"Responding to the challenges of arts education: Tensions between traditional and contemporary practices and transcending geo-cultural differences?"

"Cultural Dialogue in Music: From the Personal to the Collaborative"

It is a privilege and a pleasure to be speaking at the UNESCO 2nd World Conference on Arts Education here in Seoul, Korea. I would like to begin by describing some key moments in my personal history that relate to our topic – in 1982 at the University of California, Berkeley, when I felt a sense of difference as a newly-arrived Korean-American; in 1989 in Paris, when I found my cultural identity again called into question, and now 28 years later, when I presented the fourth Pacific Rim Music Festival at the University of California, Santa Cruz just last month.

I was born in Seoul and spent the first 25 years of my life here. I graduated from the College of Music at Seoul National University with a BA degree in Music Composition in 1977. In 1980 my father, who was a Presbyterian Minister, responding to a desire he had of helping Korean immigrants in the United States, moved our family to California, where I have lived ever since. I went to the University of California, Berkeley for my graduate education in 1982. I knew I was a new arrival, so when the shock of a different educational and musical culture hit me at UC Berkeley I was somewhat prepared. I realized immediately during the first composition seminar with the other graduate students that I had a different cultural background and different inspiration than they had. I knew from that moment my own Korean tradition was deeply embedded in me. My first composition I wrote there was based on the essence of the Korean folk song, A-Ri-Rang, a piece called “A Ri” written for voice and string quartet.

In 1989 I had the opportunity to study for two years in Paris as part of a grant from UC Berkeley, and it was there that I received quite an unexpected cultural shock. I was studying in the DEA (Diplôme d’Études Approfondies) program at the IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique) and École Normale Supérieure, and in a seminar I played a recording of the premiere performance of the first movement of my composition, “Islands in the Bay,” a Percussion Concerto. To my surprise, some of my classmates commented that I was writing “American” Music. This came as a complete shock, and my own cultural identity suddenly became mysterious to me. In America I had been considered a Korean composer, and now here in Paris I was being called an American composer. I was confused and did not know how to proceed in my music with such a comment. I was helped by the comments of two of my teachers at that time. I asked Jean-Baptiste Barrière, who was the director of the Pedagogy department at IRCAM, about this comment. He advised me, “Why be bothered by others? Just be yourself and find your roots. Don’t you have your own heritage to study?” That was an important comment for me--simple and direct. Around the same time, the late German-Korean composer, YUN Isang told me that I should try to respond
naturally to whatever I have in me. These words from my elders gave me great
guidance. Since that time I have known that I had those two cultures within me, and
that I was a Korean–American composer.

I was confronted by the differences between musical traditions in 1985, when I returned
to Korea to begin a deeper study of Korean traditional music. I had training as a
Western composer/musician since I was eight years old. Moving to America had
reawakened my desire to learn about my Korean culture, and I was naturally attracted
to Korean traditional music. I was able to go to Korea in the summer of 1985 to study
Korean music in all areas: history, theory, performance. That’s when I met my teacher,
PARK, Eun-Ha, Senior performer in Samulnori (folk percussion ensemble) at the
National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts. Her teaching was focused on
the traditional method—the oral tradition, without music scores or recordings, and
therefore we needed to stay extremely focused in order to remember what she just
played for us. I completed learning the entire piece of “Seol Jang Go” that summer, and
since then, I practiced it and taught it to students and a colleague friend who became an
ethnomusicologist in Korean Music, the late Marnie Dilling (Professor at the University
of California, San Diego). This music was internalized and remains in me until now, and
so I was later able to write a string quartet based on “Seol Jang Go.”

In 2001, I wrote a piece called, “Rituel” for Western ensemble and a Korean drummer/
dancer featuring my teacher, PARK, Eun-Ha. The piece was dedicated to my two
friends who died around that time, one of them was Marnie Dilling. The important
concept of this piece was to keep the Korean traditional music unchanged for Ms.
PARK’s part and let the other instrumentalists improvise within that framework. It was
particularly interesting to see the dialogue between Korean performer PARK and the
Western percussionist, William Winant, who was an accomplished improvisor within the
Western contemporary music tradition. With the success of this performance, it was
possible to create the next projects of “Rituel II and III.”

At around the same time (2001) I was invited to write a work for the Hun Qiáo [Bridge of
Souls] Project: Premiere Concert, “Remembrance and Reconciliation,” featuring Yo-Yo
Ma and the Chamber Music Society of Minnesota. This project was meant to use music
to heal the wounds of the Second World War in the Pacific arena. Composers were
chosen from China (Chen Yi), Japan (Michio Mamiya), Korea and the United States
(Andrew Imbrie) to represent the nations involved in that conflict. Since I was
representing Korea I was asked by them to use the Korean folk song, Arirang, for the
theme of the entire piece. It was a project to find reconciliation and peace through
music—looking back at the wounds of the mid-20th century war era, and looking
forward to a future with a positive view toward working and living together in harmony.
Music and the Arts can heal and overcome wounds and boundaries. (play brief selection of
work.)

The above projects reflected my personal growth and my attempts to forge an artistic
voice out of the combination of cultures that came from my personal experience. In the
projects I want to describe next, I attempted to create this synthesis on a larger scale,
with more musicians from both cultures and with the idea of creating an educational
environment for students as well as for mature artists to exchange their traditions of music and aesthetics. The fusion of cultures can be simple and superficial, but I wanted to provide a context by which my students could go more deeply into a culture foreign to them and try to create musical works of depth and expressiveness.

Festival for Gayageum and Western Instruments (2006-07)

The gayageum is one of Korea’s oldest musical instruments. It has a technique unique to the instrument, and produces music that is unlike any other in the world, consisting of subtle pitch bending and inflection that is not possible on any other instrument.

I teach musical composition at UC Santa Cruz, and in 2006 I had the idea to try to engage my students in a project of writing new compositions that combine this elegant and ancient instrument with Western instruments. The first problem was that they knew nothing about this instrument or about traditional Korean music in general. While I was able to offer a seminar on Korean music, I also wanted to give my students in-depth and hands on experience with this instrument. I organized workshops at UC Santa Cruz taught by one of Korea’s best gayageum performers and teachers, KWAK Eun-Ah (professor at Ewha Woman’s University). I was able to find funding from the University of California, Santa Cruz to bring KWAK from Korea to Santa Cruz for an extended period. Graduate students, undergraduates and faculty members participated in her workshops in order to learn about this ancient instrument and were then invited to write new works for any combination of gayageum and western instruments. Also participating were graduate students from UC Berkeley and UC Davis. There is a modern version of the gayageum that has more strings, and is able to provide a complete chromatic scale that is characteristic of Western music. Many composers have written for this instrument before, and it carries much the same role in the ensemble as a harp would, for example. I wanted to use the same technique and language of traditional Korean music, so for this project we only used the original instrument with 12-strings in order to understand and carry the beauty of the traditional musical language. KWAK Eun-Ah presented 25 hours of workshops on gayageum, bringing with her enough instruments so that each student would have a chance to play on the instrument. Ultimately, 17 composers, including faculty and graduate students from UC Santa Cruz, Berkeley, Davis, and two Korean composers wrote new compositions using gayageum in combinations with other instruments.

In 2007, the Festival for Gayageum and Western Instruments was presented in Northern California and in Seoul, Korea. Ten concerts and one seminar were presented. This was the first attempt by an institution outside Korea to learn a Korean instrument and create contemporary pieces for it in solo or ensemble forms along with western instruments. The project was greeted enthusiastically on both sides of the Pacific.

This was a pilot project toward the development of new cultural forms, and it was more successful than we could have dreamed. It has not stopped since then. The participating performers and composers of this project continue to create new works
and extend their instrumentation, and concerts have been presented in Japan, Korea and in the US annually in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

Cultural Synthesis Project at the Pacific Rim Music Festival (2009-10)

As a result of the success of this project, we decided to expand upon it and include more traditional Korean instruments in a new project that we called the "Cultural Synthesis" project. This project was inspired in part by a unique group of traditional musicians from Seoul, the Contemporary Music Ensemble Korea (CMEK, YI Jiyoung, director). Their ability and dedication proved a key factor in the success of this project. They represent a new, younger generation of traditional Korean musicians. While they have all achieved mastery of their traditional Korean music, they have also been trained in Western music as well. They all read music, for example, and are familiar with Western music theory. Several of them have written dissertations in which they have tried to communicate their traditional music through new notated forms, in a scholarly way. In this sense they represent a break from the older traditional musicians who studied strictly in the old oral tradition. More than anything else, their dual training, with one foot in the traditional music world and one foot in the contemporary musical world made this project possible. They are dedicated not just to preserving their traditional music, but also embrace the creation of new genres in their music.

Four members of CMEK came to UC Santa Cruz for five weeks in January and February 2009 to give intensive workshops for 75 hours: three hours a day, five days a week. Four instruments were the main focus of the workshops—gayageum (12 string-zither), haegeum (2 string-fiddle), daegeum (bamboo flute), and ajaeng (bowed zither). Structured around the academic requirements of a college course, the workshops required a dedication and time commitment that far exceeded the typical course requirement. Both students and faculty participated in the workshops. The presence of such gifted musicians helped inspire all of them to this greater commitment.

Daegeum virtuoso and CMEK member KIM Jeong-Seung stated about this workshop experience that "Through participation in the Workshops at UC Santa Cruz, I was very proud as a Korean Traditional Musician and saw lots of possibilities for new development of Korean traditional music. I really looked forward to the next step of the collaborative project, which was the performance at the Pacific Rim Music Festival 2010."

After the workshops, twenty-five composers (twelve faculty and thirteen graduate students) from UC Santa Cruz, Berkeley, Davis, San Diego, Columbia University and Brandeis University as well as from the Korean National University of the Arts diligently worked on their new compositions for the instrumentation of Korean instruments with Western instruments. We decided to focus on the Western ensemble of the String Quartet, and invited the Del Sol Quartet from San Francisco, and the Lydian Quartet from Boston to participate in this project. We also invited the New York New Music Ensemble, one of New York City's finest contemporary music ensembles, and the Santa Cruz Chamber players to participate, augmenting the string quartets with wind,
keyboard and percussion instruments. Over the course of the next year composers submitted sketches of their work - in partial or more complete forms - to the performers for feedback and criticism, and changes and improvements were made to the compositions as a result of this feedback.

The Internet and email proved an invaluable aid in this process, and helped to overcome the geographical distances involved. A composer in Santa Cruz could email a sketch to performers in Seoul or in Boston, and receive comments and suggestions back within a few days. In some cases the performer could even email an mp3 file of the composers score in performance, so the composer could hear the music and revise the work accordingly. This proved of great value to composers who, even after the workshops on the traditional instruments, were still relative novices in these new techniques. This collaboration created very close communication with the composers and performers (both Korean and Western).

About this process, Laurie San-Martin, composer/ professor at the University of California, Davis where she co-directs the Empyrean Ensemble of Contemporary Music writes: “Writing for gayageum and string quartet was one of the most rewarding projects I have undertaken as a composer. The Pacific Rim Music Festival is run with ambition, vision and extreme diligence. The choice of musicians and composers has also been thoughtfully selected. I found the entire experience to be professional, rewarding, and inspirational. I feel that I wrote a very strong piece partly because of all the preparation and help that the Pacific Rim Music Festival provided including master classes with the Korean instrumentalists, literature pamphlets and CD recordings of the instruments.

Professor San-Martin continues: “The gayageum performer, Ji-young Yi gave a very detailed master class at UC Santa Cruz that was many hours long and covered the techniques and nuances of writing for the instrument. While writing the piece over the next few months, I was able to send excerpts to Ji-young who would then send back an mp3 of how my excerpt would sound. This is very rare—for a musician to learn the music so far in advance and then record it and send back over email. Ji-young’s efforts demonstrated to me how dedicated she was to giving first-rate performances and how she took the project very seriously. This is one of the most conscientious responses I have seen from a busy and professional musician. The Lydian String Quartet members were also very responsive and helpful giving feedback about my writing and parts well in advance of the concert.”

This use of old and new technologies seemed to work well in the way that it was structured. That is, students first met the traditional musicians face to face in the workshops. Beginners that they were, the western students were learning the instruments with hands-on experience the way they would have a hundred years ago. They then communicated with the musicians using the most modern technologies, email, internet, mp3 and computer generated scores, to go deeply into the particular areas of the instrument that most interested them and that they were embodying in their musical compositions. The impersonality of the new technology was overcome by the initial, face-to-face meetings in the workshops. Participants met on a human level, new friendships and working relationships were initiated, and then technology helped to continue and develop them.
The entire creative process of learning the instruments/traditions, creating new compositions and getting feedback from the performers, took us about two years. The results of this effort were extremely rewarding! They were finally showcased by premiere performances at the Pacific Rim Music Festival.

I founded and have been Artistic Director of the Pacific Rim Music Festival at the University of California since 1996. The fourth presentation of the Pacific Rim Music Festival at Santa Cruz and at Brandeis University in April 2010 was the perfect opportunity to present the results of this Cultural Synthesis project. A series of concerts called the Premiere Concerts presented twenty-five world premiere performances of new music written for combinations of Western instruments and the traditional players of CMEK. Three programs were presented. Twenty-five composers—twelve distinguished faculty composers and thirteen graduate student composers—representing five generations and from ten different nationalities participated. Thirty-two top caliber performers --Contemporary Music Ensemble Korea (ten members), the Del Sol String Quartet from San Francisco, Lydian String Quartet from Boston, Santa Cruz Chamber Ensemble from Santa Cruz, and the New York New Music Ensemble performed. Five musicologists participated in seminars and colloquia presented at UC Santa Cruz. A total of sixty-two artists participated.

Judith Eissenberg of the Lydian String Quartet commented after the performances that “The experience of working on the newly composed pieces was truly memorable. It was interesting to hear how each composer dealt with the 'problem' of writing for musicians of such different traditions. We have composers to thank for being the fearless mediators, imagining new languages, finding common ground, and valuing our differences. The act of creation is such a powerful unifying force; we all felt that as we worked together. It is a lesson for the world, and artists can help light the path.”

“The audience reaction was strongly felt. Both in Santa Cruz and at Brandeis, students, faculty, community members, composers, performers - all were drawn in to the gorgeous soundscapes and stunning musical ideas.”

Haegeum virtuoso, CHUNG Soo-Neon, professor at Korean National University of the Arts stated that “A New Sound Era for the 21st Century opened through the Pacific Rim Music Festival: I am certain that a new musical genre for Korean Traditional Instruments, as well as a curtain rising on a new stage for Western Music were enabled through this Premiere Concert project.”

The achievement of this project could not have occurred without significant financial support. We received support from and are grateful to the University of California, the Korea Foundation, and to numerous individual donors who made this project possible. A comment by Professor of Music at UC Santa Cruz, David Evan Jones: “I was impressed with the standing traditional ensembles supported by the Korean government and cultural institutions. I believe that this effort to preserve tradition frees the contemporary imagination: if you know your cultural foundations are safe you are free to experiment!”

This project tried to represent the positive side of this process of moving from the personal to the collaborative. Most of us deal with the issues of cultural identity on our
own, on a personal basis, with whatever resources we may be able to gather on our
own. Moving this project to an institutional level enabled us to challenge these problems
together, and to provide support to each other as we struggled with them. I hope it gave
the individuals involved another level of resource by which they could deal with these
issues, but it could not have been achieved without significant support from those
educational and government resources.

The renewed interest in traditional music of all the world cultures has been an
encouraging development of the last few decades. The personal experiences and
projects I have described have all been directly influenced by the search for tradition in
modern life. The Cultural Synthesis project shows how traditional and modern music
can be combined within an educational structure at a school. There are also other
implications that this topic raises.

Within the field of music, there are several conflicting opinions expressed as to just how
traditional music should be treated and preserved. At the Festival, one of the topics
discussed was Pansori. Pansori is a beloved vocal form among the Korean people. A
single singer, accompanied by a single drummer, presents a dramatic narrative story
that is sung and spoken over several hours, in a uniquely Korean vocal style. It has
been recognized as an important vocal form by being named a UNESCO Intangible
Cultural Heritage.

The question arose, how should this traditional form be treated in the 21st century? I
can illustrate using three differing treatments of the form.

1) At one of the colloquia, the musicologist John Robison presented a paper on the use
of Pansori in the work of the contemporary Korean composer LEE Chan-Hae. LEE
Chan-Hae has said, “I think Pansori is like a mono-drama, opera. It is the sound of the
common people. I wanted to make it like an opera, and wanted to perform it with Western
ensemble, so it could be appreciated by a global audience. We can share this Pansori with
many people in the world, and not just have it regarded as an ethnic music”

She has been trying to compose the five Pansori pieces using different Western
Ensembles, with the accompaniment in a modern contemporary musical language. The
Pansori singing melody is the same as the original form, but the role of the Drum (Buk)
accompaniment is replaced by an ensemble accompaniment of Western and Korean
instruments. This is an attempt to make Pansori accessible to non-Koreans and to
combine Pansori with Western ensembles.

2) A different point of view is expressed by those who think traditional music should be
left untouched and preserved in its old forms. The German journalist and music critic
Mattiass Entress of Berlin has been enthusiastically promoting Pansori and has
translated the texts into German and is in the process of English translations. He thinks
the original form of Pansori must be preserved without any change:
“...Also, I don't like any add-ons in Pansori-Performance. Only a drummer and the singer. I don't like this western-opera-version Changgeuk of Pansori and I don't like to have melody instruments as accompaniment to the singing. Pansori must not be improved. The beauty inside is destroyed if some superficial beauty is added to the performance. Pansori is the art of inflaming the listener's imagination, it is the art of communication, it is not an opulent operatic form which overwhelms ears and eyes. Of course I will never allow to amplify the singer. It must be direct contact. In western theatres the acoustical situation allows this, and in Korea it also would, if one would turn down the air conditioners..."

3) Korean-American Pansori singer, Chan-Eung PARK tries to make Pansori understandable to non-Koreans by singing in English for the Aniri (narrative portion of Pansori) while singing the Sori in the original form in Korean. Many Westerners appreciate her efforts to make this Korean form accessible to non-Korean speakers.

Related to this idea is a newly created Pansori, Jesu-Jeon (The Story of the Life of Jesus Christ): It was created in the 1970's by the late Pansori Master, PARK Dong-Jin. The idea came from the late Rev. KIM, Yong-Jun who was the director general of the Korean Audio-Visual Christian Organization (later combined with the CBS, Christian Broadcasting Services). He thought that the traditional music should be brought into the Church music in Korea. This has inspired many musicians and many are trying to use traditional idioms for the church music in modern society.

To summarize these three approaches: 1) we should merge the tradition with modern genres to create something new; 2) we should preserve the tradition as it exists without changes; 3) we should modify the tradition in simple ways that don’t alter its essence in order to communicate the tradition with audiences from other cultures. These examples raise issues that I am sure are being discussed at this conference, as well as by all interested in traditional music. I think that all three of the above approaches have merit. Perhaps the key factor for us is--what is the intent of the music? Music is written for many reasons, and those reasons influence the form and character of the music. Music written for dance will be different than music written for religious service, or music written for a funeral, or music written for film or theater. For many of us the music we value most has the intention to communicate meaning--specifically, to communicate what it means to be alive today. Music has the ability to communicate things about ourselves and our lives that can not be communicated with language. Traditional music has depth and power because it is the product not of just one person's efforts, but is the product of countless generations building one upon the next, keeping what they treasure and leaving behind what they find insignificant. The attempt to convey what it means to be alive today entails the understanding of what it means to be alive today, and that understanding requires constant study, an inquisitiveness and openness to everything in the world around us. The first step must be to provide for the preservation of the past. Tradition must be preserved. With traditional practices reasonably secure, the second step must be to provide a basis for dialog between the past and the present. While a dialog of words can...
play an important role in this process, a dialog of artistic practices — cross-cultural collaborations — can be even more important. If the tradition is being preserved, new forms created through this dialogue will also be preserved by future generations if they feel an important communication of meaning, or they will be discarded if they are felt to be of insignificant meaning.

Again, the essential requirements for this project were these:

1) You must have artists who are committed to the communication between cultures and are willing to experiment and search for new musical genres and languages; As professor David Evan Jones stated, "The members of Contemporary Music Ensemble Korea are SO valuable because they are the bridges: their traditional music is alive not only because they perform it, but also because they bring their experience into dialog with contemporary European and Korean music. They are the bridges that allow transit between cultures and even between centuries: they allow the past and the future to support and sustain each other."

2) There must be a core group of committed planners who are willing to schedule events, make appropriate contacts and organize the artists, and take care of those physical elements that must be in place for the collaborations to take place;

3) There must be cultural support from the institutions of the society, the schools, foundations, businesses and governments, who are who are committed to this cultural interaction and openness. This philosophy of openness is no small matter. We believe that a society will thrive and flourish best when it opens itself up to other ideas, and promotes the free exchange of information to all its members. Like a mountain lake, if there is a constant cycling of the water from sky to earth, rivers flowing out and rain falling in, the water will remain pure and healthy. If the lake is cut off and the cycling of water blocked, the lake becomes stagnant, the water undrinkable. Individuals and societies need the free flowing of ideas to stay healthy and growing.

My position at the University of California was an important part of this process. I tried to create a framework within an educational institution by which the merging of different musical cultures can occur in more than a superficial way. It required study and effort, and above all respect for each other's traditions and aesthetic views.

These ideas, the results of our cultural synthesis project, were perhaps best exemplified by the works presented by one of the senior members of our project, the eminent Chinese-American composer/ scholar Chou Wen-chung, Professor emeritus from Columbia University in New York. He came to America as a young man, studied music composition in New York as the French-American composer Edgar Varèse's last student, and has been a strong advocate for these ideas of cultural heritage and cultural interaction since before many of us here today were born.

Professor Chou wrote three pieces for the Festival that are different, but related to each other:


Upon first listening to these three pieces we hear that they are very different, and their relationship is not easily understood. But they are very closely related.

Before I discuss composer Chou Wen-chung’s own views of these pieces, I would like to share some comments from the composer, LEE Geonyong, professor at Korean National University of the Arts:

“I felt the three versions of the Eternal Pine were all different pieces—for Korean Ensemble, New York Ensemble and the solo gayageum version. However, the composer says they are three different versions of one piece.

“Mr. Chou often mentions ‘heritage’ of the East and the West. What is the heritage of the East? Connected to this example, I think it meant ‘the mind is more important than the material.’ I think the people in the West consider the material more important, so the appearance gets more emphasis. But wisdom in the East teaches us to understand the Mind beyond the Material.

“Talking about the Eternal Pine: If we think about the material, they are clearly different pieces. Beyond that material element, if we can read the mind, the three pieces are the same piece. Mind that can see is the wisdom and the valuable heritage of the East. That was my understanding.’

And Professor Chou explained:

"Eternal Pine" for a Jeong ak ensemble is composed out of admiration for the heritage of the Korean Jeong ak (chamber music): spirituality in character and affinity to nature. It is composed with knowledge of Jeong ak practice and dedicated to its esthetics. The goal is to make a great cultural achievement of the past vibrant again with its own language but with modern sensibility.

“It is an example of what is needed today. We must revivify cultural achievements around the world to enable a cross fertilization of cultures for the future of all humanity. To do so, we must stress education in humanities, particularly the arts.

“We must stop emulating recent arts of the West at the expense of revitalizing past heritages of other regions. Nor should we continue exploiting what are labeled "exotic," "popular," or "ethnic."
“We must educate the young about our past in order to create an art of the future for the whole world, the foundation of which rests on all great heritages of the past. We must initiate a new holistic education in culture to inspire future generations.

"Ode to Eternal Pine" for modern instruments is composed out of a desire to make "Eternal Pine" more accessible across cultures today. It illustrates the potential of synthesizing the past with the present. "Eternal Pine for gayageum solo, CHANG SONG EUM" is still another version for the artist to demonstrate all the subtleties of this instrument’s beauty, so as to tantalize the public’s inert musical sensibility.

"This experience confirms my own belief that the only way towards a ‘merger’ of musical heritages that I’ve long advocated is in the education of composers and performers. I envision the future of music not by seizing it but molding it.

Humanities studies should be the foundation for the education of the 21st century composer."

This idea needs to be stated firmly. It is these aspects of educating the young in order to create an art of the future that inspired the theme of the Pacific Rim Music Festival: “Music from the Past, Music for the Future.” Through study, through workshops, through communication of ideas, utilizing the oldest musical traditions and the newest technologies, along with the cultural sensibilities of all the various people involved, we can create the music of the 21st century that thrives in its tradition and excites in its innovation.

THE END