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Commentary

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[1] In addition to the conceptual ideas Isang Yun shares in his interview—which, as I will suggest below, have profound implications for music theory and analysis far beyond Yun's music specifically—we should take note of the value the interview format itself holds for the production of new knowledge. The interviewer, Akira Nishimura, asks nuanced questions that lead Yun to consider aspects of his compositional practice that might be glossed differently in a different presentational format. Nishimura also introduces examples from Yun's compositions that illustrate key concepts, draws comparisons to concepts from other compositional practices, and pushes Yun to clarify important ideas. All of this illustrates the value of thinking through ideas in dialogue (Chua 2022)—resisting the Western assumption that philosophical thinking and theory-making (and, by extension, composing) are fundamentally solitary endeavors (Ahmed 2006; Collins 2000).

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[2] In his interview with Akira Nishimura, Isang Yun describes aspects of his "linear musical language" through which characteristic linear gestures "ranging from fine microtonal tremors to tremolos wider than a third" animate musical processes that at once form cohesive, living wholes and "transform without end." Yun borrows ideas from Korean singing styles (A-ak and Namdo Chang are named in the interview) and East Asian philosophy more broadly. But the actual content of those musical styles are seldom explicitly present in his music; rather, Yun folds traditional ideas—say, the gestural impetus of an A-ak court melody—into a "more general grammar" that also reflects his training in high-modernist compositional techniques in Europe.

[3] These ideas are reflected in the key compositional concept Yun and Nishimura discuss, *Hauptton*. A number of commentators have provided valuable accounts of how Hauptton functions for Yun as a "main tone" that is embellished with any number of ornaments: vibrato, tremolo, microtonal glissandi, and so on.(1) A careful read of Yun's characterization leads, however, to a subtly different definition. Hauptton, for Yun, refers to a "oneness of sound" that flows through what most commentators refer to as ornaments. In other words, it is not that there is a single tone that ontologically precedes ornamentation.(2) Instead, a single "tone" persists, which is created through the very act of "merging different sounds." Elsewhere Yun emphasizes the composite nature of the concept: "[a] countless number of variant possibilities inhere in an individual tone, to which such surrounding elements as appoggiatura, vibrato, accent, after notes and other ornamentations

belong" (Yun and Sparrer 1994, 50; translation in Kim 2012, 48). This is a crucial intervention with stakes for music analysis as well as musical experience: the fundamental musical object is in fact something always already in a process of changing. As Yun puts it, "[t]he Hauptton . . . 'flows' like a stream of water and creates a line, which is a concept different from the Western use of a melodic line."

[4] Two further technical terms are at work in all this. As suggested, "tone," for Yun, encompasses all number of embellishments, mutations, disturbances, and even redirections and superimpositions, what I will describe below as a monistic whole any given span of which should be thought of as an adumbration or perspective. This accords with ideas about foundational musical elements across numerous Asian musical practices, where, for example, microtonal variations, glissandi, and timbral transformations are essential rather than accidental aspects of a given musical sound. Joon Park's translator's commentary in note 6 underscores this point by suggesting a "fluid" rather than "objective" model in which a singular tone "is created by merging different sounds." The Hauptton, under this definition, becomes a particular case of diverse musical parameters converging to create a complex whole, but one which is constantly in motion, like the flow of a stream Yun conjures.

[5] This leads, then, to the second term, "line," which for Yun "can be endlessly varied depending on interpretation and reception." Lines, for Yun, curve in all number of ways. As he puts it in the interview,

> people speak about my music as flowing, smoothly flowing, an endless repetition of the line. The smoothly flowing line is not a straight line but a curved line. And there are various ways a line can be curved. Within a curve, there are various parts. The part and the curve each contain a universe within itself.

Yun's characterization opens onto many questions about what "counts" as a line and what is at stake in the concept. Nishimura's comparison to heterophony is apt, especially how it aligns with Yun's point about interpretation: many voices might perform the "same" line but each with its own inflections and interpretive trajectory. Yun's brief point about reception is important too, though—suggesting that an individual listener's phenomenological engagement with perceived musical sounds is itself part of the ontological structure of the music, rather than something that stands outside it. Yun suggests there is a fundamentally "intuitive" aspect of East Asian thinking that "transcends the logical/illogical distinction" (and later, the rational/irrational distinction) of European Enlightenment metaphysics. While we should be extremely cautious about broadly sweeping essentializing claims, Yun seems less to be generalizing about the nature of thought in East Asian culture than offering a critique of the degree to which certain forms of rationalism have dominated Western thought in the wake of Descartes's hierarchical binary logic.(3) As such, I read Yun's critique not as a reiteration of problematic East/West binaries, but as a differential way of thinking about musical structure, process, interpretation, and experience that has affinities with how other experimental logics address matters of time, indeterminacy, mobile forms, heterophony and micropolyphony, and much more.

[6] Yun's Étude for Solo Flute no. 1 (1974), referenced in the interview, exemplifies the kind of line that a Hauptton makes manifest. Each gesture (lasting a single prolonged breath) more or less precisely follows the contour Yun draws ([4.1]), beginning with a "decorative tone" (a brief melodic flourish; note Yun's characterization of this gesture as a "tone" in light of what I have summarized above), continuing with a long "vibrating" expanse, and culminating with "melismatic motion." As an étude, Yun seems to be deliberately clarifying some key aspects of what determines a Hauptton; to the brief list given in the illustration annotations I would add the timbral intensity asked of the performer ("*ff, immer intensif, mit normalem vibrato*"). As the étude winds toward its end, the more florid embellishments take over, ultimately fading out with a repeated nine-note tuplet figure, decreasing in volume but with the indication "*immer geräuschvoller*" ("ever noisier") as the "tonal" (under Yun's definition) implications suggested in earlier gestures are made ever more explicitly manifest.(4)

[7] All of these concepts—line, tone, Hauptton—are aspects of a more foundational principle that animates Yun's compositional designs. In response to a question from Nishimura about heterophony, Yun describes his music as "monistic," unfolding as a process through which "various lines flow through according to the same principle . . . and the individual lines are in accordance with each other." He describes the importance of the persistence of ideas and the maintenance of what he calls tension over long periods of time, suggesting a possible alternative point of departure for thinking about musical form and process, different from models based on contradiction and contrast, which is how he characterizes Western formal designs. The distinction

between tone and Hauptton is key here. Yun suggests that any piece of music is, in some important way, an expression of a universal "tone":

> This universe's tone flows without end. My works are merely an arrangement of a tiny little part of it. This is what I think. You erect your antenna; you organize according to your conscience, mental capacity, and the techniques you have learned; and then you present it as a composition.

In this reckoning, a composer makes selections (as Gilles Deleuze [1989] would put it) from an ongoing, monistic whole, which express or reflect that whole. In Yun's terms, this is the universe contained within the curve of a line described above. The composer's craft is built around these selections: "[a] tone is not created by a composer. You grasp it. You give order to the tones based on the techniques you have learned." But tones, for Yun, are variations or adumbrations of that ongoing whole, one which is at once still and in motion (stillness and motion being perspectives rather than discrete categories).

[8] Yun explicitly contrasts this process of selection, variation, or adumbration with Western compositional methods, in which form and content are in a dialectical relation. Yet I find in Yun's characterization a profound resonance with a different line of Western philosophical thought: Baruch Spinoza's monism. For Spinoza, any aspect of reality (whether material or a product of thought) is a mode or singular coming-into-being of an eternal substance of which everything in the universe is composed. The connection between materiality and thought is important and connects to Yun's point about the ontological status of interpretation and reception. Any particular mode, in Spinoza's account, amounts to a shift in perspective. Yun's account of universal monism is similar. It likewise similarly posits a relationship between even the smallest instant of time and eternity, each an expression of the other. As Spinoza puts it, "[e]very idea of any body or particular thing existing in actuality necessarily involves the eternal and infinite essence of God" (Spinoza 2002, 270). As Yun describes of the transformations that characterize a particular Hauptton, "a moment reflects eternity, and eternity can be captured as a moment."

[9] One implication of Yun's monism is a possible shift in analytic perspective that might be brought to bear on many musics, not just high modernist compositions that are rooted in traditional East Asian practices to some greater or lesser degree. If a composition is considered as "an arrangement of a tiny little part" of a continuous universe (or, in Spinoza's terms, as a now-perceivable mode of an infinite monistic substance), then we might think differently about gestural qualities (broadly defined) rather than or prior to the precise smaller elements that comprise them. There is precedent for this in music theory, for example Lynnette Westendorf's (1995) gestural analyses of Cecil Taylor's music, or Elizabeth Hoffman's (2019) examination of Iannis Xenakis's gestural drawings. Analytic attention would turn to the nature of different kinds of concurrent change within a temporally-extended musical gesture, reflecting the definition of tone (and, by extension, line) as something always already different from itself, rather that seeking to find differences between atomic elements and then analyzing how they hang together structurally.

[10] Consider the opening of Yun's 1960 orchestral composition *Bara*. The initial four-note string gesture could easily be classified as a Hauptton as described above: a brief "decorative tone" moving up a semitone from B♭ to a longer sustained B, which then gives way to a more quickly moving two-note concluding figure (back down a semitone, up a tritone). Alongside this unfolding, we hear a timbrally heterogeneous texture involving six wind or brass instruments playing what could be construed as a single Klangfarbenmelodie line or, perhaps, as a pair of shorter composite gestures in a kind of antecedent-consequent relation. In either hearing, the tuba concludes the passages with a descending semitone dyad that echoes the strings' opening decorative tone, approaching B from above. A second string melody emerges from the tuba's dyad, echoing the higher strings' semitone-down, tritone-up concluding figure and sustaining and decrescendoing the landing tone. A pair of soft double bass tones closes off this twenty-second passage. It's easy to hear this as three (or four) relatively discrete events—string melody, heterogeneous wind/brass line, second string melody, double bass punctuation—overlapping as a contrapuntal dialogue. But Yun asks us specifically not to do that. "My music is monistic. My music is not polyphonic or pluralistic. . . . [I]n my music, all flows are uniform, whether it is the mainstream or branch." He clarifies that "uniform" is not quite the right word, which suggests an opening for music theorists to perhaps come up with a better one! But the main point is: what if we actively practice re-hearing this passage not as multiple strands in contrapuntal dialogue but as adumbrations of an ongoing totality, a single, complexly changing "tone" irreducible to the atomic elements that comprise it? How might this change our analytic perspective, our notion of part-whole relations, our discourse?

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Footnotes

1. See Kim 2012, 47–52 for a thorough overview.
Return to text

2. Compare this to Paul Dunbar's (2016, 40–48) consideration: Dunbar makes a Hauptton "reduction" of the principle tone movement in each of Yun's five flute études.
Return to text

3. I develop this point in another context in Stover (2024).
Return to text

4. See Dunbar 2016, 10–12 for a brief but enlightening examination of the étude from a performer's perspective.
Return to text

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