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Performed by Sojung Lee Hong, piano
Recording/Mixing//Mastering: Gene Nemirovsky
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FROM EAST TO WEST

Twenty-four piano solos
based on Korean folk songs

Composed by

Jean Ahn

Hyuk Cha

Seung Ki Hong

Misook Kim

Eun Young Lee

Insik Lee

Teddy Niedermaier

Dongil Shin

Heeyoung Yang

Kyle Werner

Sojung Lee Hong, Piano

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from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.



Artist's Statement

by Sojung Lee Hong

Professor of Music, Judson University, Elgin, IL, U.S.A.
D.M.A. at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.
B.M. and M.M. at Seoul National University, South Korea

It was not until I was a graduate student in the U.S. that I first performed a Korean folksong-based composition. I received quite an enthusiastic response to a piece called Korean Rhapsody. Later, when I began my musical career, I became involved with the Sejong Cultural Society, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization that promotes the cultural heritage of Korea. While serving on the Planning Committee of the Sejong Music Competition, I encountered many wonderful compositions based on Korean folk songs, which rekindled my interest for this kind of music.

Through a series of concert tours promoting Korean arts sponsored by the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Chicago, I further developed my fluency in interpreting Korean folk songs. By planning Korean-themed performances with Korean traditional dancers and musicians, I became much more familiar with the aesthetics of Korean traditional arts. During these tours across the Midwest, I realized that Korean-themed music could also touch the hearts of people who have never been exposed to Korean culture.

For this recording project, I have selected twenty-four piano solos composed by contemporary composers between 2005 and 2020. These pieces are based on well-known Korean folk songs and have been used as required pieces for the Sejong Music Competition. The folk melodies are made of pentatonic scales and use jangdan, rhythmic patterns that are unique to Korean traditional music. Grounded in the musical structure of classical music, each composition shows a great variety of moods by utilizing different harmonies, tempi, and textures. Because most of these pieces are written for intermediate and early advanced levels of piano study, they are well-suited for piano students who seek to extend their musical horizons into diverse cultures. Ultimately, I hope this music will be shared with all those who enjoy cross-cultural expression in the arts.

This project reflects my identity as a musician who has lived in two distinctly contrasting cultures for similar amounts of time: Korea and the United States. Throughout my musical life, the richness and depth of Western classical music has given me endless delight. Nevertheless, playing simple Korean folk songs that I heard in my childhood continues to provide me with a different source of pleasure. In the twenty-four piano solos, these two musical languages happily bridge the differences between East and West to amplify the beauty of Korean folk songs.

The COVID crisis in 2020 has taught us that people, whether near or far, are tightly connected in a complex web of relationships and communications. It is my hope that the harmonious sounds from these compositions will bring relief to a weary world and reconnect people through the universality of human feelings evoked by the lyrics of the folk songs.

Artist Profile



Sojung Lee Hong, Professor of Music at Judson University (Elgin, IL) has performed as an active soloist and chamber musician at universities and concert halls in the United States, Asia, and South America. As an ardent advocate of community outreach concerts, she organized and performed at a great number of benefit concerts in the Chicago area. These concerts include annual scholarship fundraising concerts for young musicians and the benefit concerts for the Sejong Cultural Society, the Food for Hungry International, and the Global Children Foundation.

For the past several years, she also participated in a series of concerts with the artists from the Chicago Korean Dance Company and the Korean Performing Arts Institute of Chicago. This collaboration between Korean and western arts is fully sponsored by the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Chicago. In 2019, she produced a unique collaborative event entitled “Harmony of Korean Dance and Western Music” supported by the Illinois Arts Council Agency. Her two CD albums, “Whispers from Heaven” (2012) and “Tranquility” (2017) are made for people who seek spiritual peace through classical music.

As a searching artist-teacher, she has presented lecture-recitals at international and regional conferences of the College Music Society and the Music Teachers National Association. Her students have obtained admissions to master's and doctoral music programs as scholarship recipients and have secured teaching positions at institutions in the U.S., Korea, China, and Burma. In 2017, YWCA Elgin honored her with the Margaret Hillis Award, given to an individual who has advanced the life of arts in the northwest suburbs of Chicago.

She received the President's Award at graduation from Seoul National University (B.M. and M.M.) and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in piano performance and literature at the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign. Currently, she resides in the west suburbs of Chicago and has two adult children in New York City.

Explanatory & Interpretative Notes

Contributed by Jean Ahn, Hyuk Cha, Seung Ki Hong, Misook Kim, Eun Young Lee, Insik Lee, Teddy Niedermaier, Dongil Shin, Heeyoung Yang, and Kyle Werner

1. Arirang Fantasia (2005) by Hyuk Cha

Arirang Fantasia is based on two Korean folk songs: Jindo Arirang and Gyeonggi Arirang. Arirang is agreed to be the most well-known folk song of Korea, and each province of Korea has passed on various versions of Arirang. This piano solo juxtaposes the distinct characters of the two Arirang themes by using different rhythms, harmonies, and articulations. The spontaneous musical ideas cast in the introduction return at the coda. Both the improvisatory spirit in the outer sections and the exciting contrast between the two folk tunes in the main section create structural beauty and balance, satisfying the concept of fantasia.

2. The Beggar's Song (2006) by Dongil Shin

The melody of The Beggar's Song is taken from a Korean folk song, Jang Taryeong (Street Market Song). Traditionally, this song had been sung by beggars called Pumbaa, singing and dancing wanderers who entertained spectators at street markets. In this miniature piano solo, the rhythm of the folk song in bold harmonies conveys the liveliness of an open-air market.

3. Longing for the Sun (2006) by Dongil Shin

The tune used in Longing for the Sun is a Korean traditional nursery rhyme that was believed to be sung when children were waiting for the sun. The quiet mood at the beginning of the piece describes the calmness before the sun comes out. The music gets faster and more vivid in the second part to describe children playing happily under the sun after it finally arrives.

4. Song of Roasted Chestnut (2007) by Dongil Shin

Gunbam Taryeong (Song of Roasted Chestnut) is a folk song from the Gyeonggi Province. This song is characterized by merry yet sarcastic lyrics with a delightful refrain which cheers tasty roasted chestnuts in fast 12/8 meter. The piece consists of three sections which depict multiple stanzas of the song. The lively mood develops through sections until it reaches a climax with running 16th-note and octave passages at the end.

5. Ongheya (2007) by Jean Ahn

Ongheya is one of the most famous farming songs in Korea. An antiphonal song, it features a 'call and response' between the leader and the farmers. This work enhances the antiphonal character of the song by using the high contrast of each side. Throughout the piece, the communal spirit of the farmers is emphasized.

6. Tae-Pyung-Ga (2010) by Eun Young Lee

The lyrics of Tae-Pyung-Ga expresses the effort to overcome mundane anguish by singing joyful tunes. This work was completed at MacDowell Colony in May 2010.

7. Yin-Yang: The Infinity (2010) by Misook Kim

The compositional plot of Yin-Yang (Infinity) reflects the harmony and balance of the Korean flag and comes from simple melodies of the Jeju folk songs. It is strictly written in 5-note scale, Kye-Myun-Jo, with extended use of pedal to express the movement of the universe.

8. Kwe-Ji-Na Ching-Ching Na-Ne (2010) by Misook Kim

Kwe-Ji-Na Ching-Ching Na-Ne is originally a farmers' song and represents an important musical genre which has been developed mainly by peasants in the agricultural society of Korea. It became a folk song of the Gyeongsang Province. Kwe-Ji-Na Ching-Ching is an onomatopoeia of a small brass gong used in traditional Korean folk music. The piece starts with a slow tempo, but then the two main themes keep repeating as a call and response between two contrasting dynamics and registers of piano.

9. Changbu Taryeong (2010) by Misook Kim

Changbu Taryeong is a simple, bright, and cheerful folk song from the Gyeonggi Province. The real treat in this movement is found in the unique harmonies and changing meters that are accompanied with lyrical melody. The last chord is meant to be humorous as it interjects an otherwise virtuosic passage, and completely stops the momentum of energy.

10. Mong (2012) by Heeyoung Yang

Mong is based on a Korean traditional song named Monggumpo Taryeong. The folk tune is made of a simple pentatonic melody. The title Mong means 'dream' and it describes the earnest desire of a woman who longs to meet her beloved, as is implied in the lyrics of the song. The sequence of perfect fifths is used in the beginning and at the end to emphasize the innocent, pure, and sincere love with its high degree of consonance.

11. Rang, Rang (2013) by Eun Young Lee

Rang, Rang for solo piano is based on a Korean folksong, Arirang. In contrast to the broken-hearted mood of the original Arirang, this version is filled with delight. It consists of not only the common classical style but also ragtime that interrupts and interacts with the original melody.

12. Milyang Arirang (2014) by Teddy Niedermaier

Milyang Arirang stems from Milyang (or Miryang), a city located in the Korea's southeastern region. The serious, driving melody adheres to the A minor pentatonic scale. The meter follows semachi, a rhythmic pattern in moderate tempo with three beats (expressed here as 9/8 time), with the final two beats exchanging long-short and short-long rhythms. In measure 24, the Arirang melody temporarily disappears, and the semachi pattern comes to the fore. Like many other Korean folk songs, Milyang Arirang casts a complex web of emotions including loss, beauty, nostalgia, pain, and devotion.

13. Bluebird, Bluebird (2014) by Teddy Niedermaier

Sung as a lullaby, the original Korean melody, “Birds, Birds, Bluebirds” contains only three pitches: D, G, and A. Filled with large leaps and perfect intervals, the melody creates an empty and mysterious feeling. This arrangement preserves the leaps and intervals of the original melody, but immediately introduces new pitches that suggest a dark mixture of the G major and G Phrygian scales.

14. Song of the Roasted Chestnuts (2014) by Teddy Niedermaier

“Gunbam Taryeong” (Gunbam means roasted chestnut) follows a quick and vivacious rhythmic pattern called jajinmori jangdan; the fastest rhythmic structure found in Gyeonggi folk music. The lyrics bask in the delights of nature: relishing the sea, a refreshing breeze, the coming of spring, and the taste of freshly roasted chestnuts. In western notation, this translates into an Allegro in duple compound meter, replete with syncopation, ties, and grace notes that enliven the rhythmic profile. Cross-hand arpeggios, persistent eighth notes, and leaps generate energy and momentum.

15. Distant Fields (2015) by Kyle Werner

Distant Fields references two traditional Korean melodies: Parang-Sae (Blue bird) and Chung-Sung-Gok (also spelled Cheongsong-gok). Parang-Sae, a lullaby, appears in its entirety in the left hand at the beginning of the piece. This melody becomes the repeating base line of a passacaglia, over which quotations from Chung-Sung-Gok emerge in the right hand, like distant bird calls. The music gradually moves from a gentle, soothing atmosphere to a mysterious dream-like state during which the two melodies disappear for a time, returning later in a majestically transformed character. The lullaby and memory become a dream, which then becomes a reality.

16. Arirang Variations for Piano Solo (2015) by Seung Ki Hong

Arirang Variations for Piano Solo uses Gyeonggi Arirang as a main theme of the variations. Throughout the variations, such musical elements as tempo, harmony, and rhythm keep changing in the styles of waltz, polonaise, and tango. In particular, the final variation, written as a tango in a minor key, mysteriously evokes emotions described in the lyrics of Arirang:

17. Curious Cuckoo (2016) by Heeyoung Yang

Among many kinds of birds mentioned in the folk song, Sae Taryeong (Blue Bird) which serves as the basis of this piece, the cuckoo is the only bird whose birdcall is directly used in the melody. The distinctive call of the cuckoo is used, and the descending chromatic line supports the original tune.

18. Popping Chestnuts (2016) by Heeyoung Yang

Popping Chestnuts is based on the folk song Gunbam Taryeong (Song of Roasted Chestnuts). In this short piece, the process of roasting chestnuts is described using the original tune and staccato with a light touch of popping sounds.

19. Fantasie from ‘Hanobaeknyeon’ (2016)

Hanobaeknyeon (translated as ‘five hundred years’) is a popular folk song from the Gangwon Province and sung in a very slow rhythm. The title comes from the refrain “of course, of course, let’s live together for five hundred years.”

20. A Meandering Path: Toccata (2017) by Heeyoung Yang

Ari-Gogae (which means ‘a meandering on high hills’), one of many different arguments on the origin of the term Arirang, has inspired me to start composing this piece. A journey for a long trip along a meandering on high hills, as described in the lyrics, is depicted in this toccata.

21. Blue Wave: on a Theme of Arirang (2018) by Heeyoung Yang

One of the proposed theories regarding the origins of the popular Korean folk song Arirang lies in a combination of two words: ari (blue) and irang (wave). This short piece paints various images of water waves using the tune of Arirang as its main motif.

22. Ballon Flower Waltz in Wonderland (2019) by Heeyoung Yang

This short piece is based on the Korean traditional song, Doraji Taryeong (Balloon Flower Song). How would it sound if Doraji Taryeong is sung by Alice in Wonderland?

23. Maidens’ Circle Dance (2020) by Misook Kim

Ganggangsullae is an ancient Korean dance. It incorporates singing and dancing, exclusively performed by women. Maidens’ Circle Dance describes the image of young and old women holding each other’s hands and dancing in a circle under the moonlight. Two different registers of piano symbolize that the lead singer sings a line and everyone else sings the refrain, ganggangsullae.

24. The Phantom of Arirang (2020) by Misook Kim

The Phantom of Arirang is derived from the folk song, Arirang and the hymn, Amazing Grace, both of which are based on a pentatonic scale. The main ideas from Arirang and Amazing Grace were utilized throughout the work. The piece has a clear three-part structure. After initially expressing the energy and excitement, the second part conveys serious musical monologue and intensifies a rich tonal quality by the sustaining pedal along with the soothing repetitive chords. This effect gradually develops into the final section, Quasi una fantasia, along with magnificent chords in octaves.

These compositions can be purchased on the website of the Sejong Cultural Society.
sejongculturalsociety.org