

The Rise and Fall of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra

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Abstract

The Ŭnhasu Orchestra was a major North Korean ensemble in 2009–2013. It was established by Kim Jong Il (Kim Chŏng'il, 김정일) and was composed of young musicians and singers of both genders, several of them having studied in foreign higher educational institutions in countries like Austria, Italy, Russia and China. Its members represented the core class of the North Korean society. It was ostensibly meant to display the high quality of North Korean art and engage at this level also in international cultural diplomacy, both in terms of physical visits, and in terms of DVD and internet publishing. In addition to domestic concerts, the Ŭnhasu Orchestra performed with visiting Russian artists, and gave a concert in Paris in 2012. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra exemplifies also the problems with regime transition in North Korea. It was so closely tied with the Kim Jong Il regime that the change at the end of 2011 to the Kim Jong Un (Kim Chŏng'un, 김정은) regime did not proceed altogether smoothly. In August 2013 it was disbanded rather abruptly, causing an international uproar, and signalling the beginning of a wave of other purges leading up to the highest leadership levels. The article attempts to shed light on the nature of the Orchestra as a North Korean cultural phenomenon and the reasons for its sudden ending, trying to dispel some of the disinformation surrounding the event.

Introduction

At the time of writing, it is now almost five years since the famous North Korean ensemble Ŭnhasu Orchestra was destroyed in August 2013. This article is an attempt to make a historical interpretation of what the orchestra was, what was its role in the North Korean society, and why was it terminated so abruptly. We also attempt to shed light on the practical aspects of the power transition from Kim Jong Il (Kim Chŏng'il, 김정일) to Kim Jong Un (Kim Chŏng'un, 김정은). As our purpose has been to understand the Ŭnhasu Orchestra in its entirety, our narrative follows the plot that the philosopher of history, Hayden White, has named “tragedy”,¹ following the art theoretician Northrop Frye.² It interprets the background and beginning, the rise to eminence, and the ultimate fall of the Orchestra in the changed political environment.

A society ages, loses its revolutionary zeal, and stabilizes. North Korea has a predominantly urban population with a low fertility rate (2.0),³ which is a demographic factor that greatly increases social stability.⁴ It has a political system specifically geared towards securing continuity,⁵ and an economy that is poor but functioning.⁶ Children are born, and parents, who can afford it, want to give their children a good education. Some of this training occurs in the arts and cultural sector, which creates demand for workplaces for them. This generational mechanism may be one factor behind the short lived but high class North Korean ensemble called Ŭnhasu kwanhyŏn aktan (은하수관현악단), literally meaning “Milky Way Orchestra”, though usually known by the name Ŭnhasu Orchestra. It was reportedly established in 2009.⁷ Its earliest roots go to a group of young female singers called Ŭnhasu, a subsection of the Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble, first mentioned by the KCNA in 8 February 2008.⁸ The earliest recorded performance of Ŭnhasu is even earlier, uploaded to YouTube in 23 December 2007. The uploader was hidden behind the pseudonym “soffkj4y”. He/she was active during 2007–2010, publishing altogether 172 short music pieces of North Korean music. In 23 December 2007 he/she uploaded during that single day 63 different videos, signalling the beginning of an operation of international cultural diplomacy in YouTube. Modern understanding of cultural diplomacy is usually based on Joseph Nye’s complicated concept of soft power, which presupposes large amounts of multi-level interactions between states,⁹ but in the case of North Korea a simpler 1950s understanding of it—as exchanges of artistic, athletic and scientific personnel, as well as their products, for better mutual understanding and alleviation of tensions—suffices. Along with tourism, North Korea’s external image is largely limited to rare visits and publishing on the internet.¹⁰

The educational sector is also important here, because we are here dealing with highly educated professionals. Universities constitute essential nuclei in transnational epistemic communities.¹¹ Their transnational character enables a smooth movement of people across national boundaries in search of intellectual exchanges, necessary for attaining levels of performance of an international standard. In the cultural field the international movement of established artists, ensembles and related people is important, but enabling the movement of students during their formative years means an important investment for the future skill levels of a nation. In a recent interview the Vice Rector of the Kim Wŏngyun Pyongyang University of Music (KWGUM),¹² Rim Haeyŏng proudly announced that his university is at the world level in terms of its musical education, but that it also has extensive connections with ensembles and universities in a large number of countries.¹³ Music is a national prestige project in North Korea, and exchanges are essential for keeping up with international trends.

We can therefore take a look at the biographies of a few members of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra. Various educational details have been disclosed regarding conductors, musicians and singers, because they have studied and performed abroad. Apparently, North Korean art leadership decided in the 2000s to send a fair number of promising youth to study abroad, which a few years later resulted in a pool of internationally trained artists. Ŭnhasu Orchestra was then established around this nucleus. Kim Jong Il's children belong to this same cohort of North Korean youth with international familiarities.¹⁴ Youth trained in domestic high educational institutions form a much larger segment of this cohort, but not necessarily much different in outlook: professionally skilled, with elite consciousness, and apparently loyal to the rule of Kim Jong Il. When the regime changed at the end of 2011, they continued being loyal to the system itself, but did not necessarily look too steeply upwards towards the young new leader. He was like one of them, which may be one of the causes for the subsequent troubles in 2013.

The source material of this research is composed of small pieces of biographical information extracted from various European musical events, news in North Korean media, and videos published in YouTube. Many of these videos were wiped out during 2017, when the international tension around North Korea was at its highest. However, we have deemed it best to refer also to these videos, because we expect that little by little they will reappear in various sites, becoming accessible again.

Illuminative Biographies

One interesting case is Ri Myŏngil. He was the main conductor of the Ūnhasu Orchestra, working with it in every single published concert from the beginning till the end. He was born in 1978, making him a bit over 30 years old during that time. In spite of being Kim Jong Il's most favoured top ensemble in North Korea during its brief existence, the Ūnhasu Orchestra was mainly composed of young artists. Most musicians and singers were in their 20s.

Ri Myŏngil is an artist of whose family background we have information. He is the grandson of Ri Sŭnggi (1905–1996), who studied chemistry at Kyoto Imperial University and in 1939 was a member of the group that invented the synthetic fibre *Vinalon*.¹⁵ After 1950 he became a central figure in setting up the North Korean chemical industry. In the late 1940s North Korea, with assistance from the Soviet Union, was successful in attracting scientists, artists and other professionals from the South, where many faced either neglect or harassment. Charles Armstrong estimates their number as “perhaps hundreds”; no exact figures exist.¹⁶ As the director of the North Korean Atomic Energy Research Institute from 1965 onwards he was influential also in the first phases of the development of the North Korean nuclear programme. During 1962–1990 he was a member of the Supreme People's Assembly.¹⁷ The grandfather was thus undeniably among the elite figures of Pyongyang society.

Rather than industry, the grandson Ri Myŏngil devoted himself to the cultural field. High culture is an attractive field in all societies, but in a totalitarian type of system it may have an additional attraction. As Sheila Fitzpatrick comments on the children of the high Soviet leadership in the Stalin period, they received good academic education but stayed usually out of politics.¹⁸ It was the best possible combination of high social standing with lowered threat of being targeted politically. Lacking any interview or statistical data on the subject in North Korea we have no exact way of knowing, but we suppose that a similar kind of psychology has worked also in North Korea in a number of elite families, especially if they already were in an academic field. Ri Myŏngil studied piano at the KWGUM, graduating at the age of 20, continuing then to study conducting. Later he was sent to Austria to further studies at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna, majoring in conducting. One of the authors was able to watch and listen to his final exam before graduation, which meant conducting the Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien at the Wiener Musikverein in 2006.¹⁹ The famous concert hall is located in the inner city of Vienna, was built in 1870, and is said to have one of the best acoustics in the world. Ri then returned to North

Korea, and when the Ŭnhasu Orchestra was established in 2009 he started to work as its main conductor.

Yun Bŏmju was another conductor of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra. At first, he visited concerts irregularly until at the beginning of 2012 he became a regular conductor. He was born in 1975. He as well studied at the KWGUM, and also he was sent to Austria for further studies. He studied conducting and composing at the same University of Music and Performing Arts, graduating in 2007. His graduation thesis written in German on composition can be found in the library of the university; for some reason Ri's cannot.²⁰ His final exam in conducting took place in 25 June 2007 at the RadioKulturhaus Wien, where he conducted Bedřich Smetana's "My Homeland" with the Hungarian Savaria Symphony Orchestra. Both the location and the orchestra are a shade lower than what Ri Myŏngil received for his exam. Perhaps the university professors considered Ri to be a bit better conductor at that stage. During Kim Jong Il's time Yun Bŏmju was subordinate to Ri in Ŭnhasu Orchestra, but during Kim Jong Un's rule Yun seems to have been evaluated higher. In May 2013 he was awarded the title of People's Artist. After the demise of the ensemble he soon reappeared as one of the conductors of the State Merited Chorus, and in February 2018 he conducted the Samjjiŏn Orchestra in Gangneung [Kangnŏng] and Seoul. His career has proceeded well. Ri has disappeared without a trace and has not been observed in public since July 2013.

Another well-known case is People's Artist Mun Kyong Jin [Mun Gyŏngchin], who acted as the concert master of Ŭnhasu Orchestra. He has left a trail in the internet because he participated in several violin competitions in various countries. Mun Gyŏngchin was born in 1981 as the son of a musician. He received his pre-school education at the Pyongyang Taedongmun Kindergarten, which is specialized in violin and kayagum education for small children. It is located in central Pyongyang, which points to good family connections.²¹ In 2000 at the age of 19 he graduated from the KWGUM. In a public letter to Kim Jong Il he thanked the supreme leader for enabling his university studies.²² References to the leader were a formality, but his foreign studies obviously required the approval of the supreme director of arts, because the DPRK invested much money on him. During 2000–2005 he played violin at the Mansudae Art Troupe, but he is also said to have studied in China for some time.²³ He received the second prize at the twelfth "2.16 Individual Performing Arts Competition" in Pyongyang in 2002. In 2005 he was sent again to study abroad, this time to the Moscow State Conservatory. He studied at the postgraduate level but was not enrolled in a degree programme. While in Moscow, Mun participated in a number of international competitions. His greatest success came immediately

in July 2005, when he received the first prize at the Canetti International Violin Competition held in Miskolc, Hungary. The event was duly noted in DPRK media. To be a winner in an international competition was great national news there, as it confirmed North Korea's official self-understanding of its international rank.²⁴ Nevertheless, in spite of receiving the first prize, Mun actually was not the winner of the concourse. The winner's title was Grand Prix, which went to the Russian violinist Lena Semenova, and even the first prize was divided between Mun and Russian violinist Pavel Milyukov.²⁵ Being one of the two second bests is not the same as winning, but there is no reason to downplay the achievement either. It was a good result in a tough international competition, and certainly proved that Mun had both talent and a good education.

He participated also in other competitions. In December 2005 in Moscow he won the second prize at the Third Paganini Violin Competition. We can see from the records that also in the Fourth Competition in 2006 there was a participant from North Korea, but as he/she did not win a prize, we do not know the name.²⁶ As it is unlikely that Mun would have participated a second time in the same competition, another North Korean violinist probably was at that time in Moscow. In 2006 Mun won the third prize at the Fourth Yampolski violin competition in Moscow, and a prize, though no number given, at the Astana Merey competition in Astana, Kazakhstan. In February 2007 he won the second prize at the Third Moscow International David Oistrakh Violin Competition.²⁷ In June 2007 he participated in the first round of the renowned International Tchaikovsky Competition Moscow, but his name was no more seen in the second round, which means that he dropped out.²⁸ This event notwithstanding, his success in international competitions was consistently fairly good. As his participation in international competitions ended in June 2007, we can assume that he returned to Pyongyang. In 2009 Mun Gyöngchin became 28 years old, had a fair amount of international experience behind him, and already in the first Ŭnhasu Orchestra concert he was placed in the position of the first violin.

During the early years of the current millennium Italy was a favourite destination for North Korean singer students, most of them females. The movement went both ways, as also many Italian singers visited North Korea, such as the soprano Patrizia Greco, who taught in Pyongyang during 2003–2004,²⁹ while shorter visits were made by countertenor Mario Bassani in 2004,³⁰ mezzo-soprano Alessia Sparacio also in 2004,³¹ and the whole Roma Barocca Ensemble likewise in 2004.³² Several North Korean singers studied in Italy; their names appear below in the form they were written in Italian media:

- 2003 Paek Mi Yong
- 2004 Park Mi Yong, both names most likely referring to Paek Miyöng, for two years or twice, later performing in the Ŭnhasu Orchestra
- 2004 Sok Ji Min
- 2004 Kim Ki Yong, a middle-aged male singer, later in the State Merited Chorus; his son became a singer in Ŭnhasu Orchestra, and the father also visited once.
- 2004 Ri Hyang Suk, later in the Ŭnhasu Orchestra
- 2006 Ri Myong Gum
- 2006 Hwang Un Mi, later in the Ŭnhasu Orchestra

Of these singers we have most information about Hwang Ŭnmi, the leading mezzo-soprano of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra. Her information comes from the hand-out in Paris in March 2012, even though she did not perform there; no singers went with the orchestra to Paris. She was born in 1984. At the age of 22 she was sent to Italy to study in Rome in Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, one of the oldest institutions for musical education in the world. In May 2006 she participated in the 13th Giuseppe di Stefano International Vocal Concours held in Trapani in Sicily, winning the first prize there in the section for contraltos. This achievement was duly noted in North Korean media.³³ It was an important prize, because it included an invitation to perform during the same autumn in Mozart's opera "Cosi fan tutte" at the Opera of Trapani. The same invitation went also to other winners. Although it was only a student performance, it was a real opera production directed by Michał Znaniecki. Hwang Ŭnmi sang the part of Dorabella, and she was one of the few whose performance was especially praised by the art critic Gigi Scalici in his evaluation of the production.³⁴ To our best knowledge, she is the only North Korean opera singer who has participated in a complete opera production in Western Europe. She graduated in 2008, apparently returned to Pyongyang, and in 2009, at the age of 25, started to work at the Ŭnhasu Orchestra. International experience, in addition to talent, clearly had an effect, as she was from the start till the end one of the most shining stars of the ensemble.

The biography of Ri Sol Ju (Ri Sölchu, 리설주), the spouse of the current supreme leader, provides a glimpse on the system of elite children's musical education in Pyongyang. There has been a tremendous amount of gossip around her since 2012.³⁵ Source criticism is difficult, because sources that can be considered reliable are few. The original source of all family information on Ri Sol Ju is a short Japanese report from September 2012. It does not cite any sources, but nor has the information ever been disputed convincingly. She is said to have been born in Ch'öngjin in the eastern coast, but the family

is supposed to have moved to Pyongyang soon after. Her family consisted of a university professor father and a medical doctor mother.³⁶

The most accurate information is presented in the South Korean journal *Minjok21*, whose reporters personally met Ri in 2007. *Minjok21* gives her birth year as 1988. In 1992 or 1993 she entered a facility specialized in musical education called the Kyōngsang Kindergarten in the Central district in Pyongyang. In 1994, she proceeded to the Ch'angjōn Primary School, which lies in the same area in Central Pyongyang. In 1999 she moved to Kūmsōng Number 2 Middle School, which at that time was affiliated with the KWGUM, and is nowadays part of the university. Ri Sol Ju visited in afternoons the Pyongyang School Children's Palace and the Mangyōngdae School Children's Palace, which likewise offer musical education.³⁷

Ri Sol Ju travelled often abroad. In 2002 at the age of 14 she visited Fukuoka in Japan as a member of the North Korean team participating in a UNESCO children's art festival. In 2003 she participated in Kosōng County in Kangwōn province in an inter-Korean tree planting ceremony organized by the Red Cross, and in the following year she participated in Mount Kūmgang in an inter-Korean teacher's conference as a student companion. In 2005 she moved to the Kūmsōng Institute. It was a high school divided into a musical instrument education programme and a singing program, and is likewise now a section of the KWGUM. Ri continued her specialization in singing, like about 150 other girls. This number attests to the popularity of singing as a favourite education for the daughters of Pyongyang elite families. There are also other similar institutions specialized in musical education for them. North Korea produces lots of young singing ladies, many of whom used to go to work in North Korean restaurants abroad. In September she participated in inter-Korean cultural events during the 2005 Asian Athletics Championship in Incheon in South Korea. She performed on stage with her classmates Ri Kyōng and Kim Suhyang, both of whom later became singers in the Ŭnhasu Orchestra.³⁸

In March 2008 Ri Sol Ju and several of her classmates were sent to study at universities in Beijing. Ri studied at the China Conservatory of Music (中国音乐学院),³⁹ which specializes in traditional Chinese music. She is supposed to have returned to Pyongyang in late 2008 or early 2009. Besides music, she studied also Chinese in Beijing. *Minjok21* suggests that she travelled at this time in Europe, at least in Germany, perhaps also in some other countries.⁴⁰ During her formative years Ri Sol Ju thus was able to receive an excellent cultural and artistic education in prestigious Pyongyang institutions, and get first hand international experience of Japan, South Korea and China.⁴¹ She clearly belongs to the privileged core of the North Korean society.

Minjok21 published a group photo of Ri with some of her classmates, taken in 11 May 2007. From this photo we know that not only Ri, but also many of her classmates made a career in singing: Yu Pyönnim (Wangjaesan Art Troupe/Ŭnhasu Orchestra), Kim Suhyang (Ŭnhasu Orchestra), Kang Yönhüi (Ŭnhasu Orchestra), and Ri Kyöng (Moranbong/Ŭnhasu Orchestra). Moranbong here does not mean the Moranbong Band established in 2012, but a small lady chorus, which started as a project with the Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble. After the Ŭnhasu Orchestra was established in 2009, Moranbong started to perform with it. Ri Sol Ju was placed usually within the Moranbong group, but she sang also solos. Her first appearance at the stage took place as a member of a roughly 270-member choir in the May Day concert in 2010.⁴² In 11 September 2010, at the age of 22, Ri debuted at the front stage,⁴³ and in 4 February 2011 she made her last published singing performance.⁴⁴ Her public career as a soloist lasted only six months. 2009 is often mentioned in international media as the year of marriage, but *Minjok21* tells that at that time she was only chosen as Kim Jong Un's future spouse. South Korean lip readers claim that Kim Jong Il recommended her to his son.⁴⁵ The actual wedding is supposed to have taken place after Ri Sol Ju's singing career ended. The songs she performed in her farewell concert, "I Cannot Tell Yet" and "Elegant Person", in a lightly flirting style with the saxophone players, suit much better an unmarried girl than a wife, which makes us support *Minjok21's* interpretation. After marriage, family life and occasional state level public appearances have characterized her career.

These short biographies may not be those of average Ŭnhasu Orchestra artists. Only people who by luck, skill or connections were able to do something remarkable abroad had their personal information published there. On the other hand, many Ri Sol Ju's classmates, of whom we know only their names, went through the same educational institutions, visited foreign countries, and joined prestigious orchestras. As a cohort they had similar experiences. With a high probability they all belonged to the highest core class with a good *songbun* [söngbun].⁴⁶ Connection between social class and loyalty to the regime can be seen in the fact that although many of these people spent long periods abroad, they probably did this with state funding, and never defected. Defections among top level North Korean musical artists are unheard of. The state took good care of its musicians, and they in turn have displayed constant loyalty to it.

Because education in music was widely offered, and because the trained artists were children of important families, a push effect from the families and from the educational institutions for expanding opportunities for these children apparently existed. From the point of view of employment policies, the Ŭnhasu Orchestra was a new work place. Supreme decisions were of course also needed.

It has been pointed out that after Kim Jong Il's stroke in 2008, there emerged in 2009 a plethora of new projects, from dams and factories to musical ensembles, the Samjiyŏn Band and the Ŭnhasu Orchestra being some of the prime results.⁴⁷ The necessity of launching new undertakings became tangible, if the leader wanted to observe the results during his remaining years among the mortals.

Orchestra of the Century

The Ŭnhasu Orchestra was established on 30 May 2009. From the start its concept was international and inclusive in terms of cooperation with other musical entities. Its first concert in 8 September 2009 is a good example. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra did not have a choir of its own. In most concerts there was a choir, but it was loaned from other ensembles, or was composed of KWGUM students. In the first concert on 8 September the choir was loaned from the State Merited Chorus of the Korean People's Army. Its members wore civilian suits. This is the only time they have been observed performing in civilian costume, attesting to the high culture image of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra. Large choirs were typical of the Kim Jong Il era aesthetic style; the sound of a great amount of voices singing in perfect unison, symbolizing mass unity, was an essential element in musical performances.

This was not all; other supporting ensembles in the inaugural concert were the Orchestra of the 21st Century of Russia, as well as the State Academic Unaccompanied Chorus Named after Yurlov, also from Russia. These ensembles had been brought to Pyongyang by their conductor Pavel Ovsyannikov, the retired director of the Presidential Orchestra of the Russian Federation in the Kremlin. His cooperation with North Korea dates from Kim Jong Il's visit to Moscow in 2001. Kim had been so impressed by the performance of the Presidential Orchestra that he invited the conductor to visit Pyongyang already in 2002.⁴⁸ These visits were repeated during the following years, with Ovsyannikov training Korean ensembles. He was by no means the only Russian who had a strong influence on North Korean musical tastes. The celebrated folk singer Lyudmila Zykina is said to have been close both to Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung (Kim Ilsŏng, 김일성). She is reported as having visited North Korea six times.⁴⁹ Another visiting Russian celebrity was Alla Pugachova, who performed in Pyongyang in 1989. Andrei Lankov has a comment on the concert, with information obtained from a local artist:

Tickets were sold by speculators for \$100! Can you imagine what \$100 was in Pyongyang in the late eighties? This was crazy money, it could sustain a whole family for several months. We were all waiting for a miracle and saw

something mind blowing. Well, the music, the melodies. And the sound—the volume seemed unusual and created a very special atmosphere, which we were not accustomed to. And the demeanour on stage—gestures, free movements. All this was unusual and bright, something one would like to emulate. The next day, everyone in the city began to sing the songs performed in the concert. Especially “Million scarlet roses”. All Pyongyang was talking about Pugachova only—and on musicians this concert made an especially huge impression.⁵⁰

This is of course two decades before the establishment of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra, but it shows that North Korean society was enthusiastic about foreign cultural influences. The concert video itself is highly interesting, because Pugachova’s immediate effect could clearly be discerned in the audience.⁵¹ There always existed an uneasy balance between domestic and foreign art forms. Control of the society with the help of the *juche* [chuch’e] ideology presupposed strong emphasis on domestic art, even though that category is in all societies artificial. In practice North Korea imported a large number of cultural elements from abroad. Necessity for this is emphasized in both *On the Art of Music* and *On the Art of the Cinema* credited to Kim Jong Il:

Establishing the Juche orientation in music does not mean ignoring and rejecting foreign things indiscriminately. For the rapid development of music in our country, we should adopt good things from foreign music.⁵²

The quotation does not contain a clear prescription of what to do with foreign inspirations, but the door was left, if not totally open, at least ajar for importing foreign elements of art where needed. Ŭnhasu Orchestra was probably the most internationally trained and internationally minded orchestra that North Korea thus far has seen. When it made its debut in 8 September 2009, the musicians and singers apparently had been trained for a week by Ovsyannikov and his entourage, who had arrived at Pyongyang already in 1 September.⁵³ The cultural influences went politely both ways, because the Russians learned North Korean songs.⁵⁴ In the joint concert most songs performed were North Korean and Soviet Union compositions, but there were also a number of Italian, French and British classical music pieces. All in all, the first Ŭnhasu Orchestra concert was resolutely an international phenomenon, showing how North Korean artists performed with high skill together with their Russian guests.

In purely North Korean concerts domestic songs dominated. However, even though the audience typically consisted of Kim Jong Il, other high leadership, and party cadres, the atmosphere was not especially solemn or uptight. Members of the orchestra appeared happy and full of confidence. Perhaps a song that might adequately catch the atmosphere of this early period was “20th

century recollections” performed by Hwang Ŭnmi as a solo in the October 2009 concert.⁵⁵ The lyrics were written by Yun Dugŭn, and the melody was composed by An Chŏnggho in 2002.

20th century recollections

The new century brings up memories.
 What was our pride of the 20th century?
 At the glittering grounds of sunrise in Mangyŏngdae
 we greeted the sunrise of Jong Il Peak.
 Ah, living under the care of the Leader
 was the honor and pride of the 20th century.

In the days of the new century, we should not forget
 what were the victories of the 20th century.
 Defending the flower of the Leader, socialism,
 together with the General.
 Ah, with the guns of Songun we achieved
 the victories and glories of the 20th century.

The General’s century will brightly come.

The lyrics describe well the ideological and psychological situation. The title is a reference to Kim Il Sung’s memoirs *With the Century*.⁵⁶ Most of the songs performed by the Ŭnhasu Orchestra, and all the other ensembles as well, were eulogies for the leaders. It was not always necessary to use their names; they could as well be identified by their titles. Leader (*suryŏng*) always referred to Kim Il Sung, while General (*changgun*) referred to Kim Jong Il, except in very old songs. As Rüdiger Frank has commented, one of the images of Kim Jong Il was the moon, which reflected the light of his father. The father was the sun, the originator, who established the state and gave it a direction to pursue. The son built up his legitimacy on being the prophet for his father, who knew best how to carry on the national project.⁵⁷ We can see that structure in the lyrics, as the father is always mentioned before the son. Mangyŏngdae was the birthplace of Kim Il Sung, while Jong Il Peak in the Paektu Mountain was named in honor of Kim Jong Il, who was supposed to have been born in a log cabin below it. As the birth date was 16 February 1942 according to North Korean biography, the song appears to have been made for his 60-year celebrations. As his father had lived up to the age of 82, in 2002 Kim Jong Il probably expected to guide the country some two or three decades more. Thus the new century was called “General’s Century”. The young members of the Orchestra had lived their adult life during it. They were the ones whose task it was to achieve “victories and glories” in the General’s century, and by all appearances, they were willing and ready to do

exactly that. They were a privileged group of North Korean elite youth, and it appears that they answered for the support and trust placed on them by happy loyalty.

The appreciation appears to have been mutual. Kim Jong Il was satisfied with his creation. The Korean Central News Agency reported in 27 and 28 July 2011 that Kim Jong Il awarded practically all of the nearly one hundred personnel of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra a large number of honorary recognitions, medals and presents, so that probably no one was overlooked. The century metaphor was employed also here as the explanation for the avalanche of honors. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra was said to embody the creation of “music of the new century”.⁵⁸ The Milky Way Orchestra was thus the cultural manifestation of the Kim Jong Il Century, and as the century was still young, the future of its artists seemed bright.

On the basis of the research material, Kim Jong Il appears as the chief patron of the orchestra. It is probable that there existed also more intricate patron-client relationships between individual higher-level administrators and musicians, as described by Sheila Fitzpatrick in her *Everyday Stalinism* in the case of Soviet Union.⁵⁹ These relationships tend to be mutually advantageous. A person in a powerful position gathers people with a cultural aura around himself, because they give lustre to his standing, while in a situation of economic scarcity the artists can utilize help from above for smoothing out everyday life and enabling advances in their careers. Much of the larger society also seems to be based on patron-client relationships. Jang Jin-sung [Chang Chinsŏng] in his account of his life in North Korea refers to them.⁶⁰ When reasons for Jang Song Taek’s [Chang Sŏngt’aek’s] execution were announced to the public in 2013, he was accused of having built a personal “kingdom” of such relations.⁶¹ Labor relations in enterprises are essentially based on the same system of personal loyalties.⁶² Unfortunately, we do not have any specific knowledge of the private networks of Ŭnhasu Orchestra. We can only make a general comment of the prevalence of such relationships.

Characteristics of the Orchestra

The Orchestra was composed of rather heterogeneous elements. One aspect was gender balance, where it was a trail blazer. A special event that may have had influence on this took place in 26 February 2008, when the New York Philharmonic Orchestra gave a concert in Pyongyang. The conductor, Lorin Maazel, tells this kind of story of the visit:

At 11 AM it was my turn. I was invited to conduct the National Orchestra of Korea. I walked on stage and found before me some 80 black suited men all bedecked with ties. The only women—two harpists—set back against the wall.⁶³

The American guests were themselves a perfect example of a world-famous orchestra with a fairly equal gender balance. We do not know what followed in Pyongyang after the visit of the 280 Americans, but at least we could observe future Ŭnhasu Orchestra members in the audience, such as the violinists Mun Gyōngchin and Chōng Sōnyōng.⁶⁴ The gender balance of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra did not become exactly equal, being in the case of musicians about 20 percent female, while females always formed the majority of singers.⁶⁵ However, also the Viennese musical scene, with which both conductors were familiar, was only moving towards increasing female participation in orchestras. Ŭnhasu Orchestra clearly belonged to the global trend of correcting gender imbalances in concert music.

Another heterogeneous element was its instrumental composition, which allowed it to perform various types of musical styles. Its nucleus was formed by the classical elements of a philharmonic orchestra, which created the basic sound world. The Orchestra also regularly used traditional Korean instruments. The *changsaenap*—an oboe-type instrument—and the percussion instrument *kkwaenggwari* were used from the beginning. Later *kayagūm* and *sohaegūm* were introduced and became important elements of the Orchestra. The *changgo* drum, the *okryugūm*—a modern North Korean string instrument—as well as various Korean lutes and flutes were also occasionally seen. This element reflects the nationalist *chuch'e* aspect of North Korean music. In 1961 there was started a programme to improve traditional Korean instruments.⁶⁶ The state musical politics needed western instruments, because they emitted deeper and wider sound, suitable for rousing propagandistic songs, but the *chuch'e* ideology demanded nationalism. The solution was to improve traditional instruments so that their sound timbres were retained but tuned differently in order to fit with western type orchestras. For instance, the traditional *saenap* is tuned in the pentatonic scale (only the tones of the black keys of the piano), but the *changsaenap* is tuned in the diatonic scale (all the tones of the white and black keys of the piano). In the case of *changsaenap* the improvement process was fulfilled around 1970.⁶⁷ This combination allowed North Korean orchestras to employ fully the powerful sound of western instruments, while adding symbolic Korean sound as a spice. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra was a perfect example of this kind of ideological nationalist/internationalist amalgamation.

There were also more surprising instruments. The classical timpani were accompanied by a modern drum set used by pop orchestras. There was also an

electric guitar, an electric bass, a synthesizer, as well as a six-member saxophone section. Occasionally also a harmonica was used. In spite of electric guitar solos, the Ŭnhasu Orchestra never actually played rock music, but big band jazz was a staple element in its concerts. The instrumental composition of the band thus meant that it was able to play a large variety of different musical styles, from classical North Korean and Western music pieces and traditional Korean songs to popular tunes with catchy melodies, and finally jazz. Invariably all concerts during the happiest period contained one to three jazz numbers. This heterogeneity of instruments fit well with its style.

The Ŭnhasu Orchestra was intended to play popular music. Although the musicians had received education also in classical music, they did not perform one-hour long symphonies in three parts. Even the State Symphony Orchestra seldom performs that kind of music. The Orchestra played music that was entertaining and easy to listen to, even though its highly trained singers sang their arias professionally, and much of the outlook of the ensemble was that of a classical orchestra. The key difference was the length of the numbers performed. Systematically, they were all from two to four minutes long. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra was meant to entertain, but with a certain high-class ambience. It combined prestigious concert music elements with a popular style of performing. The repertoire was usually composed so that different styles followed each other in rapid succession, only one to two songs performed in one specific style, the mood then changing to something else. This made the concerts always lively and surprising. One can note also a curious rule: unlike in European style concerts, where the audience is given an important role in applauding, whistling and shouting in terms of approval or sometimes disapproval of the orchestra, this interactive element was missing when Kim Jong Il was present. The rule was waived, though, when Russians or other foreigners were on stage. There could be applause when Kim Jong Il was not present, even in the case of a totally North Korean audience, though the orchestra took no notice of that, and moved rapidly to the next song. When Kim Jong Il was present, only at the very end of the concert did the Orchestra “notice” the audience, bowing and applauding back to them. This rule of rapid proceeding was apparently meant for keeping the interest of an impatient popular music connoisseur high, while discarding unnecessary elements that lengthened the performances.

At the time of the birth of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra the worst years of hunger were already a decade past. However slowly, the North Korean economy was moving towards a functioning stage, though now through private initiative, no more relying completely on the state distribution system.⁶⁸ Kim Il Sung era songs depicting abundant agricultural produce, such as “Birds fly in in a year

of abundant harvest” (1960) and “Let’s be proud in front of the whole world of the full harvest of an abundant year” (1977) returned to the repertoires of ensembles. Such songs had disappeared from publicity during the 1990s, as they too clearly would have pointed out the failure of the state to provide for the sustenance of its citizens.⁶⁹ Now these old songs could be performed again, which signalled the return of sufficient amounts of food for a large segment of the North Korean society. However, new songs on the theme of abundant harvests were not made until 2014, when the Ŭnhasu Orchestra no longer existed.⁷⁰

The Ŭnhasu Orchestra was created as a conspicuously civilian looking group, symbolizing the return of relative prosperity and trust towards better times during the General’s century. Of course, it was very much a high-class Pyongyang phenomenon. There is no information of prefectural tours, or of factory visits to entertain the laborers. Concerts took place in Pyongyang in front of Kim Jong Il and other high leadership, though of course in the audience there could be various kinds of people, including representatives of administrative sectors from the prefectures. The only recorded visit to a “work place” occurred in May 2010, but that location was the KWGUM at the Taedonggang District in Pyongyang. Most ensemble members had studied there, and from there it continued to recruit new talent. The only known concert that did not take place in Pyongyang was given in Paris in March 2012.

High Noon

One of the tasks of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra was to perform during important national holidays, and something interesting happened in the April 2010 Day of the Sun celebrations. We have video evidence of two concerts with the same repertoire given at that time, namely a private recording of a Korean Central TV broadcast of the 15 April concert, as well as a DVD version of the 17 April concert. 15 April is the official birthday of Kim Il Sung. It is the most important national holiday in North Korea. The concerts took place in the Ryukyŏng Jŏng Chuyŏng Gymnasium, which is the biggest sports and concert hall in Pyongyang, built by the South Korean Hyundai Corporation during the Sunshine policy years, and used for important concerts directed at mass audiences. It is not known exactly how many spectators can occupy it at one time, but a rough estimate is 15000. The location attests to the important position where the Ŭnhasu Orchestra had risen less than a year after its inauguration.

The interesting difference between these concerts may appear as an insignificant detail, but it is indicative of cultural tensions within the North Korean

society. In the 15 April concert the female soloists were wearing Western evening dresses, as they had always done, displaying a fair amount of charming feminine skin and jewellery. In the 17 April concert they all were wearing *chosŏnot*, the traditional Korean female costume. It covers most of the body, effectively hiding the physical shape, covering everything excepting the face, neck and hands. From this date onwards, the Western evening dress was totally banned, and no female Ŭnhasu Orchestra soloist ever wore one in published concerts. Also, jewellery disappeared from the necks and ears, though facial make-up remained. There was no corresponding change in the male soloist attire: they continued to wear tuxedo as before. All orchestra members, males and females, wore military dress for the first time in the history of the orchestra. These different styles and changes imply that there was a deep cultural balancing process going on about the way the Ŭnhasu Orchestra symbolized North Korean national identity.

As studies of gender and nationalism have shown, the female body and the degree of its public visibility are highly controlled aspects of national culture in all societies, Korea being no exception. Kim Taeyon's observations on South Korean treatment of the outlook of females attests to the importance of this issue even in a highly modernized affluent society.⁷¹ North Korea is much more conservative.⁷² The military dress is an honorary attire, and the musicians' change of costume in the Kim Il Sung memorial day attests to that. Females have traditionally been seen as representatives of the home, which makes them anchors of national self-identity and symbols of resistance against infiltrations of foreign, especially Western, culture. Apparently, the revealing Western evening dresses of the female soloists stood out as ideologically unacceptable, in such an important national day, when the Orchestra now had emerged from smaller concert halls to perform in front of mass audiences. Nevertheless, the change in attire did not mean any noticeable difference in the musical style. The vocalists sang jazz tunes in perfectly the same way in evening dresses and in *chosŏnot*. Jazz with profuse saxophone and electric guitar solos apparently fit without hitches with Kim Il Sung birthday celebrations, as long as the conspicuous female attire was correct. This kind of cultural negotiation processes tend to be rather complex.

This episode leads us to contemplating on what kind of art the Ŭnhasu Orchestra was developing. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière's conception of the forms of art regimes, especially the ethical and poetic ones, may be helpful here in pinpointing the quality. In an ethical regime all arts, in the plural, are seen as serving the educational ethos of the state, teaching the citizens its teleological goals, and their proper roles in the grand national

scheme. Elements that are not ethical in this nationalistic sense, such as beauty for beauty's sake, are not necessary and can be banished. This is what happened with the Western evening dresses, even though also the *chosŏnot* is undeniably beautiful. The art regime of socialist realism is of this type, but so were religious paintings in Medieval Europe, or music in the service of war propaganda in any modern state. The purpose of ethical arts is to serve the collective. A poetic art regime is different: art, as a singular, is seen as an essential element in fulfilling human life. Art is an autonomous form of existence separate from the state.⁷³ The concept of fine art, referring to objects of art enjoyed solely because they are “art”, explicates the poetic regime, but the regime is not limited to elite circles. It exists equally in all kinds of art as a specific form of doing, where we have artistic creation and innovation. Artistic creation is hard to define in an exact manner, but it is the quality of doing whereby a new and inspiring element is added to the product. This is actually a rather bourgeois way of understanding art. Its goal is positive subjective experience, not collective education. To be able to thrive, a poetic regime needs moderately high levels of relative wealth, peace and security, but where such conditions appear, they suggest that changes are taking place in the society. The heterogeneity of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra brought with it cultural tensions, which is an indication that we deal with an unstable balance between different art regimes. The North Korean state is without doubt basically a regime relying on ethical art, and it has been that since its beginning, but the Ŭnhasu Orchestra displayed also definite poetic characteristics, such as the highly trained opera and jazz elements, and well-arranged numbers. In this sense, with hindsight, the late Kim Jong Il regime can actually be considered in the field of arts relatively liberal—no quotation marks needed—compared with the first five years of the current Kim Jong Un regime.

This can be exemplified with a composition that can be considered the signature song of the ensemble. This song is “3000 Li of Vinalon”, a new composition in 2010, again by An Chŏngho, with lyrics by Yun Dugŭn. The cooperation of this duo produced many North Korean musical masterpieces. Vinalon is the chemical fibre that the chief conductor Ri Myŏngil's grandfather Ri Sŭnggi brought with him from Kyoto Imperial University. In North Korea it was claimed as a domestic invention, and eventually it became the most important synthetic fibre produced in the country and used in various kinds of clothing and other industrial products. Kim Jong Il wore clothes made of Vinalon whenever he appeared in public in cold weather. He is wearing it also in his bronze statue in Mansudae. Vinalon can be regarded as one of the ultimate industrial metonymies of the *chuch'e* idea: a domestically invented fibre from domestic raw materials, domestically produced, used in clothing only in North Korea,

and everyone wearing it. 2010 was another rally year for its use, with a new factory established, and apparently the song was created for supporting that campaign. 3000 li is a metaphor for whole Korea, as the peninsula is roughly 1200 km or 3000 Korean li long; both North and South Korea use the metaphor in their respective national anthems. The name “3000 Li of Vinalon” implies that all Koreans should wear clothing made of the fibre. Thus, in addition to being an industrial rally song, it was simultaneously also a song ideologizing Korean unification from the North Korean perspective. All this industrial and political content of the song might not suggest a specific artistic pearl, but it is actually an exquisitely beautiful composition. An Chŏngho clearly created art in the poetic sense here, and the Ŭnhasu Orchestra carried this aspect to full bloom.

The song was performed as an ordinary vocal version with full lyrics only twice, first when it was inaugurated in the May Day Concert in 2010, and again in the May Day concert in 2012, but in that formula it was not exceptional. For the concert series celebrating the 62nd anniversary of the founding of the DPRK in 2010 it was given a totally new arrangement. Two new female musicians were introduced, Cho Okchu with *kayagŭm* and Nam Unha playing *sohaegŭm*, both in brightly coloured *chosŏnot*. In Kim Jong Il’s *On the Art of Music* there is an instruction: “We must [...] develop the form of kayagum solo and ensemble.”⁷⁴ The Ŭnhasu Orchestra was fulfilling that instruction to the letter. The *kayagŭm* and *sohaegŭm* emit sounds that appear traditional, though they are typical improved versions of traditional instruments. For instance, the modern *sohaegŭm* has four strings, and it is played with a violin bow.⁷⁵

The song was performed with Cho and Nam as soloists, with the support of the whole orchestra, the choir participating only at the very end, singing the two last lines, which signified that the General was working to spread Vinalon throughout the whole Korea. The rest of the lyrics were dropped out. This meant that most of the performance was pure music, and the soloists with the backing of the orchestra meticulously spread out all the fine aspects of the melody. The balance became perhaps 90 percent poetic art and 10 percent ethical art—though the numerals of course are only metonyms, as art cannot be measured mathematically. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra performed the song several times afterwards with slight variations. It entered the repertoire of Kim Jong Il memorial concerts during spring 2012, and it was likewise one of the highlights of Ŭnhasu Orchestra’s concert in Paris in 14 March 2012.⁷⁶ The French audience probably thought that it heard something traditionally Korean, though actually it was in many senses ultra-modern North Korean music, an amalgamation of *chuch’e* with the West. Also the South Korean art critic Bae Ihngyo considers the arrangement very good.⁷⁷ The last time it was heard was in the 15 April 2013

concert, while its length had over the three years grown from two minutes in 2010 to five minutes in 2013. This attests to the growing importance of the melody in the Ŭnhasu Orchestra repertoire.

Exit of the Patron

Kim Jong Il unexpectedly had his final heart attack in 17 December 2011. The death of the main benefactor was of course a serious blow to Ŭnhasu Orchestra. Their concert was thus not given on New Year's Eve, as is usual, but in 1 January. Ŭnhasu Orchestra concerts had usually been gatherings of high state and party officials and other Pyongyang cream, but also that was changed, and ordinary looking people of all ages filled the rows of the large East Pyongyang Grand Theatre. No video of the whole concert has been published, only a 5-minute news reel,⁷⁸ but seven more concerts were given in the same location during 5–11 January, and one of these has been published.⁷⁹ Public emotional handling of the death of the leader was necessary, and the Ŭnhasu Orchestra was the central ensemble to deal with the situation.

An equally important task was legitimating the leadership change, and the Orchestra fulfilled its role also on this score. Most of the songs performed were compositions made during Kim Jong Il's reign. The background screen showed pictures of the father with young Kim Jong Il. After this Paek Sungnan narrated with her virtuoso style memorial words for the deceased, the video displaying scenes of the funeral procession. At the end Kim Jong Il was metaphorically resurrected and was shown on the screen perfectly alive with his son Kim Jong Un, while Paek Sungnan declared that from now on he will lead the country. The scene ended with the Ŭnhasu Orchestra performing two lines of the first song made especially for Kim Jong Un when he had been established as the crown prince in 2009, namely "Footsteps" by the composer and poet Ri Chongo:

The steps resonate loudly
Leading us to a glittering future

The video displayed old and tired Kim Jong Il sitting on a chair in the background, while the young and energetic Kim Jong Un was shown in the front, already in the commanding position where leaders invariably were depicted. The same message of leadership change was pouring out from all outlets; the Ŭnhasu Orchestra did its part with musical and visual means.

Other memorial concerts followed. A week-long series of concerts were held in February around the time of Kim Jong Il's birthday in the Ryukyŏng Jŏng Chuyŏng Gymnasium. It can be estimated that well over one hundred

thousand people heard Ŭnhasu Orchestra live at this period, and much more via television. However, the memorial mood in North Korea subsided fast after February. The old leader was dead, and the nation moved on. Traditional festive day concerts by the Orchestra, such as the International Women's Day in 8 March, the 80th Anniversary of the Korean People's Army in 25 April, May Day, and the 66th anniversary of the Korean Children's Union in 6 June all had their own themes. Songs related with Kim Jong Il were performed, but they were in no central role. Yet, the Ŭnhasu Orchestra had not forgotten its creator. In 19 June, ostensibly celebrating the 48th Anniversary of Kim Jong Il starting to work at the Worker's Party of Korea, the Ŭnhasu Orchestra gave a memorial concert of its own for the deceased leader. It was dedicated solely to him. This took place in the small Ŭnhasu Theatre given to the Orchestra by Kim Jong Il in 2011; actually, the venue is the renovated former concert hall of the KWGUM, from where the university had moved to a new location. The KCNA never mentioned anything about the concert, and the audience appeared to be people in ordinary clothing, with no important state or party officials attending. The event simply appeared to be Ŭnhasu Orchestra's own semi-private memorial concert for the memory of its protector.⁸⁰

Kim Jong Un occasionally visited Ŭnhasu Orchestra concerts, though his wife Ri Sol Ju has been observed only once. That took place in 30 August 2012, in a concert for youth organizations. The legitimacy building process chosen by the leadership demanded that Kim Jong Un should physically appear among various kinds of social groups, such as the military, workers, female organizations, children, etc., and concerts were an excellent venue for this. He became a performing star on his own right, cameras following the processions of his entrances and exits, as well as his moods during the performances. This was totally different from his father, who was never displayed during concerts. Like all other ensembles, also the Ŭnhasu Orchestra started to perform new songs made for Kim Jong Un, such as "Our Leader Loved by the People". It was the favourite ending number in concerts during summer and autumn 2012. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra performed it as enthusiastically as any other ensemble. Another one was "Let's Advance Towards the Final Victory." It seems to have been written between 15 April 2012, when Kim Jong Un gave a speech using the expression, and 26 June 2012 when the notes and lyrics were published in Rodong Sinmun.⁸¹

The fall of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra started in autumn 2012. It was visible in many ways during the 10 October concert for the 67th Anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea. The choir was missing, as well as a number of musicians. The shooting and editing of the concert video was amateurish,

and the KCNA report of the concert was off-handed. Personnel and technical resources clearly were drawn out of the Orchestra. The concert took place in the People's Theatre, which is a good concert hall, but the point is that a new ensemble was performing at the same time at the big Ryukyŏng Jŏng Chuyŏng Gymnasium, where also Kim Jong Un appeared in the audience. This competing ensemble was the Moranbong Band, which now visibly had become the most favoured group. It was established in March 2012 by Kim Jong Un,⁸² apparently to perform the kind of music that fit better with his musical tastes, which understandably pointed more towards pop than opera. He was 40 years younger than his father. Several Moranbong Band members can actually be seen in the second row in the audience of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra concert in 8 March 2012; perhaps they were sent to observe how an established top ensemble conducts itself on stage.⁸³ At that time the Ŭnhasu Orchestra still was at the height of its career, soon leaving to an important cultural diplomacy mission to Paris, where it performed in 14 March together with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France under the direction of the South Korean conductor Chung Myung-Whun. In Paris itself the concert was a success, leading to profuse applause, and the orchestra returned home as heroes, but its practical diplomatic results were close to zero. It had been initiated and planned during Kim Jong Il's reign, but by spring 2012 North Korea was manifestly moving ahead with its missile and nuclear programmes, and concert diplomacy was not followed by corresponding international good-will gestures by the new leadership.⁸⁴

A Joint Concert with the Moranbong Band

Studies on North Korea are continuously building up a jigsaw puzzle. The metaphor is not new, but nevertheless fitting. Such puzzles would be difficult even if there was enough empirical information on what is taking place within the regime, but the difficulty is heightened because North Korea invariably provides a researcher only a few of the pieces. We do not know what exactly happened during the last year of the existence of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra, but we think that we are at least able to say something about the relationship between the Orchestra and the new leader. This endeavour can possibly also shed some new light on the early years of the Kim Jong Un reign.

There is no doubt that Kim Jong Un appreciated the skills of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra. We also know that he had been attending several concerts with his father, at least from the 6 October 2010 concert onwards, because his name began to appear at the list of venerable guests as the vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea.⁸⁵ He can have

been in the audience also earlier, but because his formal rank was too low, he was not mentioned. On 10 May 2013 it was announced that Yun Bŏmju, the other regular conductor, would be awarded the title of People's Artist by the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly.⁸⁶ The force behind this sudden decision seems not to be the Presidium, but Kim Jong Un himself, who attended the Ŭnhasu Orchestra's May Day concert. He is said to have praised the performance of a certain song as "admirable," and that after his endorsement the song had become very popular among the people.⁸⁷ That is reason enough to award an honorary title.

The North Korean news media is actually confused on whether he attended or not. In the first report of the concert the KCNA does not mention him. The audience was said to have consisted of representatives of industrial establishments, labor innovators and administrators of the economic sector.⁸⁸ In the concert video there is no trace of Kim Jong Un, and it is unthinkable that he would have been edited out: he was the highest star performer of any concert. Thus, it appears that there had been two concerts: the first one more private for Kim Jong Un and his entourage, then another public one for the labor sector people.

Also, what can be seen on the concert video points towards this kind of interpretation. The song in question was "Peace Is on Our Bayonets." It was composed in 1993 by Ri Chongo, with lyrics by Chŏng Ŭnok. The conductor Yun Bŏmju had presented a new, dramatic arrangement of the song, with Hwang Ŭnmi in vocals, performing with her beautifully passionate style. After the song was finished, there was not only profuse applause from the audience, but also shouts, which was exceptional. Then, without any apparent reason, the Orchestra performed the song again.⁸⁹ This leads one to suspect that Kim Jong Un had requested the song to be performed twice during the private concert, and that the audience had been informed about the honor. It was an excellent performance. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra performed it in the same way in all of its final concerts, and after it had been disbanded, Yun Bŏmju became a conductor of the State Merited Chorus, and with it performed the song once again in the 10 October 2013 joint concert with the Moranbong Band.⁹⁰

If we look carefully at the repertoire and the use of the video screen of Ŭnhasu Orchestra concerts since winter 2012–2013, we can notice that unlike the Moranbong Band, it did not position itself as a Kim Jong Un supporting orchestra, but rather as an orchestra supporting Kim Jong Il's memory. A case in point is the December 2012 concerts celebrating the successful launch of the Ŭnha-9 rocket taking the Kwangmyŏngsŏng 3-2 satellite to circle the earth. The Moranbong Band gave its concert in honor of the scientists and technicians on

21 December, making it a narrative of the successful leadership of Kim Jong Un. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra gave its concert to the same people in the following day but made it into a narrative of North Korean industrial prowess under the guidance of the party and Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Un appeared occasionally on the screen but he was in a side role. The final screen displayed photos of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.⁹¹

The new songs created in North Korea during 2012–2013 basically fell into two categories: songs for the sacred memory of Kim Jong Il, and songs celebrating the new happy rule of Kim Jong Un. The Moranbong Band performed both types of songs, but the Ŭnhasu Orchestra leaned clearly towards the Kim Jong Il memorial songs. This does not imply any opposition to Kim Jong Un. Perhaps we can rather describe the approach of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra as academic: if the theme was a rocket, then it sang about industry. If the theme was Kim Jong Il, then whole attention was poured on the late leader. If a concert took place in the International Women's Day, the songs were about women, mothers and family. If on a Korean War anniversary, the spectators were served a musical narrative of the events, but nothing about Kim Jong Un, because he had not been born at that time. Kim Jong Un simply was placed on the periphery of the mental horizon. Ŭnhasu Orchestra's approach to its work was artistically and academically absolutely sound, but perhaps not politically.

One hard and dramatic fact is that in 8 May 2013 the KCNA, as well as practically all North Korean newspapers, announced that in 27 July, on the 60th Anniversary of the Ending of the Korean War, there would be a joint concert by the Ŭnhasu Orchestra and the Moranbong Band.⁹² This was declared by the leader himself when he visited the rehearsals of the former. This combination would of course have made a lot of sense. It was an important anniversary, worth putting together his father's top ensemble and his own favourite one to celebrate it. The idea was not only to have a good concert domestically, but to impress the rest of the world. Kim Jong Un reportedly said:

[...] it is necessary to make good preparations for it and once again demonstrate before the whole world their reputation as art troupes loved by the people [...]⁹³

He himself seems to have placed much importance and his own energy on the joint concert, because he personally went to give minute instructions to the orchestra. As the KCNA reports:

After watching them, he gave important instructions for the preparations of celebration performance ranging from its orientation to its ideological stand, numbers and arrangement.

The ideological stand is of course important, but an even more interesting piece of information is that Kim Jong Un himself dictated songs for the repertoire and lectured for established music professionals on how the songs should be performed.

Another important fact is that this concert never took place. On 27 July there indeed were simultaneous jubilee concerts by the Ŭnhasu Orchestra and the Moranbong Band, but in separate locations. The Ŭnhasu Orchestra concert took place in the large Ryukyŏng Jŏng Chuyŏng Gymnasium, which obviously had been reserved for the joint concert. The Moranbong Band concert took place in the small Mokran House, which is the banquet hall of the Worker's Party of Korea. Kim Jong Un attended only this small concert. In other words, he had made a plan for a grandiose national event, and somehow this plan was destroyed.

We can speculate that there might have been some resistance on the part of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra to very close hands-on guidance by Kim Jong Un, which he reportedly did with the Moranbong Band.⁹⁴ Kim Jong Il had been a seasoned chaperone of the art production of North Korea since the 1960s, had established several opera and light music ensembles, had in his name a pile of articles and books on the subject—whomever had written them—and reportedly even played violin himself. Especially in his late years he apparently also saw it best to leave much of the actual creation of art to the artists themselves, as exemplified by the high content of poetic art in the music of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra. Compared with him, the son was an amateur without musical education, and his meddling might not have been unquestioningly received by manifestly professional artists, conscious of their skills, belonging to the same generational cohort, and proud of their recent international success in Paris. Music has a tendency to strengthen social bonding leading to communities with a strong group mentality.⁹⁵ At the same time, resources were clearly drawn out of the Orchestra, indicated by disappearing personnel and technical expertise. Ŭnhasu Orchestra's retreat to a mental horizon, where legitimating Kim Jong Un's rule played only a minor role during the last nine months of its existence, could be an expression of this. In Key Shelemay's concepts, the Orchestra transformed from a descent community to a moderate dissent community because the environment around it changed.⁹⁶ As a result some sort of frustration, distrust, or suspicion towards the Orchestra might have developed during summer 2013.

More intricate patron-client relations between individual Orchestra members and Kim Jong Il period powerful figures, still largely in their positions at that time, probably also played a role. A further fact is that the Ŭnhasu Orchestra purge in August opened the scene to an autumn of living dangerously

for the whole North Korean political elite, culminating in December in the purge and execution of Chang Sōngt'aek together with an unknown number of his “group”, “faction”, “base”, “followers” or “elements”, as they were called in the official announcement of the event.⁹⁷

What Happened?

In 29 August 2013 an international news storm was started by the South Korean newspaper *Chosun Ilbo*. Based on a rumour transmitted via an anonymous informant in China, it reported that in 17 August the 1990s hit singer Hyōn Songwōl and Ŭnhasu Orchestra's violinist Mun Gyōngchin, who was titled as the “head” of the ensemble, had been arrested, and that a dozen artists had been executed by machine guns in 20 August. The article also hinted at a sexual relationship between Hyōn Songwōl and Kim Jong Un, and that the reason for the execution of the artists was pornographic video tapes produced by them and sold in North Korea and China. There was also a mention of the alleged possession of Bibles. It was further said that members of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra, Wangjaesan Light Music Band and Moranbong Band, as well as the families of the victims had been forced to witness the executions, and that the families had afterwards been dragged to prison camps.⁹⁸ The report is clearly based on a rumour, where lots of speculation and unrelated facts were mixed up. The muddle went around the world in news media, where more gruesome details were added, and the number of executed people grew to “dozens.” As an example, a typically sleazy article was published by the British *The Telegraph*, which is not even supposed to be a sensationalist newspaper.⁹⁹

We have also other narratives. The North Korean deputy ambassador to London, T'aek Yong Ho [T'aek Yōngho], who defected to South Korea in 2016, gave in spring 2017 a series of interviews for the Arirang News. In one of them he told that the Ŭnhasu Orchestra member families had been given apartments in a high-rise building in front of a major metro station, which implies central Pyongyang. In August 2013 they were all evicted from their homes and their property was confiscated, with furniture and TV sets thrown out of the windows by soldiers.¹⁰⁰ T'aek obviously was not an eye witness to the event, and thus this also appears to be a Pyongyang rumour. As a seasoned diplomat T'aek clearly told things that he supposed his South Korean and American audiences would like to hear. His story has a suspicious detail about a rush hour in the metro near 12 a clock midnight, while the Arirang News video utterly confuses Ŭnhasu Orchestra with the Moranbong Band and State Merited Chorus. Everything in this video clearly is not believable. Nevertheless, we might well believe that Kim

Jong Il had indeed given a building for the families of the Orchestra, and that they were indeed evicted from there as one operation while the Orchestra was disbanded.

Something drastic certainly happened. There were no more Ŭnhasu Orchestra concerts, and it became impossible to buy its CDs and DVDs. They disappeared from all music shops in North Korea, as well as from the music shelves of North Korean export-import companies in China. If you asked in these shops for items by any other North Korean ensemble, the shop attendants would duly search for the products, but enquiries of Ŭnhasu Orchestra music were invariably met by a blank “no.” Everything had been removed from the shops.

What about the executions? No North Korean news media has ever mentioned anything related with the event. We have, however, an informant, who for understandable reasons chooses to remain anonymous, but who has given three names of artists that actually were executed. They are the concert master Mun Gyŏngchin (also mentioned in the Chosun Ilbo report), a female star violinist Chŏng Sŏnyŏng, and a star bass singer Kim Gyŏngho, son of the State Merited Chorus bass Kim Giyŏng. This is again a Pyongyang rumour, but it is a simple cool statement, without any gruesome details. Many other Ŭnhasu Orchestra members have been subsequently sighted in other North Korean ensembles, but these three people have never been seen, even though they were undeniably skilled artists. Also, Kim Giyŏng disappeared from the State Merited Chorus for three years, but he returned in 2016 in good condition as an honored solo vocalist. If there was any “dragging of family members to prison camps”, that rumor either was not true, or it was a short affair.

The implication of the Moranbong Band administrative leader Hyŏn Songwŏl in the whole affairs appears to be completely baseless. She has been observed in 2014, 2015, and 2018 in North Korean, Chinese, and South Korean media in perfectly normal condition. Her implication is probably based on a mistake of names. The original rumour was transmitted by phone from North Korea to China, via how many people we do not know, and over the chain the relatively unknown violinist’s name Chŏng Sŏnyŏng can easily have been mixed with the well-known name of Hyŏn Songwŏl.

There has been no evidence of anything pornographic related with the Orchestra. If anything of the sort had been distributed commercially, the sensation hungry media certainly would have dug it out during the past five years. Also, the cueing towards Bibles is unbelievable; the Orchestra members were representatives of the regime. However, there may well have been something related with religion, as we have to understand the regime as

religiously grounded, where anything blasphemous towards the highest leader would be a grave offence.¹⁰¹ It would be “lewd”, without a sexual implication. The Japanese journalist Ishimaru Jiro made an investigation of the event during autumn 2013. His argument that the case most likely involved smuggled South Korean and Japanese documentaries and blasphemous videos of Kim Jong Un appears plausible.¹⁰²

The history of the Ŭnhasu Orchestra is interesting in its own right. It sheds light on the third-generation life of the North Korean elite, with many progeny gravitating towards the cultural field. It attests to the international and artistic aspirations of the late Kim Jong Il regime. It also tells that the unexpectedly rapid transition of power to the son was much more difficult than presented in North Korean media. One part of the state machinery quickly started to eulogize him, but another part carried on like before, or engaged in passive resistance, as the Ŭnhasu Orchestra did after its resources became diverted elsewhere since autumn 2012. The most indicative case is the aborted 27 July 2013 concert, which was a blow on Kim Jong Un’s prestige. It is the first and only known case of a cancelled event concerning him which had been clearly announced beforehand in North Korean media. Since then, everything has been announced only after the event. The building up of Kim Jong Un’s power base and making it functional at all levels of society took several years. Crushing the Ŭnhasu Orchestra, in an apparently emotional manner, was one of the stepping stones along this process.

Notes

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Videography

Ūnhasu Orchestra Videos

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