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Teaching Korean Rhythms in Music Class Through Improvisation, Composition, and Student Performance

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce the characteristics of Korean rhythmic patterns and provide effective ways to teach Korean rhythms based on the theoretical and pedagogical approaches derived from 5,000 years of Korean musical tradition. First, we have provided the fundamental principles of Korean rhythms that represent the culture from which the music originated. Then, we have introduced the pedagogical process of Korean music, which includes the use of *gu-em* (Korean verbal syllables of music) and improvisatory practice. Finally, we have offered the resource of composition and the schoolwide performance using Korean rhythms that would be suitable to a contemporary educational context. By doing this, music educators will gain an understanding of the characteristics of Korean rhythms and acquire the skills necessary to teach them in the classrooms; as a consequence, they can confidently incorporate Korean rhythms in general music classes.

Keywords

composition, creativity, world music, culture, elementary general music, music education, improvisation

One of the most important purposes of teaching world musics in a general music classroom is to introduce unfamiliar music to students. Since the Tanglewood symposium, which posited the importance of "music of all periods, styles, forms, and cultures" (Robert, Charles, Charles, & Wersen, 1967, p. 51), the National Association for Schools of Music made world music training a mandatory part of the music education sequence in 1972, and the *National Standards for Art Education* has emphasized the importance of having students understand music in relation to history and culture (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994). In addition, the Housewright Declaration (Madsen, 2000) supported the inclusion of all types of music, stating, "All music has a place in the curriculum. Not only does the Western art tradition need to be preserved and disseminated" (p. 219).

However, it is difficult for music teachers to actively introduce those unfamiliar musical styles into the music curriculum without understanding the musical tradition through research, such as reading, performing, or listening (Campbell, 2004). In addition, music teachers also need access to high-quality multicultural materials that provide an appropriate strategy of *how* to teach those distinctive characteristics (McCarthy, 1997). This would be an important issue because in teaching music from unfamiliar cultures to students in the classroom, instructors should incorporate not only the musical style itself but also the way the music is taught within that culture (Senders & Davidson, 2000).

The purpose of this article is to introduce the characteristics of Korean rhythmic patterns and provide effective ways to teach Korean rhythms in the general music classroom setting. Since Korea has 5,000 years of history, Koreans have developed their own musical tradition. Most musical characteristics are well preserved and have been passed down to contemporary generations; rhythm patterns are one of them. Moreover, this project suggests effective ways to teach Korean rhythms based on the theoretical and pedagogical approaches derived from the Korean musical tradition, which includes improvisatory practices. Last, we will suggest the idea of teaching composition and performance to students by using these newly learned Korean rhythms, as an approach to bridge the Korean musical tradition and current practices of music education in the United States.

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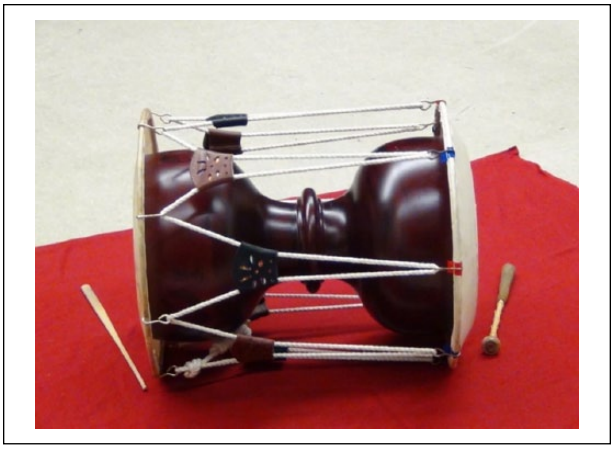

Figure 1. *Janggu* (Korean hourglass drum).

Characteristics of Korean Rhythms

In traditional Korean music, rhythm cycles play an important role, distinguishing the musical tradition of Korea from Western music, where melody and harmony take the primary place (Harwood, 1976; So, 2002). Most Korean musical pieces, including both art and folk music, have rhythmic cycles that underpin the entirety of the music. This rhythmic cycle is called *jangdan*, literally meaning "long and short." Jangdan consists of small rhythm sets of duple or triple beats that comprise either symmetrical or asymmetrical patterns (Lee, 1997).

There are two ways in which jangdan has been used in the Korean music tradition. In the first case, jangdan serves as a major means of accompanying music. Regardless of vocal or instrumental music, a cycle is repeated for a whole section, similar to the Western concept of *ostinato*. However, whereas ostinato tends to preserve the same rhythm patterns and a steady beat, Korean jangdan is repeated with lots of improvised variants. When jangdan is adopted for accompaniment, it is mainly played using the Korean hourglass-shaped drum named *janggu* (see Figure 1).

In the second case, jangdan is performed as its own form of folk music mainly played with percussion instruments. Among percussion ensembles, *samulnori* (meaning "playing the four objects") is the most popular throughout the country and abroad. In samulnori, the four Korean percussion instruments play jangdan in an artistically elaborate manner, not only with lots of improvised variants but also with increasingly accelerated tempo. The four percussion instruments include *janggu* (Korean hourglass drum), *kkwanggwari* (Korean small flat gong), *buk* (Korean barrel drum), and *jing* (Korean large gong; see Figure 2).

Jangdan includes either symmetrical or asymmetrical patterns, depending on the different allocations of duple or

Figure 2. *Samulnori*: From left, *jing* (Korean large gong), *kkwanggwari* (Korean small flat gong), *janggu* (Korean hourglass drum), and *buk* (Korean barrel drum).

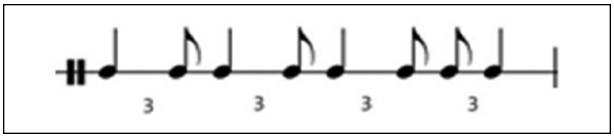

Figure 3. *Sam-chae*, the 12-beat rhythm cycle of symmetry: 3 + 3 + 3 + 3.
Source. Howard (1992, p. 27).

Figure 4. *Sam-chae*, the 12-beat rhythm cycle of asymmetry: 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3.
Source. Choi (2000, p. 140).

triple beats. For example, when the four triple beats comprise one jangdan of 12 beats, this jangdan becomes a symmetrical pattern in 12/8 meter. Figure 3 presents musical excerpts of the symmetrical 12-beat jangdan from the *Sam-chae* percussion ensemble piece (Howard, 1992).

However, the different allocation of duple and triple beats can often comprise one jangdan. Although the jangdan generally remains as a 12-beat cycle, as different sets of duple or triple beats combine up to 12 beats, it sounds asymmetrical. The musical excerpt in Figure 4 is from the same percussion ensemble piece, Sam-chae (Choi, 2000, p. 140). It sounds irregular because of the different allocation of 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3.

The different allocations can happen across more than one *jangdan* cycle. Figure 5, drawn from a Korean folk instrumental piece (Moon, 1989), presents an example of the asymmetric allocation of rhythm sets occurring within the two cycles of 12-beat jangdans across 24 beats; this process exaggerates its rhythmic asymmetry to listeners.

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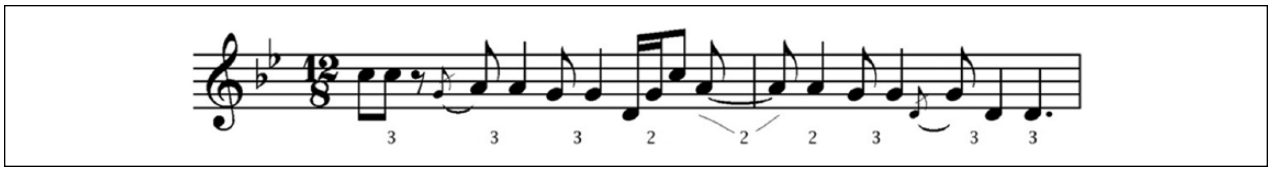

Figure 5. *Jajinmori*, the different allocation across the two 12-beat cycles.
Source. Moon (1989, p. 70).

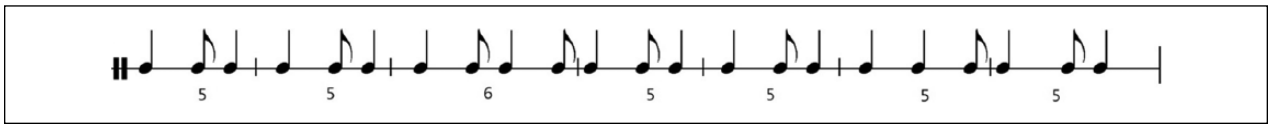

Figure 6. *Chil-chae*, the 36-beat rhythmic cycle.
Source. Lee (1997, p. 59).

These asymmetrical combinations of duple and triple beats can comprise various jangdans as short as five beats (duple + triple or triple + duple) and up to as long as 36 beats (Lee, 1997). Figure 6, excerpted from another Korean percussion piece titled *Chil-chae*, is the longest rhythmic pattern that consists of 36 beats. As shown in Figure 6, this 36-beat jangdan could also be divided into sets in this manner: 5 + 5 + 6 + 5 + 5 + 5 + 5. Moreover, it could be further subdivided into 5 (3 + 2) + 5 (3 + 2) + 6 (3 + 3) + 5 (3 + 2) + 5 (3 + 2) + 5 (3 + 2). Therefore, the long asymmetrical jangdan creates smaller jangdans within a larger one.

Traditionally, in Korea, aural and oral transmission has been a major means of teaching and learning music. Korea has developed its unique notational systems; but because of the already broad scope of this article, they will not be explained in detail. Korean notational systems have not been considered as reliable a source of critical musical information as Western music. Instead, a notational system has been devised to help musicians remember or recall a lesson, or to preserve and conserve the music (Campbell, 1991a; Paek, 2007). Following the example of Korean folk music tradition, in this article, the structure of the rhythmic patterns is described in terms of Western rhythm and Western rhythmic notation in order to help readers who are educators remember or recall a lesson or to preserve and conserve the rhythmic patterns they want to teach. However, it is advisable not to use notation when teaching students. Adopting an oral and aural teaching process is a recommendable way to help students grasp and perform musical structures when teaching Korean rhythms.

Students can practice oral and aural transmission with the use of *gu-em* presented under Western notation in the example of chil-chae in Figure 7. *Gu-em* are Korean verbal syllables of music, and it literally means "mouth tone." Gu-em is an effective tool to aid learners in memorizing music, since in this manner, some folk music is transmitted from generation to generation in Korea (So, 2002). With the nuance and strength of each phoneme, gu-em provides a sense of rhythmic length and dynamics to practitioners; in this way, it resembles Kodaly rhythm syllables. For example, as shown in Figure 7, *kkwdang-gwari gu-em* indicates the long and strong beat as "gan" and the short and weak beat as "ji." Therefore, if learners verbalize this gu-em, they could acquire rhythmic structure and could be able to play the music accordingly. Gu-em primarily imitates the sounds of each instrument (So, 2002); each syllable in the words "gan ji," "dung de," gung gu," and "jing" represents the instrumental sounds of *kkwanggwari* (Korean small flat gong), *janggu* (Korean hourglass drum), buk (Korean barrel drum), and jing (Korean large gong), respectively. Gu-em is also referred to as *yukbo*, meaning "physical notation" (So, 2002), which may imply that Korean music educators tried to "inscribe" or "notate" music inside of the learners' bodies and minds by using those syllables. Therefore, the purpose of using gu-em or yukbo is more than just memorizing music; rather, it is about having students internalize music.

One of the unique characteristics of *jangdan* lies in its improvisatory practice. Among the characteristics of this improvisation are elaboration and spontaneity, both of which can be found particularly in folk music performance, such as percussion ensembles or virtuoso instrumental solo pieces (Campbell, 1991b; Lee, 1980). Every jangdan begins with the basic pattern of slow tempo and soft dynamics. The more a cycle is repeated, the more elaboration and spontaneity take place by subdividing beats and adding the micro beats of ornamentation; variation on the basic pattern is unlimited (Choi, 2000). Moreover, along with this procedure, the tempo is gradually accelerated until performers and audiences reach their musical and emotional peak (Choi, 2000). In this

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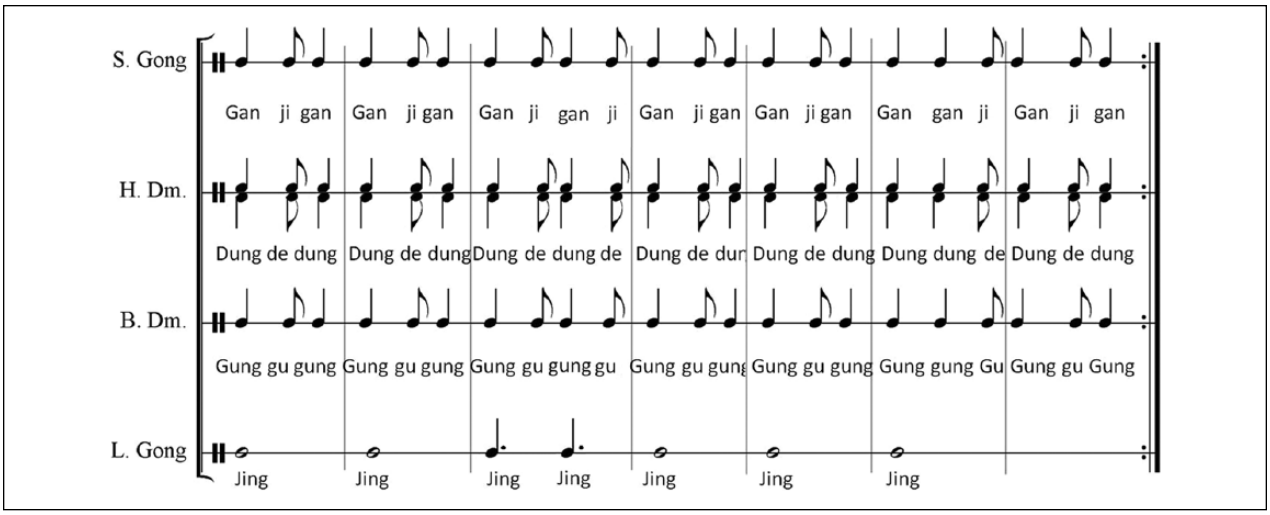

Figure 7. The notation and *gu-em* (Korean verbalizing syllables) of *chil-chae*.
Source. Choi (2000, p. 130).

manner, Korea's musical tradition has provided a certain degree of freedom to performers, which can be attributed to the improvisatory characteristics of Korean music.

Teaching procedures of the aforementioned Korean rhythms will be provided in the following sections. The procedures will use the traditional Korean learning style, gu-em, in order to teach repeated rhythmic cycles of symmetry and asymmetry, improvisatory practices, and tempo changes, primarily based on Korean musical tradition in terms of musical style and learning method. In addition, the procedures will include ideas about teaching composition and performance with the use of these newly-learned Korean rhythms to reconcile the Korean music tradition with contemporary music education practices.

Classroom Practice Teaching Korean Rhythms

The proposed lesson plan is designed for use in upper elementary and secondary music classrooms over several class periods. Through the steps that follow, students will learn basic rhythmic cycles (jangdan) of symmetry and asymmetry, how to develop the basic rhythmic cycle in the process of improvisation, and how to create and perform their own rhythmic cycles. The following lesson plan is divided into three main sections with detailed explanations of lesson procedures for each step.

The 12-Beat Rhythmic Cycle

Step 1: The symmetrical 12-beat rhythmic cycle (jangdan): The primary goal of Step 1 is for students to learn to play the symmetrical 12-beat rhythmic cycle (see Video 1 in the supplementary material). Before students play classroom instruments, they will learn to enunciate duple or triple beats using Korean verbal syllables (gu-em) that provide the students with a sense of rhythmic length and appropriate dynamics (see Figure 8). In Figure 8, rhythm (a) is pronounced "gahn-gee," "gahn" being long and strong and "gee" weak and short. Rhythm (b) is enunciated "ge-gahn" Here, the short note preceding a long note indicates the short note should be weak; thus, the rhythm (b) is pronounced with emphasis on "gahn." Rhythm (c) is pronounced "ge-ge-ge," with the first "ge" accented and stronger than the others. Rhythm (d) is pronounced "gahn" and should be long and strong. One rhythmic cycle consisting of 12 beats has the appropriate length for students to begin to learn Korean rhythms; the 12-beat rhythm will also become familiar to students as it frequently appears in Korean folk music. In this step, the teacher instructs the students to imitate symmetrical 12-beat rhythmic cycles until the students become familiar with the Korean verbal syllables. Examples of various 12-beat cycles are shown in Figure 9 (see Figure 9; see also Video 4 in the supplementary material). Once students internalize the cycles using verbal syllables,

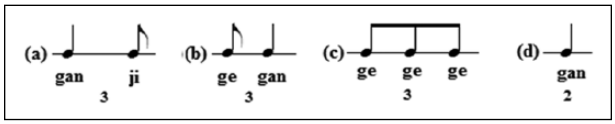

Figure 8. The notation and *gu-em* of vocalizing duple and triple beats.

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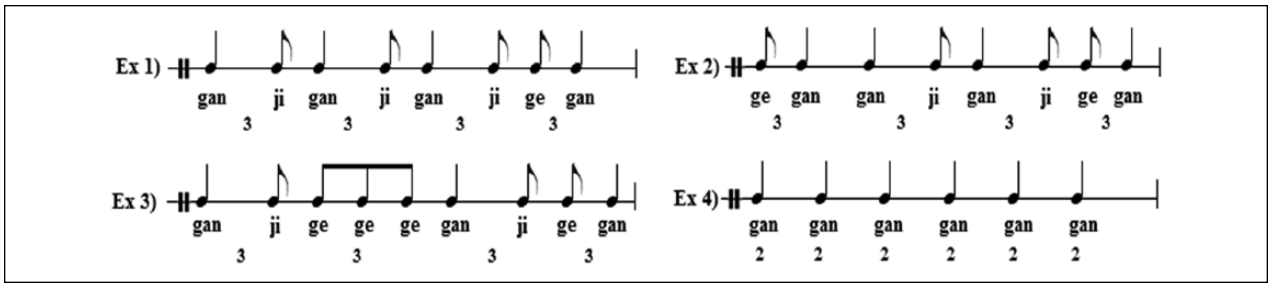

Figure 9. The notation and *gu-em* of 12-beat rhythm cycles of symmetry excerpted from *Sam-chae*.
Source. Choi (2000, p. 137).

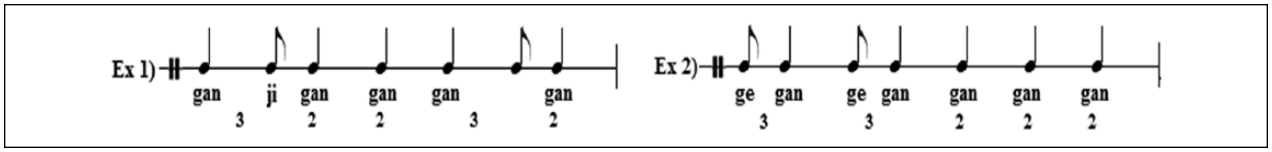

Figure 10. The notation and gu-em of 12-beat rhythm cycles of asymmetry excerpted from *Sam-chae* rhythmic cycles.
Source. Choi (2000, p. 138).

they can practice replicating them on instruments, maintaining the correct rhythms and placing accents in the appropriate places.

Step 2: The asymmetrical 12-beat rhythmic cycle (jangdan): The second step of the lesson plan involves practicing the allocations of duple and triple beats in the asymmetrical 12-beat rhythmic cycle. To help students acquire a sense of the patterns of an asymmetrical 12-beat rhythmic cycle, the teacher instructs students by chanting several rhythmic cycles containing different allocations of duple or triple beats (see Figure 10; see also Video 2 in the supplementary material) using Korean verbal syllables. Afterwards, students practice the rhythmic cycles on the classroom instruments

Step 3: Improvisatory practice in the 12-beat rhythmic cycle: After students recognize and become familiar with both symmetrical and asymmetrical 12-beat rhythmic cycles, they can begin learning the process of improvisation with these rhythmic cycles through the following steps. The teacher first provides students with the symmetrical 12-beat rhythmic cycle (see Figure 9) that the students practiced in the first step. Students play the provided rhythmic cycle several times until they are familiar with the basic pattern. Afterward, they are encouraged to add micro beats of ornamentation to the basic patterns. When an ornamental note precedes any note, it is pronounced "gə-rahng"; gə should be weak and added to the following note as quickly as possible and "rahng" should be strong (see Figure 11; see also Video 5 in the supplementary material). Then, instructors can encourage students to allocate different rhythm sets of duple and triple beats within 12 beats. During this process, tempo is increasingly accelerated from slow to fast. The more the rhythm peaks in the fast tempo, the more the beat tends to be subdivided with the loudest dynamics. In this process, initial beats of the duple and triples beats should be accented so as to avoid blurring the border between duple and triple beats (Video 6 in the supplementary material).

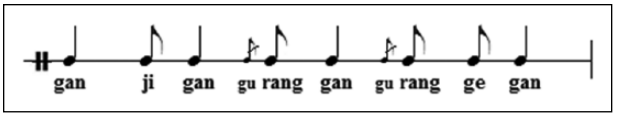

Figure 11. The notation and *gu-em* of the ornamental notes.

The Extended Rhythmic Cycle (Beyond the 12-Beat Cycle)

After sufficient practice of the 12-beat cycle, the teacher can instruct students to play longer rhythmic cycles, such as the symmetrical 24-beat rhythmic cycle or the asymmetrical 36-beat rhythmic cycle through the same steps as the 12-beat rhythms. The teacher uses two rhythmic cycles of Sam-chae (24-beat cycle) and the chil-chae rhythmic cycle (36-beat cycle) so as to teach longer rhythmic cycles, because both frequently appear in the well-known Korean percussion ensemble pieces, such as samulnori (see Figure 2).

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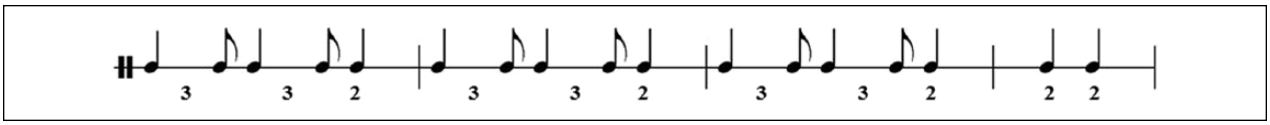

Figure 12. The example of a longer rhythmic cycle of asymmetry in classroom composition.

Composition and Performance

So far, students have learned and performed the symmetrical and asymmetrical rhythmic cycles drawn from Korean tradition. Now, we suggest the next step of composition and performance to allow students to extend the rhythmic cycles to any longer patterns and make their own performances, creating a link between the Korean and Western music tradition.

For the compositional activity, the teacher divides the class into groups of four students and then asks each group to choose two different types of rhythmic cycles. For example, one group might select a rhythmic cycle consisting of 12 and 24 beats, and another group might choose 12 and 28 beats. Next, students determine the allocations of duple and triple beats in their rhythmic cycles (e.g., 28 beats: 3 + 3 + 2 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2; see Figure 12). Following the allocation, the students design the overall structure of their composition: for instance, (A) 28 beats × 4 times (B) 12 beats (A) 28 beats × 4 times, and so on. Finally, each group performs its own rhythmic cycles for the class with the use of instruments (either traditional Korean instruments or classroom instruments), which could result in an expanded percussion piece for an extended version of a classroom composition-based activity. The two examples (Videos 7 and 8 in the supplementary material) are extended versions of classroom composition based on the same Korean rhythmic structure explained above. If authentic Korean instruments are available to you, it is advisable that you provide your students with an opportunity to learn to play and perform their own rhythms. If you do not have Korean traditional instruments, you could borrow these authentic instruments from the Korean student union at a local university or Korean *Hangul* schools where Korean American children usually learn Korean culture and language.

However, realistically, most music teachers have been faced with limited access to traditional instruments in their classrooms. In school systems where traditional instruments are unavailable, it is acceptable, practical, and effective to use classroom instruments so as to provide students with opportunities to experience active and participatory music-making activities with diverse musical cultures (Bartolome, 2011; Klinger, 1996). Teachers can also take advantage of technology by bringing i-instruments and applications for mobile devices to world music lessons in the general music classroom. With these opportunities, teachers can aid students in experiencing indigenous instruments in an indirect manner.

In addition, teachers can frequently use handmade instruments created to resemble the appearance and sounds of traditional ethnic instruments to encourage students to engage in performing and making music (Anderson & Campbell, 2011). For example, a gallon-sized plastic milk carton can be a substitute for a Korean drum because the mechanics of vibration of both are similar. The Korean metal instrument kkwanggwari (a small gong) can be replaced by a metal bowl because both are made of metal. The students of each group are provided with everyday-item instruments attached to pictures of authentic instruments. By drawing associations between performances on handmade instruments with images of the traditional instruments they simulate, teachers can effectively and accurately introduce students to different musical cultures (Anderson & Campbell, 2011). More important, the teacher should allow the students to compare recordings (see Video 9 in the supplementary material) of "the original music" played with traditional instruments to the "students' recreations of it" played with the classroom instruments or ordinary objects (Campbell, 2004; Szego, 2005). By linking the authentic sounds of world music to their compositions (Anderson & Campbell, 2011; Campbell, 2004), teachers can effectively "tune students' ears to the sounds of the musicians" (Bartolome, 2011).

Reflections on Future Teaching in the World Music Class

Schippers and Campbell (2012) reported that music teachers have faced some challenges associated with teaching multicultural music including teachers' fear of being inauthentic, presenting the music out of context, a limited understanding of pedagogical processes, and lack of the necessary resources. In this article, we have tried to provide some practical guidance to teach Korean rhythms in order to help teachers resolve those challenges. First, we have provided the fundamental principles of Korean rhythms so as to provide musical authenticity. Also, we have introduced the pedagogical process of Korean music, which includes the use of gu-em and improvisatory practice. Last, we have provided the resources of composition and performance using Korean rhythm that

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would be suitable in a contemporary educational context. In this manner, students would be able to experience Korean musical tradition, which has been practically adapted for use in current general music classrooms. More world music materials satisfying both the original musical tradition and practicability should be developed and disseminated to the music classroom, not only from Korean music but also from various music cultures. By doing this, music teacher educators will gain an understanding of each characteristic of music from different cultures and acquire the skills necessary to teach them in their classrooms; as a consequence, they can confidently incorporate world music in general music classes.

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