poem. It is from “By the Well of Living and Seeing” by Charles Reznikoff, about intolerance of the unfamiliar. How do we meet the stranger in our society? This does not serve as an explanation of the music, but it at least points to the aesthetic envelope. In order to enjoy the piece, it is indeed necessary to use both the Western and the Eastern sensibilities for sound and music making. The beauty of it is that there is, after all, no such thing as a Western, as opposed to—or distinct from—an Eastern musical sensibility. There are only sets of sensibilities—some of which are more developed in the Western tradition than in the Eastern, and vice versa.

All the Noises in the World

In this work from 2006, which was written for an ensemble of six players, the Korean cultural background of the composer comes across most clearly and most explicitly. This can of course be explained by the fact that all the instruments are Korean. The *taegum* is a bamboo flute, the *piri* a Korean traditional bamboo oboe, the *haegeum* a fiddle with only two strings, the *kayageum* a string zither with twelve strings, the *komungo* a plucking zither with six strings, and the *changgu* a drum in the shape of an hourglass.

The inspiration of the piece, however, is not Korean but Inuit. It is a folktale about noises meeting and sounding in one place. The poetic idea of the story corresponds to the idea of ensemble-playing as Hyo-shin Na uses it in this work. The ensemble-playing is not put in code in the score, at least not mechanically and directly. The performers cannot play their parts and expect the piece to come together in a mechanical way. The six players must coordinate with one another by listening while they play. Even though the notes are written as fixed, determined entities, they are placed so cunningly that the players have no choice but to listen to one another if they wish to play their own part correctly. This option is not entirely new in Na's work. She already made use of it in earlier pieces such as 2000's *Chung-Ji-Hyang*.

But there is more. On first hearing, one might consider the work to be a piece of traditional Korean music, in which traditionally skilled performers do what they have always done. This would be a misconception. The musicians produce sounds/noises on something other than their own instrument. What appeared to be a purely Korean piece turns out to be a very complex concept with elements and sensibilities from different cultures. *All the Noises in the World* was commissioned by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and JeongGaAkHoe.

Korean Music Opened

The meeting of different cultures has been a source of rejuvenation and inspiration since the early history of European music. Plainchant combines elements from the Jewish, Syrian, Greek and provincial traditions. The argument by Pope Gregory (540–604) for unity was political rather than musical. Connecting the different modes of Christianity in Europe and the Middle East meant uniting Christianity under the authority of the Bishop of Rome. Local rites persisted, however, and they burst onto the scene from time to time, which then, in turn, fertilized the *official* art. A good example of this phenomenon are the pilgrim songs for Santiago de Compostella, as they were written down in the Codex Calixtinus, in which the later major-minor tonality was emphatically affirmed against the *modi* of the official Gregorian chant. Other examples abound. This kind of diversity comes from within.

Korean Music Meets Western Music

More conspicuous than tension within a tradition, however, is the confrontation between distinct traditions. The fact alone that the other culture is experienced as *the other culture* raises a great many problems, some of which are readily apparent to the conscious observer. Mostly, however, one is not aware of such problems as domination and submission, the defense of one's own values, misunderstandings, and so forth. The late Edward Saïd brought many of these problems into the spotlight in his classic work *Orientalism*. It is a pity that he did not pay much attention to their manifestations in music. He would have found many brilliant examples. The highly educated and honest Camille Saint-Saëns, for instance, was greatly interested in the music of the Maghreb, and he wrote some pieces in the style of North African traditions. He truly loved the region and held its music in high esteem. From his work *Africa* on, which he wrote in Cairo in 1891, and throughout his later years, when he composed pieces such as *Suite Algérienne op. 60*, he gave expression to his love for North African music and Algiers, where he died. Nevertheless, he wrote in fact a highly colonial type of music. The musical values, the practical realization with orchestra, and the very concept of the music make it a typical piece of the French romanticism with as subject some *couleur locale* of North Africa. It can only be played by musicians who are trained in the European tradition. Other cases include Charles Koechlin, Giacomo Puccini, Gustav Mahler or Gustav Holst, but I gloss over these examples here, as they lend themselves less easily to analysis. The most critical meeting of cultures leads to the recognition that there is a true problem, as one can see in the example of Paul Hindemith. When Hindemith was invited to Turkey to reorganize the country's entire musical infrastructure, he realized that good music high schools that provided training in so-called classical music, symphony orchestras with talented conductors, and publishers and scholars of classical music all threatened the local traditions and values. Subsequent political and economical change in Turkey may have enabled the creation of refined and authentic musical works, but the problem remained. It was in the United States that a truly new approach was developed. This phenomenon can be observed in the radical eclecticism of Henry Cowell, the mixture submerged in a new departure of Harry Partch, or John Cage's philosophical idea of inclusiveness. The latter's *Ryoanji* is fundamentally different from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. The above-mentioned starting points, as well as others, offered composers and musicians of other cultures the possibility to do the same. Perhaps, some day, when there is no predefined notion of material or method, Cage might write like Toshi Ichiyanagi and Ichiyanagi like Cage. It is from this point of departure that Hyo-shin Na takes the concept of her pieces.

Walking, Walking

Hyo-shin Na has written several fine works for piano, among them four *Studies* and *Variations*, which have been well received worldwide. They each have a specific idea, concept and technique. It is difficult to find commonalities between, for example, the *Rain Study* and the fascinating *Walking, Walking*. According to the composer,

The inspiration and basic musical materials of this composition from 2004 have their origin in a song by the Chilean musician Victor Jara, a central figure in that country's "new song" movement. *Walking, Walking* explores aspects and qualities of the act of walking, the rhythm and pace of walking and thinking, the balance of working and idling, and the, at times, meandering, light-hearted quality of walking. The piece reflects the last lines of a poem by Jara:

For how long have I been arriving
How long ago did I leave
How long have I walked
Since when have I been walking?

This poetic statement holds true. Consciousness of real time fades away as the piece progresses. This does not mean, however, that one should lose awareness and descend into a state of slumber. On the contrary, one's perception is sharpened and there prevails an attitude of alertness. Simple notes win admiration, as in the old Zen poem *How wondrous, I am walking!* Or should we compare it to a simple piece of Bach? Indeed, Na utilizes counterpoint or polyphony, or something akin to it of her own, to make the sounds important and remarkable. The most amazing aspect of this work is the shifting from polyphonic to harmonic writing, from single-note to grouping, or from transparent to cloudy textures. In this sense, something interesting is always happening—unforeseen, perhaps, but in a smooth progression. The walking can seemingly provide one with a new perspective at any moment. Change does not occur at just *any* moment, however. The distance between these changes in perspective is a rhythmic composition of its own. Sometimes it stays unchanged for a longer time; at other moments, changes occur at shorter intervals. Nor are the changes dramatic upheavals. This walk is taking place in the friendly hills, not in the canyons and high mountains.

The key question from a classical point of view should be: What is the final destination, the goal, of this walk? The answer is clear: nowhere; this piece is conceptually endless. The reason for shifts and changes is not to reach a certain point. The whole question of *why* is obsolete. At any and every moment the reason of existence is that moment itself.

Walking, Walking was written for Thomas Schultz; the writing of the piece was supported by Subito, a grant program of the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of the American Composers Forum.

Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots

There are string quartets, on the one hand, and pieces for string quartet, on the other hand. The first category points to a genre, the second category just to a composition for a certain ensemble that happens to be two violins, a viola and a violoncello. Hyo-shin Na's *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots* clearly belongs to this last category.

In spite of the constant remark that this is the highest and most difficult form of music, more music has been written for string quartet after 1900 than ever before since its beginnings in 1771 with Haydn's quartets, opus 9. From Beethoven on, the most obvious problem had been the homogeneity of the quartet and hence its lack of color. The four instruments were seen as supplying only four notes, and this made the balance of the four parts into a difficult compositional problem. It is clear that this reasoning only applies to the classical style in which the quartet was developed. This problem melted away when other playing and writing techniques arose around 1900. The colorful writing in early expressionism—with Webern and Alban Berg—or the economically construed idea of the writing for string quartet—as seen with Schoenberg—opened up a wide range of new possibilities. But first and foremost, they confirmed the freedom to deny the genre as such and to write simply for this kind of ensemble.

It is interesting to note that this work for string quartet is one of Hyo-shin Na's most experimental with regard to the method of composition. The composer describes it as follows:

The title and inspiration of *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots* comes from a series of four paintings made in 1685 by the Chinese painter Shi-tao (1641–1720). The fourth painting includes his own poem:

“Ten thousand ugly ink blots to vex Mi Fei; A few flaccid strokes to make Tung Yuan roll over with laughter. The perspective lacks unity from my ignorance of a winding landscape; The foreground is too confused, just a few rustic cottages can be made out. I have broken out of the mold and liberated my ‘mind’s eye!’ Like a Transcendent riding the wind, whose flesh and bones have etherealized.”

In order to “break out of the mold” and to liberate my composer’s “mind’s eye,” I traced concrete elements from Shi-tao’s paintings onto seventeen transparent sheets, and used these sheets in varied overlappings and superimpositions as a direct source for textural and melodic materials.

The transposition of visual elements to the score has been a fondness of quite a few composers throughout the centuries. To write a circular canon in the form of a circle in the early Renaissance, or to compose so-called madrigalisms, sometimes of an expressive nature but quite often pictorial too, these devices have much in common with the cryptic note-themes such as in Schumann or Shostakovich, *Abegg* and *Dsch*.¹ It must be extended to techniques working with holy numbers as Bach or Alban Berg did, or with composing on scientific formulas as the young Xenakis did. In all these cases there is a translation from one language-system into another. The interesting thing in Hyo-shin Na’s case, as with Earle Brown and Cage, is the linking to the experimental. Translation in itself is two-sided. It is compelling and it is liberating. The visual original for Na itself was a prototype for the liberating translation. Shi-tao realized a painting itself was a kind of transformation from reality to nothing more as ugly ink blots. So does Hyo-shin Na. The result of this freedom is a piece for string quartet with ever new perspectives and unexpected sounds, more a reality in itself, floating in a vast emptiness, rather than a solid piece. It would be improper to touch it with words.

This piece was made possible with the support of the Arts Council Silicon Valley, the Argosy Foundation, and the Ives String Quartet.

—*Boudewijn Buckinx*

Boudewijn Buckinx is a musicologist who has written many articles and several books, especially on music after 1950, including a book on his own music, which is extensive and contains 1001 Sonatas for Violin and Piano and Nine Unfinished Symphonies.

After studying piano and composition in her native Korea, **Hyo-shin Na** came to the United States in 1983 to do graduate work at the Manhattan School of Music and at the University of Colorado, where she received her doctorate, then moved in 1988 to San Francisco. She met Cage, Rzewski, Wolff and Takahashi, and encountered the music of Nancarrow. At the same time, she made return trips to Korea to hear and study traditional Korean music while also taking a broad interest in the music of other regions of Asia.

Hyo-shin Na has written for Western instruments, for traditional Korean instruments and has written music that combines western and Asian (Korean and Japanese) instruments and ways of playing. Her music for traditional Korean instruments is recognized by both composers and performers in Korea (particularly by the younger generation) as being uniquely innovative. Her writing for combinations of Western and Eastern instruments is unusual in its refusal to compromise the integrity of differing sounds and ideas; she prefers to let them interact, coexist and conflict in the music.

¹ Abegg—Robert Schumann’s *Abegg Variations*, Opus 1, written on a theme made out of the notes A–B flat–E–G–G, dedicated to a friend, Meta Abegg.

Dsch—Dmitri Shostakovich made a personal motto derived from letters in his name, notated as D–E flat–C–B. It occurs in several of his works, including the eighth string quartet, his tenth and fifteenth symphonies, and first violin concerto.

In Korea, she has twice been awarded the Korean National Composers Prize, and in the West she has been commissioned by the Fromm and Koussevitzky Foundations, among many others. Her music has been played worldwide by ensembles as varied as The Barton Workshop, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the Kronos Quartet, and the Korean Traditional Orchestra at the National Theatre.

She is the author of the bilingual book *Conversations with Kayageum Master Byung-ki Hwang* (Pulbit Press, 2001) and the translator into Korean of Christian Wolff's article "Experiments in Music around 1950 and Some Consequences and Causes (Social-political and Musical)" (Soomoon-dang Press, 2008). Her music has been recorded on the Fontec (Japan), Top Arts (Korea), and Seoul (Korea) labels and has been published in Korea and Australia. Since 2006 her music has been published exclusively by Lantro Music (Belgium).

John Anderson studied at the New South Wales Conservatorium. He was a founding member of The Barton Workshop (Amsterdam). As a specialist on the bass clarinet, Anderson is a prize winner in the Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition. He has performed with ASKO, the Xenakis Ensemble, the Bass Clarinet Collective and Ensemble Modern. He has recorded John Cage's *Sonata for Solo Clarinet* and Morton Feldman's *Bass Clarinet and Percussion* with The Barton Workshop.

Nina Hitz was born in Switzerland and is currently living in the Netherlands. Hitz is active in Baroque music, experimental music, improvisation and theatrical performances. She became a member of The Barton Workshop through a mutual interest in the music of Christian Wolff, Alvin Lucier and Morton Feldman. She has since then become a stalwart for the ensemble through her participation in premieres by Michael Pisaro, Christian Wolff, and Ernstalbrecht Stiebler.

The **Ives String Quartet** has established a reputation for passion, precision, and provocative programming, winning accolades for playing that shows both super-refinement and visceral, rock-and-roll intensity. In a departure from convention, the Quartet combines players with American and European experience and sensibilities, drawing on the talent and experience of the international, solo, orchestral, chamber, and recording careers of its artist members Bettina Mussumeli, violin; Susan Freier, violin; Jodi Levitz, viola; and Stephen Harrison, cello.

While the members of the Seoul-based chamber music ensemble **JeongGaAkHoe** are devoted to playing Korean traditional music, they have also, since 2000, commissioned many new works. The group has toured the United States and Europe. The musicians on this recording of *All the Noises in the World* are Hong Yoo on *taegeum* (bamboo flute), Hyang-hee Lee on *piri* (bamboo oboe), Seung-hee Lee on *haegeum* (fiddle), Yoo-jin Sung on *kayageum* (string zither), Jae-hyun Chun on *komungo* (plucked zither), and Jae-choon Yang on *changgu* (drum).

Marieke Keser graduated in 1994 from the Maastricht Conservatorium, obtaining a degree of Performing Artist in the class of Professor Robert Szreder. In 1989 she took part in the Oscar Back Competition and in 1991 in the International Orpheus Prize for the Interpretation of New Chamber Music in Antwerp. She has taken master classes with Zenon Brzewski, Marina Jaswili, Mirosław Rusin, Wolfgang Marschner, Theo Olof, and Herman Krebbers. She gives master classes at Goch (Germany). She has appeared many times as a soloist with piano and/or orchestra in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Poland. Marieke Keser and Frank Denyer have recorded several works for violin and piano by John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff with The Barton Workshop on Etcetera Records.

Thomas Schultz has established an international reputation both as an interpreter of music from the classical tradition and as one of the leading exponents of the music of our time. He has worked closely with such eminent composers as Cage, Feldman, Wolff, Rzewski, Earle Brown, Jonathan Harvey and Elliott Carter. Since 2002, Schultz has included in his recitals works written especially for him by Frederic Rzewski (*The Babble*, 2003), Christian Wolff (*Touch*, 2002; *Long Piano*, 2005), Hyo-shin Na (*Rain Study*, 1999; *Walking, Walking*, 2003), Walter Zimmermann (*AIMIDE*, 2001-02), Boudewijn Buckinx (*The Floating World*, 2004) and Yuji Takahashi (*For Thomas Schultz*, 2001). Schultz's musical studies were with John Perry, Leonard Stein and Philip Lillestol. He has been a member of the piano faculty at Stanford University since 1994.

The prizewinner at the 2000 and 2003 International Competition for Young Violists in Slovenia, **Manuel Visser** has studied with Michael Gieler, Jürgen Kussmaul, and Garth Knox in Paris. The composers James Fulkerson, Walter Hekster and Matthias Kadar have written works for him and he has recorded for the Ottavo and New World Records labels and the WDR in Germany. Visser is active as a soloist and chamber musician. He forms a trio with pianist Johann de Jong and clarinetist Fleur Bouwer. He also is the violist of the Bardac Harptrio (with flute and harp), the Escher-ensemble, the AXYZ-ensemble and The Barton Workshop.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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HYO-SHIN NA (b. 1959)
ALL THE NOISES
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1. *Ocean/Shore 2* (2003) 16:12

John Anderson, clarinet; Marieke Keser, violin; Manuel Visser, viola; Nina Hitz, cello

2. *All the Noises in the World* (2006) 13:19

JeongGaAkHoe: Jae-hyun Chun, komungo; Hyang-hee Lee, piri; Hong Yoo, taegum; Seung-hee Lee, haegum; Yoo-jin Sung, kayageum; Jae-choon Yang, changgu

3. *Walking, Walking* (2004) 25:35

Thomas Schultz, piano

4. *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots* (2006) 21:44

Ives String Quartet: Bettina Mussumeli, violin; Susan Freier, violin; Jodi Levitz, viola; and Stephen Harrison, cello

TT: 77:01

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