

# HWANG BYUNGKI AND NORTH-SOUTH MUSICAL EXCHANGE

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In October and December 1990, North and South Korea sent parties of musicians to each other in an exchange of musical performances intended to express the will for unification. On other occasions, one side has sent a musical delegation to the other, but this is the only time to date there has been a reciprocal exchange of such visits in close succession. This pair of events has been described by Han Myŏnghŭi, Song Hyejin and Yun Chunggang in their book *Uri kugak 100 nyŏn* (100 years of Korean traditional music) as “the most noteworthy cultural exchange between North and South since partition” (Han Myŏnghŭi *et al.*, 2001:352).

In reviewing the 1990 North-South musical exchange, I will concentrate on the role of composer and *kayagŭm* player Hwang Byungki (Hwang Pyŏnggi; b. 1936), arguably the most prominent figure in the exchange as a whole, since he led the South Korean delegation to P’yŏngyang and organised the Seoul concerts, performed his own works in both events, and composed two new pieces for the occasion. My information comes mainly from interviews with Hwang Byungki in 2005, from his own published writings on the subject (Hwang Byungki, 1994a, 1994b), from copies of his musical manuscripts, and from a North Korean commemorative volume which he kindly gave me (produced by P’yŏngyang Tŭngdaesa, 1990).

The two pieces Hwang wrote for P’yŏngyang are not often heard outside Korea, but they shed an interesting light both on Hwang Byungki as a composer and on the possibilities and challenges for North-South musical dialogue. Although this paper is not intended for a specialist music audience, I would like to be specific about the musical features of these pieces, in the hope that a musicologist’s perspective can contribute something new to the discussion of informal diplomacy on the Korean peninsula.

The first event was the *Pŏmminjok t’ongil ūmakhoe* (Pan-Korean unification concerts) held in P’yŏngyang from 18 to 23 October 1990. In this lavish music festival, no fewer than eighteen groups took part, representing not only the two Koreas but Korean diaspora communities in places as far flung as North America,

Germany, China, Japan, and various republics of the former Soviet Union. Most of these groups performed Western-style music, as we might guess from the festival's logo, which showed a map of the Korean peninsula encircled by a treble clef with staff lines passing through it (fig. 1). We might also be tempted to link the emphasis on Western-style music with the chair of the organising committee, Yun Isang (1917–95), a composer who wrote mainly for Western classical instruments, although he strove to evoke elements of traditional Korean music. But it was Yun who invited Hwang Byungki to lead the South Korean contingent, specifically requesting that the group perform traditional Korean music from the time before partition because this music had not been maintained in the North.

Hwang assembled a party of fourteen musicians whom he considered the best in their field, including three designated holders of Important Intangible Cultural Properties (*chungyo muhyŏng munhwajae*) and the entire Kim Duk Soo SamulNori percussion quartet. He planned a concert programme for the group that included a number of pieces evoking the theme of reunification: for instance, the *p'ansori* excerpt performed by O Chŏngsuk described the reunion of the heroine and her father at the end of the *Song of Sim Ch'ŏng*. Of Hwang's own compositions, he chose the kayagŭm solo *Pidan'gil* (The Silk Road) for its theme of exchange between two civilisations, and the song *Kohyang-ŭi tal* (Moon of my hometown) for its theme of longing for home. He also composed a new song which was given its première



Fig.1. Logo for *Pŏmminjok t'ongil ūmakhoe*

(Pan-Korean unification concerts), P'yŏngyang, 18–23 October 1990

(P'yŏngyang Tŭngdaesa, 1990:1)

in P'yŏngyang by the only performer of Western music in the South Korean party, soprano Yun Insuk. This was *Uri-nŭn hana* (We are one), and it reveals much about Hwang's approach to the musical exchange with North Korea in the way it departs from his usual compositional style.

*Uri-nŭn hana* can be heard in Yun Insuk's performance on the compact disc of the same title (Yun Insuk, 2000; see Discography). The song has no text other than the words *Uri-nŭn hana*, which are repeated many times, alternating with short passages of wordless singing. Given that *uri* so often means Koreans as a nation, it would be easy to interpret this text as a mantra affirming that North and South Korea are one. Hwang told me that he intended the song to include this meaning, but that he also meant *uri* in a broader sense, embracing the whole human race. He had long believed that man's inhumanity to man was caused by failing to see the human race as one, and he had harboured the idea of writing a piece on this theme for many years. But the form in which the piece eventually emerged was very much moulded by the context in which it was to be given its first performance. We can see this not only in the choice of text but in the musical style as well.

This becomes clear when we compare *Uri-nŭn hana* with the music Hwang had been composing shortly before he was invited to P'yŏngyang. After some avant-garde ventures in the 1970s such as *Migung* (The labyrinth, 1975; recorded on the Hwang Byungki CD, 1993a) and *Jasi* (Night watch, 1978; to be recorded on Hwang's next CD), Hwang's compositions became more consistently focused on traditional Korean musical resources. This tendency perhaps reached its peak in 1987 with *Namdo hwangsanggok* (Southern fantasy) for kayagŭm zither and *changgo* hourglass drum (recorded on the Hwang Byungki CD, 1993b), which is rather close in style to the traditional genre kayagŭm *sanjo*, a type of extended instrumental solo with drum accompaniment. *Namdo hwangsanggok* is characteristic of Hwang Byungki's music in a number of ways: it is written for a small number of traditional Korean instruments; it is inspired by a traditional Korean genre; it is thin in texture with only sparing use of harmony; its rhythms are subtle and irregular, and its overall mood contemplative. Some of these characteristics also appear in *Uri-nŭn hana*, but not in such obvious ways.

Hwang was aware that, while traditional music in South Korea had been both preserved and developed, in the North there was little concern with preservation, and traditional genres had been either developed to suit the needs of a modern socialist state or abandoned altogether. North Korean development of traditional music in many respects emulated Western classical music: for instance, in extending the pitch range and technical capabilities of instruments; in aiming for a pure, clear tone in contrast to the rough-edged timbres of much traditional Korean music; and in making free use of functional harmony (Howard, 2002: 960–63). Hwang designed *Uri-nŭn hana* to speak to audiences accustomed to this acculturated North Korean music. Although

he used the traditional changgo drum (played with the bare hands rather than using a stick on one or both heads as in traditional music) and provided a short introduction on the Korean clay ocarina *hun*, he wrote the song for a Western-style soprano with a thick chordal accompaniment on the organ that was very uncharacteristic of his previous compositional style.

On closer examination, however, the Western sound of *Uri-nŭn hana* turns out to be largely a matter of instrumentation (the Western-style voice and the organ, which Hwang says provides just “atmosphere”), and in its musical construction the piece is markedly Korean. Its overall structure does not follow the ‘recursive’ principle so common in Western music, whereby earlier material returns in later sections. Instead, it moves on from one idea to another with several increases in tempo and a concluding slow passage, much like traditional sanjo. The introduction on the *hun* is not thematically connected to the rest of the piece, but serves mainly to invoke the associations of this instrument with the earth or land (since it is made of clay) and with the land of Korea in particular (since it sounds markedly different from Chinese and other ocarinas). Although notated in the key of F minor, the piece does not use the ‘leading note’ (E-natural) that would be essential to that tonality in Western music, but is in fact written in a melodic mode resembling the *kyemyŏnjo* of Korean folk music. Its rhythmic structure in 6/4 time derives from the twelve beats of *chungmori*, one of the *changdan* or ‘rhythmic cycles’ of traditional Korean music, and its use of the changgo for rhythmic accompaniment is shared with most traditional genres. Its vocal writing evokes traditional song styles such as *sijo* and p’ansori by using vibrato only on certain notes, and sometimes on less than the full length of a note.

If these Korean musical elements might be taken to encourage a narrowly national reading of *Uri-nŭn hana*, the Western elements might suggest Hwang’s broader meaning of the whole human race being one. The combination of Korean musical elements and an international musical language might also stand as an emblem for the coming together of ethnic Koreans from around the world in the P’yŏngyang Pan-Korean unification concerts. At any rate, Hwang told me that the piece was particularly well received by the North Korean press, although they perhaps predictably interpreted its message as referring specifically to the unity of the Korean people.

Another song that Hwang composed for P’yŏngyang was *T’ongil-ŭi kil* (The road of unification), written in collaboration with North Korean composer Sŏng Tongch’un, although the two composers did not actually meet until the song was finished. The creative process began when Hwang was sent a number of North Korean poems, from which he was asked to choose one for setting to music. He chose Ri Sŏngch’ŏl’s poem *T’ongil-ŭi kil* because it seemed relatively apolitical, urging all Koreans to pool their strength and walk hand in hand towards unification, without indicating the specific form that a unified Korea would take:

*Uri kyörye taedaero ogo kadön kil  
 san-i nop'a ogaji mot hanunga?  
 Ne-ga ogo nae-ga kal t'ongil-üi kil-ün  
 uri söro son chapko yöro nagaja.*

On the road by which our people used to come and go,  
 is the hill too high to cross?  
 Hand in hand, let's go forth and open  
 a road of unification for you to come and for me to go.

Hwang composed a first draft of the melody and sent it to Söng Tongch'un for revision. While he no longer remembers the details of the changes that Söng made, his recollection is that they were fairly slight, and that they tended to make the song more “popular” (*taejungjök*) in style, whereas his original version had been too “high-brow” (here Hwang used the English word) for its intended purpose. He readily accepted most of Söng's changes, but they had difficulty in reaching agreement over the setting of the title phrase *t'ongil-üi kil*. They discussed the problem over the phone and settled on a compromise, and when they eventually met, the two composers signed the score. During the festivities in P'yöngyang, they sang the song as a duet before getting the whole company to sing it together.

Like *Uri-nün hana*, *T'ongil-üi kil* is strikingly different in style from most of Hwang's music. In contrast to his usual rhythmic subtlety, it has the four-square structure of a simple hymn, with four lines each four bars long and nearly identical to each other in rhythm. It has much internal repetition, with a melodic form of AABB' (where B and B' have the same beginning but different endings). Although it has no written-out accompaniment, it is clearly conceived with harmony in mind, and in P'yöngyang a harmonic accompaniment was improvised on the accordion, very skillfully according to Hwang. Yet also like *Uri-nün hana*, it evokes traditional Korean music in its use of a six-beat metre (multiples of three beats being highly characteristic of Korean music) and a melodic mode that resembles a Western minor key but lacks the raised leading note. Because of these features, Hwang feels that the melody sounds very traditional although it can easily be learnt and sung by those unaccustomed to traditional Korean singing—which includes most of those present at the P'yöngyang festival and most ethnic Koreans worldwide.

On his return from P'yöngyang, Hwang set about organising a return visit by musicians from North Korea (though not from the various diaspora communities that had been represented in P'yöngyang). This became the *Songnyön t'ongil chönt'ong ümakhoe* (Year-end traditional music concerts for unification), a series of concerts held in Seoul in December 1990, in which musicians from the two Koreas performed on the same stage. Hwang wrote about both the P'yöngyang and Seoul concerts in two magazine articles that were later reprinted in his 1994 book *Kip'ün pam, kü kayagüm*

*sori* (The sound of the kayagŭm in the dead of night; Hwang Byungki, 1994a, 1994b). He noted that the North and South Korean participants appeared to approach the concerts with different expectations. The South Koreans tended to regard them as pure musical events, an opportunity to transcend the political conditions on the peninsula and share a common Korean identity on a cultural level. Thus, Han, Song and Yun in *Uri kugak 100 nyŏn* state that the exchange was judged to have “highlighted the national cultural homogeneity between North and South” (Han Myŏnghŭi *et al.*, 2001:353). But according to Hwang (1994a), opinions were divided as to whether the concerts showed that North and South Korea still shared a single musical tradition or whether, on the contrary, they showed that the tradition had taken such different paths in the two Koreas that it would be difficult to recover the original unity. Moreover, he suggests that even to ask this question shows a South Korean way of thinking that would not make sense to the participants from the North. To them, the musical exchange was essentially a political event, significant in exhibiting and promoting the will for unification regardless of the compatibility or even the quality of North and South Korean music. Thus, North Korean newspaper reports did not even mention whether the music was good or not, let alone whether North and South Korean musical forms were homogeneous or heterogeneous, but concentrated solely on the mood of longing for unification. Again, at the North Korean musicians’ suggestion, the first Seoul concert ended with all the performers coming on stage together to sing An Byŏngwŏn’s unification anthem, *Uri-ŭi sowŏn-ŭn t’ongil* (Our wish is for unification; recorded on the Yun Insuk CD, 2000). At the end of the song, the North Korean musicians shouted the slogan *choguk t’ongil* (‘unify the homeland’). The next day, the South Korean performers, who wanted to keep the focus on music, insisted on changing the song to *Arirang*, and after a long argument the North Korean contingent gave in. Such incidents suggest that, despite the conciliatory gesture between North and South that the musical exchange implied, in some respects the two sides were at cross-purposes, and no very substantial outcome could be expected.

What in fact was the outcome? It would be difficult to argue, after this passage of time, that the 1990 musical exchange has brought the two Koreas any closer to unification. But within the realm of music, it appears to have had some effects. Hwang Byungki believes that in North Korea, it has led the authorities to attach more importance to traditional music, while in the South, it marked the beginning of an influx of North Korean elements into South Korean *ch’angjak kugak* (newly composed music for traditional instruments) and *kugak* fusion music. These elements include modified instruments with more than the traditional number of strings or, in the case of wind instruments, with metal keywork to make additional pitches available, as well as actual music by North Korean composers which can now be freely performed in the South. North Korean instruments and compositions often reach South Korea by way of the Yŏnbyŏn Korean Autonomous Region in China,

where South Korean musicians travel to learn about North Korean music. Thus, each side has taken on something of the other's musical culture, and at least to that extent, the 1990 musical exchange has brought the two Koreas closer.

Han, Song and Yun predict that cultural and artistic exchanges will play an important role in future progress towards unification (Han Myŏnghŭi *et al.*, 2001:353). There may be some support for this view in the importance that both Koreas attached to the role of music. Hwang Byungki recalls that although the musical gathering in P'yŏngyang coincided with other unification-oriented events such as North-South football matches, summit meetings, and reunions of family members separated by the partition of Korea, it was the musical events that seemed to be in the brightest spotlight. On the South Korean side, it may be significant that a group of musicians were among the first private citizens to be allowed to visit North Korea since partition. At the very least, I suggest, the 1990 musical exchange shows that, if we are interested in informal diplomacy between North and South Korea, it is worth paying attention to music.

*Editor's note:* All translations from the Korean (titles, quotations, verse) are by the author. The only original English-language titles are those for Hwang Byungki's two albums, listed below.

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