

# 交匯點：一位美國作曲家與東亞樂器的相遇

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## 翻譯者序

2016年10月中旬我應邀赴首爾演出，在國立國樂院參觀時遇到一位表情嚴肅、頂著一頭銀髮的美國學者，經介紹後才知道他是著名的美國作曲家 WOMACK 教授。聊天中得知他是我在美國西北大學未曾謀面的學弟，話匣子一開，WOMACK 雙眼變得炯炯有神，並不時露出燦爛的笑容。後來從我們共同的好友，首爾大學知名的伽倻琴演奏家李知玲教授處聽到了更多 WOMACK 的作品錄音，我發現他和亞洲傳統樂器之間彷彿是一種有機的絕配，毫無某些現代音樂作品「為賦新辭強說愁」的牽強感。去年3月在北市國「東亞箏峰」音樂會裡，臺灣愛樂者首度聽到由李知玲演出 WOMACK 的伽倻琴協奏曲《散調節奏》第二樂章。這次很高興能在臺北市立國樂團（下稱北市國）的國樂創作論壇裡邀請到 WOMACK 現身說法，分享他多年來為東亞各國傳統樂器創作的心路歷程。



2016年於樊慰慈與 WOMACK 教授於首爾的國立國樂院初次見面時合影

## 正文

源自我在北市國主辦「TCO 2023 國樂創作國際學術研討會」裡的一場專題演講。當活動企劃者之一，中國文化大學樊慰慈教授向我提議之初，我壓根都想不到為何會被邀請在一個為國樂創作的研討會裡當主講人？畢竟一個很少用國樂器創作的美國白人絕非首選吧？

但是想一想仍有其道理，旁觀者的視角往往讓我們更能看清自己。根據我自身的經驗，住在日韓和到歐洲各地旅遊讓我更加瞭解美國文化；學說一些即使頗為有限的日本及韓國話，讓我更理解英文的邏輯和我之前未能體會的侷限性。為東亞樂器創作也有助於我進一步理解西洋樂器，促使我嘗試一些過去未曾想到的手法。以新的思考模式面對熟悉事物，將有助於人們進行有益的自省。

我就是以此觀點向論壇觀眾發言，與其說在介紹我自己的作品，毋寧希望能促使他人審視自身的歷程並發掘其中或許被忽略的事物。

值此，我要分享一些我為韓國和日本樂器創作的音樂與相關經驗，但我為何會為亞洲樂器作曲？先說些背景應有助於大家的理解。

我住在夏威夷，現任夏威夷大學的理論作曲教授及韓國研究中心與日本研究中心的教師。只要是到過夏威夷的人都知道，其地理位置介於亞洲和美洲之間，文化上和生活上也是亞洲和西方參半。約三十年前當我剛搬到檀香山時，感覺置身於一個很不一樣的文化中，但我隨後自然而然地吸收當地的文化元素，這些元素也開始滲入我的作品裡。



2022年3月27日「東亞箏峰」音樂會韓國伽倻琴演奏家李知玲與 TCO 共同演出 WOMACK 的伽倻琴協奏曲《散調節奏》第二樂章

2003年我與已故日本作曲家三木稔成為朋友，後者請我為他在東京成立的合奏團創作新曲。這首作品混合了中、日樂器，包括尺八、日本箏和琵琶，我當時還覺得這種編制有點奇怪，起初並提不起興趣。但最後還是決定寫了，而且居然讓我愛上了這樣的組合。

這些樂器讓我接觸到一些在西洋樂器上無法輕易取得的效果，其特性迫使我採取不同的作曲方式，這真是一種解放！在接下來的幾年中，我又為日本樂器寫了許多作品，也有少數是為國樂器寫的。2007至2008年間我待在日本一年，以駐團作曲家的身份為 AURA-J 樂團創作日本器樂曲。迄今我已寫了大約 20 首日本器樂曲，以及 6 首國樂曲。

2008年又是另一次重要的接觸，韓國國樂界巨擘及國立首爾大學的伽倻琴教授李知玲走訪夏威夷大學，為我們介紹韓國樂器。我為她譜寫的第一首作品後來為我開啓了在韓國和其他地方更多的機會，為此應好好地感謝她。

迄今我已為韓國樂器創作將近 40 首作品，其中大多數在韓國並成為慣用曲目。我有幸能和許多頂尖的韓國國樂團及演奏家共事，過去十餘年來我每年都得數度赴韓參與重要的演出，在那裡並有持續不斷的創作邀約。

如同過去在日本的經歷，2021至2022年間我也在首爾待了一年，擔任國立首爾大學國樂系的客座教授，並和許多一流的國樂家共事。我訝異地發現，迄今已有大約 25 篇美、韓各大學的研究生畢業論文以我為韓國樂器譜寫的作品為題。以下我將分享一些我的音樂和經驗，尤其是檢視對韓國樂器的嘗試，因為此即我近年創作的核心。

請讀者們留意，我在文中的特定曲例上雖然提的是韓國或日本樂器，但通常均可廣義地應用在東亞的傳統樂器上。我固然理解韓國、日本和中國的樂器之間存在顯著差異，在技術層面上需要不同的作曲手法。然當我說到較廣義、概念式的見解，而非特定的技術議題時，那些方法可以通泛地運用在所有的樂器上。

首先要介紹的作品是我的伽倻琴四重奏《迷宮》(미로)<sup>1</sup>，此曲由首爾伽倻琴合奏團委託創作。伽倻琴就是韓國版的古箏，傳統伽倻琴是 12 絃的散調伽倻琴，但此曲是為 4 台現代的 25 絃伽倻琴而作。

附帶一提，我將散調伽倻琴和 25 絃伽倻琴視為完全不同的 2 件樂器，傳統樂器相對於所謂的「改良」或修改的樣式，這尤其在韓國是個很重要的問題。但很可惜這個大問題將超出本文的範圍。我只能在此表達對於以「改良」一詞用來形容修改樂器的強烈不滿，因為它將西方古典音樂傳統所側重的音樂元素放在首要位置，通常為此犧牲掉東亞傳統音樂原有的特色，我卻認為兩者至少應該等量齊觀。

<sup>1</sup> 《迷宮》的影像連結



這首專給伽倻琴的作品絕無可能為西方樂器所寫，無論是豎琴、鋼琴、弦樂四重奏或其他任何樂器，這就是關鍵所在。我創作的任何樂曲，無論是給韓國、日本、中國或西方樂器，就應以最有機而自然的方式對應到那些樂器的特性。

一件特定樂器的屬性以及它最善於表現之處，都將影響我如何為它寫作，期使音樂能盡量與該樂器的優點完美結合。換句話說，我絕對無法先寫曲子，之後再決定配器。對我而言，那是無法想像的，因為我的創作是根據樂器而決定。這是我創作思維上的根本要件，關係著作曲的每一個步驟。

但那件樂器是否合乎我創作上最大的特點也很重要，要真正寫好任何特定的樂器曲，作曲者必須能找到個人創作語法和那件樂器本身特性之間的交集。

以個人為例，我格外擅長為韓國樂器譜曲，因為韓國國樂和樂器有很多特色和我的創作興趣能產生共鳴，不但讓我得以一展所長，並擴大了我的作曲聲量。韓國樂器為我提供了許多彼此間的交匯點。換言之，我在作曲上想要達到的許多效果，韓國樂器都極富表現力。

我認為這點非常重要，作曲家必須找到樂器自然性能與個人創作特色可以緊密結合的點，只要找到了通常將會水到渠成。反之，作曲者若企圖在樂器上做出一些不自然的伎倆，或為了適應那些樂器，以不自然的方式強加改變自己的創作語法，成功機率往往並不高。

以下我將分享一些尋找那些交匯點的個人經驗，介紹我音樂裡的某些特色，及其如何與韓國樂器相呼應。

- 一、我的音樂通常具有高度發展的節奏性織體，以多層次的節奏堆疊交織於不同樂器聲部。韓國樂器也很擅於在節奏性上發揮，因為韓國國樂在傳統上就使用了許多複雜的節奏，其本身就比中國音樂及日本邦樂更具有節奏導向。
- 二、活力充沛是我作品的一大特色，常以逐漸堆起的張力來支撐樂曲結構；韓國民俗樂也富含類似的音樂動力，以持續驅策的漸強和增厚架起結構，且在樂器性能上亦習於演奏這種風格，因此兩者在特性上可謂一拍即合。
- 三、我的作品和韓國樂器都很注重樂器配置及音色層次上的表現，採用許多滑音、裝飾音、按音、微分音等等。韓國樂器在這方面很對我的胃口，某種程度來說，也包括日本與中國的樂器。這些正是東亞傳統樂器在先天上所擅長做的事。

毫無疑問，以音色裝飾和按滑音生成的演奏技法乃是韓國樂器最重要的元素。若說西方樂器是建構在音高上，韓國樂器則以音色為主。我也會進一步想，西方音樂通常把音色元素來為音高調味，韓國音樂則以音色為主，音高為輔。因此韓國樂器在這方面與我的創創意圖十分契合。

我的音樂風格固然不限於上述三點，但在此要強調這些是因為它們乃是我與韓國樂器交匯之所在，每當我在創作時都會善加利用這些特點。我若能在自己的創作風格與樂器自然的性能上找到連結，其中必將產生真正的音樂融合。我認為這是很有趣的，也是我接觸東亞樂器所持的心態。

親耳聽到要比文字敘述更直接，以下是我為不同的韓國獨奏樂器和韓國國樂團所寫的 2 首大型協奏曲。第一首是為奚琴與韓國國樂團的《與精靈共舞》(혼무) 中的三段音樂。奚琴是韓國的胡琴，兩者的外觀雖然相似，但實質上卻大不相同。胡琴在樂器製作上曾歷經不少改革，如今可以演奏快速犀利的炫技作；奚琴則始終保有其原始風貌。這件事可說是利弊參半，樂器改革通常也帶來妥協，有得有失。我再次強調，人們必須瞭解一件樂器的改革會給該特定音樂傳統帶來哪些特權與剝奪。

2 巫師儀式的影像連結



《與精靈共舞》是受釜山國立國樂院委託，特別指定要根據韓國傳統巫師儀式동해안별신굿創作。協奏曲的奚琴主奏即扮演著巫師的角色。這種巫師儀式本身十分漫長，最後恍如一場狂野的集會。我的音樂則充滿動能，有時幾近狂亂，試圖模擬巫師的角色和儀式的狂喜情境。這是巫師儀式的片段<sup>2</sup>，影片大約 6:30-8:00 之處可聽到音樂範例。

《與精靈共舞》由 8 個短的樂章組成，全長約 23 分鐘，在此僅介紹五、六、七樂章。

第五樂章〈鑼鼓〉採用常在儀式中出現的打擊樂群，展現巫師儀式裡狂野的景象。

第六樂章〈巫師之歌〉以奚琴模擬巫師的吟詠，音樂則由靜到動。

第七樂章〈與精靈共舞〉是全曲的高潮，巫師翩然起舞，由慢漸快直至瘋狂，此時才能與異世界的祖先通靈。

以上三個樂章的音檔在此<sup>3</sup>，由孔順泰（音譯）指揮釜山國立國樂院樂團演出，奚琴獨奏者是趙尹瓊（音譯）。我在此曲中試圖延展奚琴的技巧，前面提到奚琴尚未像二胡那樣在樂器上進行改革，因此我在音樂裡寫的那些疾速奔馳的樂句或許對二胡而言並非難事，在奚琴上卻是非常炫技的。

韓國樂器的演奏能耐在近 15 至 20 年間已有長足的進步，在韓國有一大票優秀的年輕演奏者渴望尋找能拓展其演奏技巧的新作品。像國立首爾大學的國樂系、國立韓國藝術大學和其他學校孕育出許多傑出的演奏家和作曲家，他們正改變過去在韓國樂器上被認為不可能的事。

值得一提的是，韓國傳統音樂家們非常樂於接納外國作曲家，他們明白歷史上每個文化都會經過外來文化的洗禮而進步，因此能以正向看待此事，認為這樣才能讓傳統繼續生存與活絡。

第一號伽倻琴協奏曲《散調節奏》是我為大型韓國國樂團所寫的另一個範例，此曲約 25 分鐘，共有 2 個樂章，分別展現我在韓國樂器上慣用的手法，而這些也都是我典型的作曲風格，包括複雜的節奏性、廣泛運用粗造和尖銳的聲響，以及注重按滑音與各種特殊演奏法。此外，兩個樂章均呈現逐步開展的樂曲架構，尤其是第二樂章裡，在簡短的快板序奏之後，進入一段漫長堆疊起的狂亂高潮，這種架構很類似傳統韓國國樂裡的散調曲體。

在這個連結<sup>4</sup> 裡可以看到此曲完整的演奏影像（第一樂章〈天外迴盪的鼓聲〉從 0:55 開始，第二樂章〈盤旋上青天〉從 12:00 開始），以及幾個選曲片段的音頻，這些都是由林亨鍾（音譯）指揮韓國國立管弦樂團，伽倻琴獨奏者就是前述引領我認識韓國樂器的李知玲。

除了近年絕大部分的作品是為韓國樂器所寫，我也曾為日本樂器創作過大約 20 首樂曲。以下也分享一些這類的作品，有助於分析比較我在為日本樂器創作時和為韓國樂器的創作在手法上有何不同。

《雷神》是一首為數件日本樂器和大提琴的七重奏，曲長 18 分鐘，可以做為我為日本樂器譜曲的範例。日本傳統神話裡的雷神和中國的雷神類似，他們都與風神搭檔。此曲具有長驅直入的強烈節奏性，也有很多按滑音，這些特色固然和我為韓國樂器的作曲手法相似，但兩者之間也有一些主要因為日、韓樂器之不同而產生的差異，至少從我的觀點看是如此。

首先，日本樂器不同於韓國樂器，在設計上較不會發出大幅度的顫音和粗造的音色。因此在此曲中這類聲響不如我為韓國樂器的作品裡那麼明顯。其次，韓國傳統音樂的節奏通常要比日本的複雜，因此這首作品的節奏並不會太繁複。最後，日本音樂和藝術非常注重空無的意境，日文稱之為「間」，這種靜止的時刻也被廣泛運用在此曲中，譬如中間段落的尺八獨奏樂段。

3 《與精靈共舞》的三個樂章的音樂檔連結



4 《散調節奏》的影像連結



因此在整體上樂曲雖仍展現我的風格，裡面仍有一些我針對不同樂器的特性所做的調整。以下連結是由日本音樂集團演奏《雷神》的錄音<sup>5</sup>，這個集團在國外以 Pro Musica Nipponia 聞名。

希望以上這些曲例能有助讀者們理解我為韓國和日本樂器創作的樂曲，以及我所採用的不同方式。總而言之，關鍵在於找出樂器自然特性和我本身創作性向間的交匯點。

當我 20 年前首度為亞洲樂器創作時，就意識到要能同時呈現個人音樂風格及發揮樂器固有特色的重要性，如此作品才能有好的表現。我瞭解若僅試圖模仿傳統音樂是不會成功，也沒有意義的；但我也明白，若忽略讓那些樂器聽來如此美好的固有特色，也同樣無法奏效。我必須在新與舊之間找到一個平衡點，亦即在我想說的和樂器能說的之間取得平衡。

好在我確實找到能獲得平衡的方法，這個方法其實很簡單，但我相信這就是我之所以能在日本和韓國獲得成功的主因。我的創作哲學可以簡化為以下這句話：我把韓國和日本樂器就當作是韓國和日本樂器來使用。亦即我專注在這些樂器本身的強項和樂器設計上展現的固有特色，這話聽起來似乎是理所當然，但其實經常被作曲家所忽略，而將這些樂器當成西洋樂器來處理，只是音色不同而已。我認為後者實錯失了利用東亞樂器最獨特而有趣之處的機會。

譬如，韓國樂器顯然往往無法像西洋樂器那樣演好西洋音樂，但西洋樂器也無法像韓國樂器一般演好韓國音樂。重點就是，不同的樂器是為了做不同的事，無論我是為哪種樂器創作，我總會注意要發揮那些樂器之所長。有時這樣做並不見得容易，即使作曲家意識到它，仍得花一些功夫將這種想法內化。最後我要分享當初為我點亮明燈的那段經驗。

那是我首次為亞洲樂器創作時即突然領悟到的，亦即前文提到為尺八、日本箏和琵琶的樂曲。在日本箏上有鄰近的兩條絃調為 A 和 B<sup>b</sup>，而我在某個樂句裡寫了一個 B<sup>b</sup> 音，一位比我更熟悉日本樂器的朋友建議，可以彈 A 絃並按高到 B<sup>b</sup>，而非直接彈空絃 B<sup>b</sup>。其實明明有 B<sup>b</sup> 的定絃，直接彈它就好，何必多此一舉？但這個建議卻為我點亮了那盞明燈，我發現用按滑 A 絃取音雖然得到同樣的 B<sup>b</sup> 音高，卻能產生不同的效果。嚴格來講，在彈奏過程中將在 B<sup>b</sup> 的音高之前或之後產生一點游移，造成某種重音的效果。這甚至可能會造成一些微分音般美妙的走音，而且完全不用大費周章。相較於空絃的 B<sup>b</sup>，按音產生的 B<sup>b</sup> 讓此音活了起來！



WOMACK 教授於 2019 年受中國文化大學中國音樂學系之邀到系上進行專題演講

5 《雷神》錄音檔案連結



WOMACK 教授指揮首爾大學國樂團演出《散調節奏》

我從那次經驗中領悟到，樂器上除了音高之外還有很多我前面提到的元素，而這些元素才是賦予樂器活力的要件。此後我在為那些樂器譜曲時都考量到這點，這甚至重塑了我整個創作思維，即使當我為西洋樂器譜曲時，也開始設法做出類似的效果。

或許這樣想是最清楚的：若作曲者為日本箏（或伽倻琴或古箏）寫了空絃音 B<sup>b</sup>，這麼做只為了需要一個 B<sup>b</sup> 音，此時音高就是焦點。但譜上若記的是用按高 A 絃得到的 B<sup>b</sup>，即使定絃上已有空絃 B<sup>b</sup> 而沒有絕對必要那麼做，則焦點就不只是音高的本身，而這才是讓我覺得變得有趣之處。

最後，若我能大膽地為作曲家們提供如何面對各種樂器的建議，就是正視那些樂器的原文化，譬如韓國樂器就是韓國樂器，日本的就是日本的，中國的就是中國的。強調其所善於表現的地方，而不要凸顯那些並非它們在設計上能做的事。使用它們的目的並非為了模仿或試圖「追上」西洋樂器，而是要強調及放大其音樂傳統的固有美感。找出那些樂器和你作曲風格之間的交集，從而展現個人獨到的見地。

這個議題當然還有很多可以發揮之處，我曾在韓國國立國樂院有關韓國樂器的一本專書中為文，有的論點較為實用，有的則偏向理論，均可做這方面的進一步參考。我的文章雖然是針對韓國樂器，大多數的意見都可以引申到不同樂器上。

這篇專文可以在國家國樂院的官網上免費下載 PDF 檔<sup>6</sup>（連結在網頁裡的「附件」（Appendix）下）。此文迄今只有英文及韓文版本，但我認為如果有足夠的華人作曲家對此感到興趣，國立國樂院也會考慮將該書翻譯成中文。

誠如我在開頭所述，希望本文的觀點能鼓勵讀者審視自己走過的路，發覺一些過去可能被忽略的事物。我堅信本世紀音樂會作品的關鍵主題將是不同音樂文化裡的樂器演奏和美學思想的整合。國樂器在世界音樂發展中扮演吃重的角色，我期待在未來數十年裡聽到作曲家們探索出各種創意十足的路徑。

6 專文的連結



# Points Of Intersection: American Composer Meets East-Asian Instruments

4/23/23

**Text** / Prof. Donald R. WOMACK, University of Hawaii

**Images** / Prof. Donald R. WOMACK, Prof. FAN Wei-Tsu, Taipei Chinese Orchestra, Chinese Culture University Department of Chinese Music

## Preface by the translator of the Chinese version

— FAN Wei-Tsu, Chinese Culture University

I first met Dr. WOMACK when performing in Seoul in October 2016. During a visit to the National Gugak Center, I was introduced to an austere looking, silver haired American composer. In the ensuing conversation, I was happy to learn we were alumni of the Northwestern University. Though our times there didn't overlap mostly, we both have some fond memories of the Evanston campus. As our conversations became more and more engaged, Dr. WOMACK's eyes turned piercingly bright, while sprinkled with radiant smiles. Later on I was able to know more of his compositions through our mutual friend YI Jiyoung, a renowned Gayageum performer and a Professor at the Seoul National University. I felt it quite fascinating that Dr. WOMACK's works have an organic vibe between his music idiom and various Asian instruments, without the strenuousness found in certain contemporary music of the genre. Many TCO fans first heard Dr. WOMACK's music, i.e. the second movement of the Gayageum concerto *Scattered Rhythm*, performed by YI Jiyoung in a gala concert last year. We are glad to have him in person this time as one of the keynote speakers for the 2023 TCO Academic Symposium for Chinese Orchestra, sharing his profound experience in writing new music for traditional Asian instruments from different countries.



Conducting 무노리 (Mu Nori) with the Gyeonggi Sinawi Orchestra November 2018

## Text

This article is adapted from a keynote speech I gave at the 2023 International Symposium on New Music for Chinese Instruments, hosted by the Taipei Chinese Orchestra. When I was first approached by Professor FAN Wei-Tsu of Chinese Culture University, one of the event's organizers, my initial thought was "why on earth is he asking me to give a keynote speech at a conference on composing for Chinese instruments?" After all, when you think about someone to fill that role, a white American who has not composed much for Chinese instruments is not the first person who comes to mind!!

But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Oftentimes, an outsider's perspective helps us understand ourselves better. Speaking from my own experience, living in Japan and Korea and traveling throughout Europe has helped me better understand American culture. Learning to speak Japanese and Korean, at least to the limited extent that I'm able, has helped me better understand how the English language works and to recognize limitations of which I had previously been unaware. And composing for East Asian instruments has helped me better understand western instruments, prompting me to explore approaches I had not thought of. When we encounter new ways of thinking about things that we're already familiar with, we're encouraged to do a healthy self-analysis.

So it was from that perspective that I addressed the symposium attendees, not just to introduce my music, but to do so in the hopes that it might somehow encourage others to examine their own paths and discover things that they otherwise might not.



Introducing pipa to school kids with YANG Jing Honolulu March 2019

Toward that end, I would like to share some of my music and experiences that have led me to this point, in particular my work with Korean and Japanese instruments. To begin, a little background will be useful. How does someone like me end up composing for Asian instruments?

I live in Honolulu, where I serve as Professor of Composition and Theory at the University of Hawaii, as well as a faculty member of both the Center for Korean Studies and Center for Japanese Studies. As anyone who has spent time there can attest, Hawaii is not only halfway between Asia and America geographically, it's also halfway between Asia and the West culturally. Living in Honolulu is as much like living in East Asia as it is like living in mid-America. Everyday life is a mixture of Asian and American cultures. So when I moved to Honolulu nearly 30 years ago, I moved to what was, for me at the time, a very different culture. And, as it naturally tends to happen, gradually over time I absorbed elements of that culture, and elements of it began to seep into my work.

Then, in 2003 I met the late-Japanese composer 三木稔 (MIKI Minoru), who became a friend, and he asked me to compose a piece for his ensemble based in Tokyo. The piece was for (what I considered at the time) a strange mix of Japanese and Chinese instruments – shakuhachi, koto, and pipa. At first I wasn't interested – why would I write for these weird instruments?!! But I decided to do it anyway. And I'm very glad I did, because, as it turned out, I loved it!

I encountered in the instruments things that are not easily available when I write for western instruments. The nature of the instruments themselves forced me to take a different compositional approach, and this was liberating. Over the next several years I wrote many works for Japanese instruments, and a few for Chinese instruments as well. I spent a year in Tokyo in 2007-08 working with Japanese instruments as composer-in-residence for the ensemble AURA-J, and to date I have written about 20 pieces for Japanese instruments and another half dozen for Chinese instruments.

An equally important connection occurred in 2008, when 이지영 (YI Jiyoung, 李知玲), Professor of gayageum at Seoul National University and a highly influential figure in gugak (traditional Korean music), made a visit to the University of Hawaii, and introduced me to Korean instruments. The first piece I ended up writing for her turned out to be a gateway for many opportunities, and I am grateful to Professor YI for opening many doors for me in Korea and beyond.

At this point I have composed close to 40 pieces for Korean instruments, most of which have become standard repertoire in Korea, being performed regularly. I have had the privilege of working with most of the top gugak orchestras and many of the top gugak players. I have been fortunate to receive a steady stream of commissions from Korea, and for the past decade or so I have traveled to Korea several times a year for significant performances.

Like my time in Tokyo, I also had the opportunity to spend a year in Seoul during 2021-22, where I worked with many top gugak musicians and was a visiting professor in the gugak department at Seoul National University. Further – and this honestly seems a little strange to me – my music for Korean instruments has thus far been the subject of somewhere around 25 graduate dissertations and theses at several universities in Korea and in the U.S.



Professor WOMACK was invited to deliver a keynote speech at 2023 TCO Academic Symposium for Chinese Orchestra on April 23rd.

With all of that in mind, I will share some of my music and experiences, in particular examining my approach to Korean instruments since that is where most of my work is being done these days.

The reader should keep in mind that while I may be referring to Korean or Japanese instruments for a particular example, the broader underlying concepts usually apply to East Asian instruments in general. I do, of course, understand that there are significant differences between Korean, Japanese and Chinese instruments, and that technical aspects require different compositional approaches. But when I speak of broader, more conceptual ideas, rather than specific technical issues, the approaches I'm talking about can generally be applied to all instruments.

The first piece I would like to present is my gayageum quartet 미로 (*Labyrinth*)<sup>1</sup>, which was commissioned by the Seoul Gayageum Ensemble. Gayageum is the Korean version of Chinese guzheng or Japanese koto. Note that the traditional Korean gayageum is sanjo gayageum, which has only 12 strings. But this piece is for a quartet of 25-string gayageum, a modern modified instrument.

As an aside, I think of sanjo gayageum and 25-string gayageum as completely different instruments. The question of traditional versions of instruments vs. so-called "improved" or modified versions is an important issue, especially in Korea, but one that, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that I strongly disagree with the English word "improved" when used to describe modified instruments, as it places central importance on musical elements valued in music of the western classical tradition, usually at the expense of elements valued in traditional East Asian music, which I believe should be of at least equal importance.

This piece could never be composed for western instruments – it has to be for gayageum, as it would not work for harps, or piano or string quartet or anything else. And that is precisely the point. Every piece I write, whether for Korean, Japanese, Chinese or western instruments, should fit the characteristics of those instruments in the most organic and natural way possible.

The nature of a particular instrument and the things that instrument does well are going to influence the way that I write, so that the music fits, as ideally as possible, what the instrument does best. To put it another way, I could never start writing a piece and then decide the instrumentation later – to do so is inconceivable to me, since what I write is going to be determined by the instruments. This is a fundamentally important way of thinking for me, one that informs every compositional decision I make.

Just as important though is that the instrument fits what I do best. To write really well for an instrument – any instrument – a composer has to find points of intersection between the natural capabilities of the instrument and their own personal compositional voice.

In my case, I have done well writing for Korean instruments in particular because there are many characteristics of gugak and gayageum instruments that intersect with my personal compositional interests, that offer the chance to do what I want to do, that amplify my compositional voice. Korean instruments offer me many points of intersection between their sound world and mine. In other words, Korean instruments are very good at doing many of the things that I like to do as a composer.

This, I think, is extremely important. A composer needs to find those points of intersection, those natural aspects of the instruments that closely align with the composer's own voice. A composer who finds those will usually do well. A composer who uses instruments in ways that are natural and idiomatic both for the instruments and the composer is likely to get a good result. On the other hand, for a composer who tries to force the instruments into an unnatural fit, or conversely, forces their own voice in unnatural ways to fit the instruments, things are not likely to go well.

So, I would like to share some my own experience as to how I've gone about finding those points of intersection. To do that I need to discuss some characteristics of my music, and how they fit with – in this case – Korean instruments.

--First of all, my music tends to be very rhythmic, using highly developed rhythmic textures, with multiple layers of rhythm, interlocking between instruments, polyrhythm and so forth. Korean instruments are quite good at this. Gugak is very much rhythmically oriented, much more so than the music of China and Japan, and it traditionally uses a lot of complex rhythm.

--Second, my music is often very energetic and driving in character, with a tendency to use structures based on gradual building of tension. The folk genres of gugak have a similar energetic and driving character, and their structures tend to be long builds based on gradually increasing activity, so the instruments are naturally designed to sustain those things.

--A third point of intersection between my music and Korean instruments is a focus on scoring and nuance in color, using a lot of glissando, pitch decoration, pitch bending, and playing "between the notes" so to speak. This is an area where Korean instruments – and I would say Japanese and Chinese instruments also – are an ideal fit for me. This sort of thing is exactly what East Asian instruments are naturally designed to do.

In fact, I would argue that articulation through things like timbral ornamentation and pitch bending is perhaps the most important element of Korean instruments. In a sense, whereas Western instruments are largely "about" pitch, Korean instruments largely "about" timbre. Or, as I like to think of it, western music generally uses the element of timbre to carry the element of pitch, while Korean music generally uses the element of pitch to carry that of timbre. This aspect of Korean instruments thus fits very naturally with my music.

Obviously there is a lot more to my style than just these three points, but I want to focus on these because they are my main points of intersection with Korean instruments, the things that I typically try to take advantage of when I write. If I can find things that fit both my compositional style and the natural characteristics of the instruments, then there should be a real fusion of musical elements. That is interesting to me, and is the frame of mind with which I approach East Asian instruments.

Since it is vitally important for the reader to actually hear the music, I will present two pieces for larger ensemble, each a concerto for a solo Korean instrument with gugak orchestra. First are three short excerpts from 혼무 (*Dancing With Spirits*), which is for haegeum and gugak orchestra.

Haegeum is the Korean version of erhu, but while they look very similar, it is important to understand that they are actually quite different. Whereas erhu has undergone extensive modification so that it is very versatile and effective at playing fast, virtuosic music, haegeum has retained its original characteristics. This has both advantages and disadvantages – modification of instruments usually comes with a tradeoff, something is gained, but something else is lost. Again, for this issue it is important to understand how instrument modification privileges or disenfranchises a particular musical tradition.

혼무 (*Dancing With Spirits*) was commissioned by the Busan National Gugak Center, which specifically wanted me to write a piece based on 동해안별신굿 (Donghaean Byolshin Gut), a Korean shaman ritual. This being a concerto, the haegeum soloist plays the role of the shaman of course.

<sup>1</sup> Video link to *Labyrinth*



It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the features of Byolshin Gut, other than to say that it is a long ritual, which can tend to feel like a wild party. The music is very energetic, almost chaotic sounding sometimes, so I wanted to emulate that character in my piece – the chaotic excitement of the ritual.

An example of Byolshin Gut can be viewed here.<sup>2</sup> (A good representative sample of the music can be heard from about 6:30-8:00 on the video.)

In its entirety 혼무 (*Dancing With Spirits*) is about 23 minutes in eight short movements, but I will point the reader to three excerpts, from movements five, six and seven.

The fifth movement is called *Drums and Gongs*, which refers to the instrumental group that typically accompanies the ritual. This movement exhibits the wild, almost chaotic feel that can be found in parts of the ritual.

In *Shaman Songs*, the sixth movement, solo haegeum emulates the shaman singing, as the music becomes more and more active.

The seventh movement, called *Dancing With Spirits*, is the climax of the piece. Here the shaman slowly dances herself into a frenzy, where she can connect with ancestral spirits on an otherworldly plane.

Audio examples from movements five, six and seven can be heard here<sup>3</sup>, performed by the Busan National Gugak Center Orchestra, with haegeum soloist CHO Younkyung, conducted by KWON Seongtaek.

In this piece I stretched the capabilities of haegeum. I mentioned before that haegeum has not been modified in the ways that erhu has, so while the kind of actively running passages that I use may not seem particularly difficult for erhu, they are quite virtuosic for haegeum.

Relatedly, the performance capabilities of Korean instruments in general have been greatly expanded in the last 15-20 years, and there is a large group of very good young performers in Korea who are eagerly seeking out new music that expands the capabilities of their instruments. The gugak departments of Seoul National University, Korea National University of the Arts, and others are producing many exceptionally strong young performers and composers who are reshaping the landscape of what was previously thought possible for Korean instruments.

In particular, Korean traditional musicians are very welcoming of foreign composers. They understand that, historically, every culture has advanced through the introduction of influences from foreign cultures, and they see this as a very positive thing, a way to keep their traditions alive, vibrant and evolving.

Another representative example of my writing for large ensemble of Korean instruments is my first gayageum concerto, *Scattered Rhythms*. The piece is about 25 minutes long, in two movements, each of which illustrates my typical approach to Korean instruments. Both movements display many elements typical of my music, including a complex rhythmic nature, extensive use of rough and raspy sounds, and the importance of pitch bending and various articulations. In addition, both movements illustrate the use of slowly unfolding structures, especially in the case of movement two, which, after a brief fast introduction, proceeds to undertake a long, gradual build to a frenzied climax, in a manner similar to the structure of the traditional gugak genre sanjo.

A video of the entire piece (as well as several shorter audio excerpts) can be found here<sup>4</sup>, performed by the National Orchestra of Korea, conducted by LIM Heonjeong, with gayageum soloist YI Jiyoung, whom I previously mentioned as the person who first introduced me to Korean instruments. (The first movement, *The Sound of Drums Echoes Beyond the Heavens*, begins at :55 on the video, and the second movement, *Spiral Toward the Center of the Sky*, begins at 12:00.)

<sup>2</sup> Video link to Korean Shaman rituals



<sup>3</sup> Music files links to the three movements of *Dancing With Spirits*



Recording with Pro Music Nipponia

While most of my recent works has been for Korean instruments, I have also written somewhere around 20 pieces for Japanese instruments. It therefore may be useful to share some of that music, and examine some of the ways in which my approach to Japanese instruments differs from my approach to Korean instruments.

As a representative example of my work for Japanese instruments, I point to 雷神(*Raijin*), an 18-minute work for a septet of Japanese instruments with cello. *Raijin* is the Japanese god of thunder, which I believe is similar to the Chinese god of thunder, Leishen. He is also accompanied by god of wind 風 (Fuujin), similar to the Chinese god of wind, Fengbo.

This piece shares many characteristics with my music for Korean instruments – it is very rhythmic, with a driving character, a lot of bending notes, and so forth. But it also has some differences, which relate primarily to the differences between Japanese and Korean instruments, at least as I perceive them.

First, because Japanese instruments are not designed to use the type of exaggerated vibrato and rough, raspy sounds typical of Korean instruments, those sounds are not prominent in the way they are in my pieces for Korean instruments.

Second, because traditional Korean rhythms are generally much more complex than Japanese rhythms, the rhythm of this piece is a little less complex.

Finally, because moments of empty space – called 間 (Ma) in Japan – are very important in Japanese music and art, such moments are featured prominently in this piece, as can be heard in the shakuhachi solo in the middle of the piece, for example.

So while the overall style is still very much my own, it has some differences that come about because I'm adjusting to the characteristics of the instruments for which I'm writing.

A recording of 雷神 (*Raijin*) can be heard here<sup>5</sup>, performed by the ensemble 二本音楽集団 (Nihon Ongaku Shudan), or Pro Musica Nipponia as the group is better known outside of Japan.

These examples will hopefully give the reader a good sense of my music for Korean and Japanese instruments, and how I approach them. Again, for me it comes down to finding those points of intersection, the places where the natural capabilities of the instruments align with my own compositional interests.

When I first began working with Asian instruments two decades ago, I realized very early on that if I was going to write effectively for them I would need to find a space where I could express my own voice while using the instruments in a way that was natural for them. I understood that it would not work if I tried to simply imitate traditional music – what would be the point? But I also understood that it would not work if I ignored the traditional characteristics of the instruments, the things that make them beautiful in the first place. Instead, I had to find an approach that balanced new with traditional, that balanced what I want to say with what the instruments are capable of saying.

<sup>4</sup> Video link to *Scattered Rhythms*



Fortunately, I did find that balance, an approach that allows me to do that. And I believe that my approach, while actually very simple, is the main reason for my success in Korea and Japan. If I could condense my philosophy into one brief idea it would be this: I approach Korean and Japanese instruments as if they are, in fact, Korean and Japanese instruments.

What I mean by that is I focus on the strengths of the instruments, their natural capabilities, the things they were designed to do. This may seem obvious, but it is often the case that composers neglect to do it, treating the instruments like western instruments that are different only in timbre. I believe doing that misses the point, and fails to take advantage of what is unique and most interesting about East Asian instruments, the things that make them special.

For example, it is a simple fact that Korean instruments, in general, cannot play western music as well as western instruments can. But it is also a fact that western instruments cannot play Korean music as well as Korean instruments can. And that is the point – the instruments are designed to do different things. So, no matter what instruments I am writing for, I try to focus on those things that the instruments do well.

This is not always as easy as it sounds. And even once a composer recognizes it, it still takes time to truly internalize this idea. So I will close by sharing an experience that helped click the light bulb on for me.

I had a sudden realization while working on the very first piece I wrote for Asian instruments – the piece I mentioned earlier for shakuhachi, koto and pipa. I had two adjacent strings on koto tuned to A and Bb, and in one passage where I wrote a Bb, a friend, who was more experienced than me with Japanese instruments, suggested instead of using the open Bb I use the A string and press it to Bb.

There was no need to do this. The Bb string was available and would have been simple to use. But the proverbial light bulb suddenly switched on for me. I realized that if I used the pressed A string it would be a different sound. Yes, I would still get the same Bb pitch, but it would have a different quality. It would have a little different timbre than the A string. It would, critically, have a little bend into and/or out of the pitch, which would come off as a sort of accent. And, beautifully, it would likely be a little out of tune. Microtones! So easy to get. That Bb would come to life by playing it as a pressed note in contrast to open strings around it.

From that moment, I realized that the instruments were not about pitch. They were about those many other things I mentioned, which is what gives them their vitality. I started writing for them with that in mind, and it reshaped my entire way of compositional thinking, to the point that I began searching for ways in which I could do similar things even when I write for western instruments.

Perhaps it is most clear to think of it this way – if a composer writes an open Bb string for koto (or gayageum or guzheng) they do so because they want a Bb. In other words, the pitch is the main focus. But if they write a Bb by pressing the A string – even though they don't have to, even though the Bb string is available – then the focus is something other than pitch. And that, to me, is where it starts to get interesting.

As a final thought, if I could be so bold as to offer advice to composers regarding how they approach instruments: Think of them as Korean or Japanese or Chinese (or whatever) instruments. Emphasize what they do well and de-emphasize what they're not designed to do. Aim to use them in ways that don't simply imitate or try to "keep up with" western instruments, but instead draw on and expand the inherently beautiful musical traditions from which they come. Find those points of intersection between the instruments and your own compositional voice that will allow you to say something unique and personal.

<sup>5</sup> Audio file link to *Raijin*



In residence at Chinese Culture University Taipei December 2019

There is, of course, much more to be said on this topic. As a further reference, I expand on some of these points in an article I wrote for the National Gugak Center's book about Korean instruments, in which I mention several things – some practical, some more philosophical. While I specifically address Korean instruments in the article, most of the ideas can be extrapolated to other instruments as well.

The article can be accessed for free as a PDF on the National Gugak Center website here<sup>6</sup>(under the "Appendix" link). (As of this writing it exists only in English and Korean. I expect, however, that if there were significant enough interest among Chinese composers, the Gugak Center would consider making a Chinese translation of the book as well.)

As I mentioned at the outset, I hope that the thoughts expressed in this article will somehow encourage others to examine their own paths and discover things that they otherwise might not. It is my belief that the defining feature of concert music over the course of the current century will be the integration of instruments and aesthetics from different musical cultures. Chinese instruments have a huge role to play in the development of intercultural music, and I look forward to hearing the various innovative paths composers explore in the coming decades.

<sup>6</sup> Link to the feature article

