MTO A JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY FOR MUSIC THEORY

Commentary

Ji Yeon Lee

REFERENCE: https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.24.30.4/mto.24.30.4.kim.html

DOI: 10.30535/mto.30.4.15

Volume 30, Number 4, December 2024
Copyright © 2024 Society for Music Theory

---

[1] Korean traditional music (*gugak* 국악), an established artistic genre in Korea, is not only performed but rigorously explored in university music programs, national research and performance institutions, governmental projects, and academic publications.(1) Although there are many more Korean musicians involved in Western art music than those playing Korean traditional music, Korean traditional music remains an integral part of the Korean cultural and national identity. In North America, however, the status of Korean traditional music is quite different from that in its homeland—it has traditionally been viewed as a subject for ethnomusicology, a discipline that broadly encompasses musics and musicians outside Western European civilization.

[2] Ethnomusicology places much emphasis on socio-political approaches to the study of music, and this lens has likewise been focused on Korean music studies outside Korea. Scholars and students in North America may therefore look at Korean music in relation to colonialism and imperialism, immigration and diaspora, K-pop, Korean Protestant church hymns, and so on.(2) Due in part to this context, while interest in and the scope of Korean music studies have expanded over time, attention to Korean music remains largely absent in North American music theory. Introducing Korean traditional music theory to North American academia through leading music theory journals such as *Music Theory Online* would therefore represent a significant step toward fostering a more welcoming and inclusive climate in the field.(3)

[3] The translator's choice of Shin Eun-Joo's article on *pansori* is perfectly suited to presenting such an introduction. *Pansori* is one of the most important genres in Korean traditional music. Although frequently compared to Western classical opera due to their shared vocal and theatrical attributes, *pansori* is essentially an epic, narrative storytelling vocal performance executed by a singer and a drum accompanist without stage design or theatrical costumes. Unlike court or ritual music, *pansori* was first circulated among commoners and the lower class, and later enjoyed by all classes as a principal form of entertainment. According to Kim, Baek, and Choe (1995, 180–81), there are five basic characteristics of *pansori*.(4)

1. *Pansori* is a temporal art executed at a performance place.(5) This means that the aesthetic qualities of *pansori* are not fixed but can change, depending on the situation and location.
2. A vocalist sings to a drum player's accompaniment. The vocalist performs three artistic acts: singing, speech, and body gestures. The drummer controls the flow of the music through rhythmic patterns.
3. When a long story is arranged as a *pansori* version, it goes through a process of re-creation (or adaptation), which interprets and stages the music with different content and plot, depending on the individual who worked on that

version. This helps establish a school of performance.

4. The artistic act of a singer interpreting and directing a story through sound is not an undirected improvisation, but—as in music composition—is carried out within a framework of three musical elements: tone color, mode, and rhythmic pattern.

5. The drummer and the audience participate in the *pansori* performance by doing *chuimsae* 추임새 (such as "Eolssigu" 얼씨구 and "Johta" 좋다).[6]

[4] Influenced by the music of shamanistic rituals, *pansori* was originally a vernacular genre in terms of training and transmission.[7] While there is no single "authentic" composer and score for the repertoire as performers learn through apprenticeship, repertory was later collected, transcribed, classified, and published. This has resulted in the development of various performance schools and repertoires stemming from different *pansori* masters.[8]

[5] Fundamentally, *pansori* is a performance-oriented, rather than composer-centric, genre. It privileges the performer's artistic discretion in realizing embellishment tones, singing technique, vocal tone and timbre, as well as body gestures.[9] These are all crucial means by which the performer expresses the visceral emotions in the text and drama during performance. Indeed, the genre's integration of performance and expressive elements critically influences music-theoretical interpretations such as the identification and classification of modes and scales. For instance, as shown in Table 1 of the translated text, most scholars define modes according to sentiment and mood, and such a definition depends heavily on the performer's subjective expression and interpretation. The importance of subjective factors distinguishes *pansori* modes from the scales and modes in Western art music that are defined solely through their constituent notes.

[6] Another significant feature of the *pansori* modes discussed in the translated text is that each constituent note assumes individual attributes. This is most evident in Baek's explanation of *Ujo* and *Pyeongjo* in Tables 2 and 3, where constituent notes are defined not only by particular intervals, but also by specific singing methods and techniques, frequency of occurrence, cadential function, melodic direction, and so on. These elements play a decisive role in defining *Ujo* and *Pyeongjo*, in contrast to the makeup of scales and modes in Western art music based on intervals and scale degree functions. It is thus common, and in fact natural, to encounter diverse theories and disagreement regarding such theoretical points; and these flexible interpretational possibilities should not simply be considered underdeveloped or less systematic than the Western counterpart.

[7] The present translation makes a valuable contribution to the teaching of Korean music, especially from a theoretical angle. Based on my experience teaching East Asian music and musicians, one of the most challenging obstacles in theory classes is the lack of quality references in English. While *pansori* is one of the best-known genres of Korean traditional music among Western audiences and there are English books and articles on its history and performance practice,[10] the existing resources fall short of exploring the music-theoretical discourse invited by the genre.

[8] I would like to suggest three key points regarding using this article in the classroom. First, this is not an introductory-level text, not least when the author critically reflects on the various definitions and classifications of the two types of modes (*Ujo* and *Pyeongjo*) for *pansori*. Instructors might therefore wish to keep the target audience in mind and strategically first present the overarching features of each mode as outlined in Table 1. Second, I highly recommend supplementing the article with audio examples of each mode so that students can connect the mode's theoretical attributes to its musical sound. The Korean National Gugak Center (국립국악원 https://www.gugak.go.kr/site/main/index001?menuid=001&lang=en) and their YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/@gugak1951) are great resources. Third, readers may want to pay close attention to the terms and concepts used in Korean traditional music, which are provided in the translator's notes and comments. Most of the terms are fundamental in the study of Korean traditional music and are likely to appear in other articles and translations.

[9] The original Korean article is a rigorous piece of work, reflecting the author's meticulous logic and methodology in their thorough theoretical investigation. Translating this piece into English must have been an enormous effort given the dense content and the essential differences between Korean and English writing—from basic structures such as sentences and phrases to the even more complex ways in which logical explanations are unfolded. Despite these challenges, the translator and editor did an excellent job of making the article accessible for non-Korean readers. With the start of this translation project, I hope that we can

continue our efforts to diversify the field by incorporating theories from underexplored cultures and civilizations.

Ji Yeon Lee
University of Houston
Moores School of Music
3333 Cullen Blvd.
Houston, TX 77204
jlee136@uh.edu

Works Cited

Jang, Yeonok. 2014. *Korean P'ansori Singing Tradition: Development, Authenticity, and Performance History*. Scarecrow Press.

Kim, Haesuk 김해숙, Daewoong Baek 백대웅, and Taehyeon Choe 최태현. 1995. *Jeontong-eumak-gaeron* 전통음악개론 [Introduction to Traditional Music]. 도서출판 어울림 Oulim Books.

Kwon, Donna Lee. 2012. *Music in Korea: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*. Oxford University Press.

Park, Chan E. 2023. *Korean Pansori as Voice Theatre: History, Theory, Practice*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Pihl, Marshall R. 2003. *The Korean Singer of Tales*. Harvard University Asia Center.

Turner, John W. 2019. "Performing Cultural Hybridity in Isang Yun's *Glissées pour violoncelle seul* (1970)." *Music Theory Online* 25 (2). https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.19.25.2/mto.19.25.2.turner.html.

Um, Haekyung. 2013. *Korean Musical Drama: P'ansori and the Making of Tradition in Modernity*. Routledge.

Footnotes

1. Since the establishment of a Korean traditional music major at Seoul National University in 1959, South Korean university programs have developed it as an independent field, separate from Western music performance, composition, and theory/history concentrations. Prior to that time, the training of Korean traditional music was primarily conducted through apprenticeship. Currently, there is no ethnomusicology major for non-Korean and non-European art music, although classes on various ethnomusicological topics are available and graduate students can research or dissertate on ethnomusicological topics. The concepts of ethnomusicology and world music as circulated in North American academia are fairly new and considered somewhat outlandish in Korea, having been introduced and practiced by a handful of Korean scholars who studied at North American universities and returned to Korea. Consequently, music academia in Korea is largely divided into two parties: Western European art music and Korean traditional music. See the curriculum for the Korean traditional music major at Seoul National University (one of the top research institutions in South Korea) at https://music.snu.ac.kr/en/node/78. Note that other listed majors such as voice, composition, instrumental music, and piano all center on Western art music and its style, although the performance repertoire and research topics have recently become more diverse and inclusive. For the two leading research institutions on Korean traditional music, visit the websites for the Korean Musicological Society (한국국악학회; http://www.gugak.or.kr/; in Korean only) and the Asian Music Research Institute at Seoul National University (서울대학교 동양음악연구소 https://asianmusic.or.kr/ and https://music.snu.ac.kr/en/node/68)
Return to text

2. For example, the following papers covering a wide spectrum of Korea-related topics were presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology in 2023: "We Are a Korean Band: The Wildcats and South Korean Model Modernity in the Pacific," "Korean Pop and the Unrequited Extension of Kinship by Navajo Listeners," "'Black-Haired Foreigner Singers' and Anti-Korean Diaspora Discourse in South Korea," "Korean American, Female Artists: Power of Electronic Dance Music," "Let's Sing the Freedom: 'Socialist' vs. 'Capitalist' Singing Styles from the Perspective of North Korean Defector Singers in South Korea," "The Multiplicities of Practice and Perception in Cross-Cultural Musical Collaborations: Tracing the Paths of 21st Century

Korean Musicians and Their Non-Korean Collaborators," "'Eye-Opening' Performance of Blindness: Vocal Imagining of Disability and Female Proxyhood in Korean Pansori," "Listening for Resonances of Potential: Anticipatory Voicing, Compressed Silence, and the Everyday Archival Ethics of Giving Voice in South Korea."
Return to text

3. To my knowledge, none of the major North American music theory journals—including *Music Theory Spectrum*, *Journal of Music Theory*, and *Music Theory Online*—have ever published articles on Korean traditional music theory. Turner's "Performing Cultural Hybridity in Isang Yun's *Glissées pour violoncelle seul* (1970)" in *Music Theory Online* 25/2 (2019) may be the only analysis article exclusively focusing on a Korean composer; his article does not, however, discuss Korean traditional music theory.
Return to text

4. In addition to these general characteristics, the authors suggest three musical elements of *pansori*: 1. *seongeum* 성음 (tone color or tone character) according to vocalization; 2. mode (*Ujo*, *Pyeongjo*, and *Gyemyeonjo*); and 3. *jangdan* 장단 (rhythmic pattern; seven types: *jinyangjo* 진양조, *jungmori* 중모리, *jungjungmori* 중중모리, *jajinmori* 자진모리, *hwimori* 휘모리, *eotmori* 엇모리, and *utjungmori* 엇중모리). The first element relates to sound and affect, which are impossible to notate on a score or describe objectively. The second element is roughly equivalent to the Western concept of mode but not identical. The third element is directly tied to *pansori*'s narrative flow through tempo, accent, and metric structure. Rhythmic modes hold enormous potential for further theoretical investigation by non-Korean theorists. For more details on these three musical elements, see Kim, Baek, and Choe (1995, 182–84).
Return to text

5. In the present day, *pansori* is performed formally at concert halls. Yet until the modern era, as with other vernacular genres, performance venues were quite flexible and might include the market, courtyard, garden, house, farm, venues out in nature, etc.
Return to text

6. *Chuimsae* 추임새 means impromptu exclamations spoken by the drum accompaniment and often the audience during a *pansori* performance. These words usually enhance the vocalist's or audience's emotions and the dramatic mood. In this regard, *pansori* is a participatory genre. Examples of *chuimsae* are "*Eolssigu*" 얼씨구 (hurray), "*Johta*" 좋다 (yes or good), "*Eolssu*" 얼쑤 (yay), and so on.
Return to text

7. After the Korean War (1950–1953), the teaching and learning of Korean traditional music was absorbed into the modern educational system. Today, arts high schools and university music programs offer Korean traditional music majors, including *pansori* concentrations. A representative institution supported by the Korean government is Gugak National High School, which educates and trains students in Korean traditional music. The school offers concentrations in instrumental and vocal performance, composition, theory, and dance. For those interested in the traditional training method of pansori, I recommend the film *Seopeyonje* 서편제 (released in 1993), which tells the story of a *pansori* artist family in the twentieth century. It depicts how a *pansori* singer is trained through extreme measures to achieve artistic mastery, a process known as "gaining voice" (*deugeum* 득음). The film features numerous excerpts from pansori pieces in the original soundtrack.
Return to text

8. In addition to the singing masters, region is another parameter for the genre's development. *Pansori* from the region east of the Seomjin River is called *Dongpyeonje* 동편제; *pansori* from the region west of the Seomjin River is called *Seopyeonje* 서편제; and *Junggoje* 중고제 indicates *pansori* from the Gyeonggi-do and Chungcheong-do regions.
Return to text

9. In Korean traditional music, the performer-oriented character is not limited to *pansori*. It is often noted that professional instrumental players are also active in academic research. For instance, the scholars discussed in the Chapter 3 of the translated text (*Ujo and Pyeongjo in gayageum sanjo*) are prominent *gayageum* players.
Return to text

10. *Pansori* was designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage item in 2003. For more detailed information, visit https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/pansori-epic-chant-00070. There are numerous books and articles on *pansori* published in Korean. But for readers who do not read Korean, I recommend the following sources for in-depth research on the genre: Pihl (2003); Jang (2014); Um (2013); Park (2023); and for a quicker read, Kwon (2012, 103–14).
Return to text

Copyright Statement

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for Music Theory. All rights reserved.

[1] Copyrights for individual items published in *Music Theory Online* (*MTO*) are held by their authors. Items appearing in *MTO* may be saved and stored in electronic or paper form, and may be shared among individuals for purposes of scholarly research or discussion, but may *not* be republished in any form, electronic or print, without prior, written permission from the author(s), and advance notification of the editors of *MTO*.

[2] Any redistributed form of items published in *MTO* must include the following information in a form appropriate to the medium in which the items are to appear:

> This item appeared in *Music Theory Online* in [VOLUME #, ISSUE #] on [DAY/MONTH/YEAR]. It was authored by [FULL NAME, EMAIL ADDRESS], with whose written permission it is reprinted here.

[3] Libraries may archive issues of *MTO* in electronic or paper form for public access so long as each issue is stored in its entirety, and no access fee is charged. Exceptions to these requirements must be approved in writing by the editors of *MTO*, who will act in accordance with the decisions of the Society for Music Theory.

This document and all portions thereof are protected by U.S. and international copyright laws. Material contained herein may be copied and/or distributed for research purposes only.

Prepared by Amy King, Editorial Assistant