

AN ABBREVIATED HISTORY OF THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY KOREAN ART  
SONG AND THE WESTERN MUSIC INFLUENCE ON THE COMPOSER,  
YOUNGSUB CHOI.

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## Introduction

Approximately 1910 began the appearance of the Korean art song as we now know it. After western music arrived in Korea, the Korean art song quickly developed and spontaneously spread throughout the country. The political climate in Korea was such that the art song was quasi “underground protest” against their Japanese invaders. Most of the texts of early twentieth-century Korean art songs had concealed meanings critical of the Japanese rulers. Additionally, many song texts bemoaned the division of the country that had been split in two in 1953.

When one studies the prose of Korean art songs, one learns much about the history of Korea in the twentieth century. Youngsub Choi was one of the first composers who studied abroad, specifically in Germany and Austria. Upon his return to Korea, he began to compose art songs in the European musical style, for example using secondary dominant chords, and borrowed chords. He also composed a symphonic poem, but with Korean texts. I will explain more of the symphonic poem later. In this creative project, I will discuss the art songs of Youngsub Choi, specifically “The Longing Gungang Mountain,” as well as discussing his Korean contemporaries. I will also write about the musical and poetic influences of western art song on the Korean art songs.

## Korean art song history before The Korean War

The history of the Korean art-song can be divided into four periods: the emergence of the form around the end of the nineteenth century, its blossoming period from 1910 to 1940, its war-influenced period from 1940 to 1960, and finally the modern art song as we know it.

At first, the art song was referred to as “Chang-ga.” Chang-ga means the “rhythmic reading of poems.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, the political and social environment of Korea played an important role in the Korean art song, influencing the texts’ political implications and reflections of Korean society. During the early twentieth century, the powerful countries surrounding Korea, such as Japan, Russia, and China, wanted to influence its development. Because Korea is situated between China and Japan, the Japanese invaded Korea with the goal of colonizing the country and possessing an unobstructed land mass stretching from southern Japan to northern Russia. Consequently, Russia and Japan were forced into a treaty with Korea using military force as well as diplomacy. Japan was to rule Korea for 35 years from 1910 to 1945.<sup>1</sup>

During those years the genre “Chang-ga” was invented and sung by Koreans. The earliest forms of Chang-ga were similar to a hymn. Author Keith Howard wrote that the Korean art songs’ arrival was influenced by the United States Presbyterian Church, which

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<sup>1</sup> Guangsun Kim, “Korean Art song history.” *Korean Art song Musical Society* vol.7 (1989): 15- 40.

brought with it to Korea hymns that the clergy translated into the Korean language.<sup>2</sup> Since 1904, Chang-ga was officially taught in the Korean schools. During this period, Chang-ga used the Presbyterian hymns and western-music melodies with simple Korean texts. Phrases of eight or sixteen measures were common. Almost as soon as Chang-ga was developed, it spread very quickly. Another reason for the quick dissemination was the awakening of an interest in western culture. Korean texts fostered self-examination about the country's weaknesses and the continued hope for independence from Japan. Most lyrics lamented the fact that Japan had colonized Korea and were filled with nationalism and the enlightenment of western culture.

Korean musicologist Jumduk Kim noted that the first Korean art song was "A Garden Balsam" composed by Nan-pa Hong in 1920. Hong at first composed the melody for instruments only. Afterwards in that year, Hyungjun Kim set his own poetry to the music. The form of this art song is similar to Chang-ga. This song text has 4+4 phrases and rhythm patterns similar to the form of Chang-ga.(see the example 1) However, it could be considered to be the first art song<sup>3</sup>. "A Garden Balsam" was not composed as an educational song, as the majority of Chang-ga compositions were. Chang-ga were composed with the intention of propagating the church and for educational enlightenment. However the composer Nan-pa Hong in "A Garden Balsam" used lyric poetry to describe a balsam. In this case, the balsam is referring to the dominated Korean people under Japanese rule. Whenever Koreans listened to this song, they would experience similar

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Howard, *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* vol.7, Contemporary Genres. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 951-952.

<sup>3</sup> Jumduk Kim, *Korean Art Song History* (Seoul: Science, 1989), 23.

emotions, which were sadness and the feeling of pity for their country. That is why the song spontaneously spread throughout all of Korea. In contrast to typical Chang-ga, this song combines the forms of western style with typical Korean melodies. Moreover, the sad nuances of the text were very descriptive. This was the most important direction for the future of the Korean art song.

울밑에선 봉선화야. A Garden Balsam standing under the wall.

내모양이 처량하다. Your shape looks very sorrowful.

Example 1. The descriptive lyrics of “A Garden Balsam.”

In this poem, “A Garden Balsam” means “pitiful Korea under the colonial policies of Japan.” Because of the subliminal text, this song was a popular with the Korean people, who sang it to protest the colonialism of that period. “Half Moon” by Kukyoung Youn, “A Rock Hill” by Heungyul Lee, and “Longing” by Dongsun Chae were also composed during the same period with similar intentions.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning around 1930, the Chang-ga began to develop into the genre of art song, but Japan’s oppressive policies prohibited the singing of this type of art song. The Korean people were forced to speak Japanese. Of course the songs, with their concealed texts, could not be sung in public---especially after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. So

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 24.

instead of a period of development, 1930 to 1940 was a period of stagnation for the Korean art song.

After World War II, the Korean art song started to be composed by musicians that had studied in the United States, Germany, Austria, and Italy. Patriotism and nationalism were common subjects of texts during this period as seen in “The Song of Great Country,” “March of Independence,” and “To the Hope Country” by Jaemyung Hyun. Around 1950, the subject matter of Korean art songs began to change from patriotism to lyrical self-expression. However, because the Korean War began in 1950, the Korean art song’s continued development was again stymied.<sup>5</sup>

#### Youngsub Choi and “The Longing Gungang Mountain”

After the Korean War in 1953, the Korean art song began to be developed by great composers. Youngsub Choi was the one of the most important composers to the Korean people. He was born in 1929 on Ganghwa Island. When he was twenty years old, he had his first compositional release. Afterwards, he attended the National Music Institute of Wien studying with professor Karl Westereich and returning to Korea in 1954. Since then Choi has been known as the “Schubert of Korea” and has composed over 200 art songs.

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<sup>5</sup> Guangsun Kim, “Korean Art song history.” *Korean Art song Musical Society* vol.7 (1989): 20.

As already mentioned, after the Korean War, the Korean art song rapidly developed. As Youngsub Choi introduced a new technique, “The Longing Gungang Mountain” was a triggering device for the development of the Korean art song, because this song’s form differed from early Korean art songs immediately prior to the Korean War. Korean art songs were published individually, but Choi’s new art songs were published in cycles. Six years after returning from Austria in 1954, Youngsub Choi introduced the secular cantata *Beautiful my Country*. “The Longing Gungang Mountain” is one part of this cantata, which includes 9 songs divided into 3 movements: Mountain, River, and Sea. The movement of Mountain included “Baekdoo Mountain,” “Nam Mountain,” and “Gungang Mountain.” From this cantata, only “The Longing Gungang Mountain” remains popular in South Korea. The importance of Gungang Mountain to the South Korean people is evident in the many songs composed about it. Along with Youngsub Choi, Nan-pa Hong and Woonyoung Na also composed art songs about the great mountain. Most texts written about Gungang Mountain are longing in mood. One could believe this was because, among the mountains of North Korea, Gungang Mountain, with its magnificent views, is the closest to South Korea and became a symbol of “Longing” for a reunification with North Korea. Moreover, Youngsub Choi composed art songs accompanied by an orchestra. His field of study in Austria was orchestral conducting, and that may be one reason that he has been recognized as the first composer who composed an art song with orchestral accompaniment in Korea.

The secular cantata *The Beautiful my Country* is a form of symphonic poem because of its orchestral accompaniment. Originally, since Franz Liszt composed his symphonic poem “Les Prélude” in 1848, the term symphonic poem has been used for

orchestral music accompanied by a program, a text (generally poetic or narrative in nature) which is intended to be read by the audience before listening to the work. “The Longing Gungang Mountain” is similar to a symphonic poem, having orchestral accompaniment and a descriptive text. Gungang Mountain is especially famous for its thousands of summits. Youngsub Choi attempted to describe the shapes of these summits using triplet arpeggios in the introduction. Eight measures of the introduction have wide intervals of triplet arpeggios, much like the shape of the mountain’s thousands of summits. (See the example 2.)



(1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

Example2. “The Longing Gungang Mountain,” measures 1-4. (Piano reduction score)

Secondly, he used a complicated chord progression that was unusual for Korean music at that time. He used a secondary dominant chord from last beats of measure 17 and 19. (See example 2.)

Musical score for measures 17-19. The score is in C major and 4/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "더 럽 한 지 몇 - 해 오늘 에 야 찾 을 날 왔 -". The piano part includes triplets and dynamic markings such as *a tempo*, *f*, and *poco rit.*.

(17)

(18)

(19)

Musical score for measure 20. The score is in C major and 4/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The piano part includes a triplet and a four-measure rest in the right hand.

(20)

Example 3. "The Longing Gungang Mountain," measures 17-20.

This song's tonality is C major. However, in the postlude, he borrowed an f minor triad from c minor key at the last beat of measure 23. (See Example 4.)

Musical score for measure 23. The score is in C major and 4/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a decrescendo (*decresc.*) and a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The piano part includes a four-measure rest in the right hand and a quarter note in the left hand.

(23)

Musical score for measure 24. The score is in C major and 4/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a decrescendo (*decresc.*) and a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The piano part includes a triplet and an arpeggiated chord (*Arpe. Arpe.*).

(24)

Example 4. “The Longing Gungang Mountain,” measures 23-24.

In conclusion, before the Korean War, Youngsub Choi composed with different techniques, using new forms and chord progressions that heretofore cannot be found in Korean art songs.

#### Textual Changes in “The Longing Gungang Mountain”

In 1961, The Korean Broadcasting System commissioned Youngsub Choi to compose a cantata in memory of the Korean War’s 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This cantata *The Beautiful my Country* was first performed in September of 1961 by The KBS Orchestra. On October 20, 1962, the cantata was performed in the National Theater in Seoul. This song’s text and melody stimulated Korean patriotic sentiment. However, in 1972, after the first South-North Red Cross Composer’s Conference, the relationship between South and North Korea became more peaceful. Subsequently, the chorus text was altered; the first verse of the chorus was changed from “have ruined” to “have passed” and the second verse of the chorus was changed from “be trampled down” to “as it was” and “all deep-set rancors” to “all deep-set sorrow.” In other words, the original text describes “revenge” or “wounds.” Now that a more peaceful mood existed between South and North Korea, the altered text was changed to reflect that new relationship. (See the underlined text below in Example 5.)

수수만년 아름다운산 더럽힌지 (못가본 지) 그 몇해  
오늘에야 찾을 날 왔나 금강산은 부른다.

The mountain which has remained beautiful. Over several ten thousands of years.  
How many years have ruined (have passed) since we saw it last?  
Has the day to go there and see finally? Gumgang mountain beckoning us.

비로봉 그봉우리 예대로 인가 (짓밟힌 자리)

흰 구름 솔바람도 무심히가나...

Does the Biro summit stand as it was (is trampled down)?  
White cloud and the wind of pine tree unconcernedly blow.

발아래 산해 만리 보이지 마라

우리다 맺힌 슬픔(원한) 풀릴때 까지

Don't show mountains and seas under your feet  
Till the moment when all deep-set sorrow (rancor).

Example 5. Text with Changes.

In conclusion, the Korean art song developed during a period of an unfortunate political climate. So the lyrics of Korean art songs had hidden meanings and were sung as a song of a national liberation movement during the Japanese colonial rule. After the Korean War, Youngsub Choi returned from Austria. He worked to develop a more advanced compositional technique with the cantata *The Beautiful my Country*. Among his nine songs, "The Longing Gumgang Mountain" is the most popular. World-renowned artists, such as Placido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, and the Bolshoi Choir have recorded this song.

"The Longing Gumgang Mountain" is one of the most important art songs because of the use of new techniques, such as the symphonic poem style accompaniment

and unusual chord progressions. While these techniques may not have been as developed as they were in the west, for Korea, they were very new compositional techniques. Moreover, some singers who wish to sing “The Longing Gungang Mountain” should be aware of the textual changes and the reasons for those changes. I believe that this creative project will offer an overview of the Korean art song and in particular the song “The Longing Gungang Mountain” that may be useful to future singers.

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