

Korean music



Korean music, the art concerned with combining vocal or instrumental sounds for beauty of form or emotional expression, specifically as it is

carried out in Korea, or the Korean peninsula, where a strong indigenous tradition has been influenced by the Chinese and the Mongols.



On a map the Korean peninsula, which comprises the countries of North Korea and South Korea, looks like a finger pointing from the top of China down to the lower part of Japan. Thus, one would expect its music to reflect its “bridge” position between two such powerful traditions. The movements of foreign, particularly

Chinese, armies and cultures are indeed major factors in Korea’s tradition. But beneath these reflections lies a deeper core of indigenous musical styles that, at first hearing, seem most strange to the ear of listeners with preconceived notions as to what East Asian music sounds like. A possible additional factor in the growth of Korean music is the region’s position as a peninsula jutting out from Manchuria and from the native ground of many Mongolian hordes. Archaeological sources indicate that various Mongol peoples from northern Asia did indeed occupy areas of Korea from at least 2000 BCE, and Chinese writings show that their people and armies were active in Korea from the period of the Chinese Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) on. Obviously, a study of Korean music contains riches extending far beyond its geographic borders.

SHAMAN MUSIC



The earliest references to music in Korea are found in a 3rd-century-CE Chinese text that comments on agricultural festivals (*nong’ak*) with singing and dancing among the tribes of northwestern Korea. Such

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events are still a strong part of Korean life. Another ancient but long-lived tradition in Korea is shamanism, or communication with the unseen world by a shaman in a state of trance. This is of special interest because such a belief is historically characteristic not only of all northern Asian tribes but also of other peoples (such as Eskimos [Inuit]) who live in the northernmost regions of the world. Korea is one of the few regions south of the Arctic that maintains strong shamanism in the face of foreign religious adoptions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity.



Musician (left) playing a *changgo*, an hourglass-shaped drum, ...

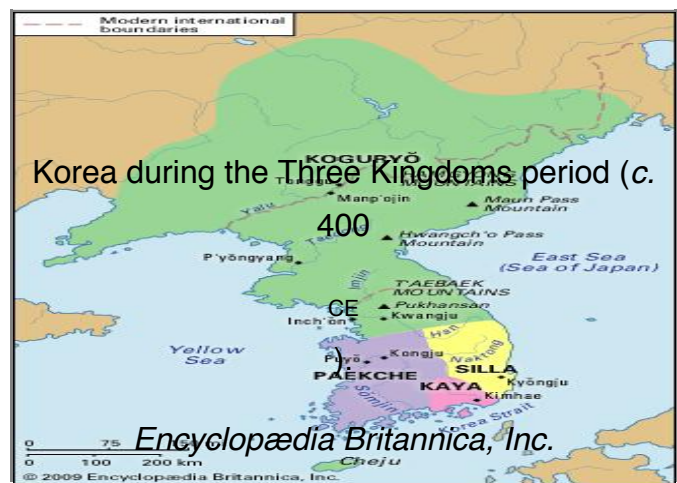
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A female Korean shaman (*mudang*) may use many combinations of musical instruments. The simplest and potentially most significant accompaniment is a small, flat gong with a slight rim. It brings to mind the single-headed pan drum with a wooden or bone hoop found in the shamanism of most of Central Asia and in the

Arctic Circle as far away as Lapland and Hudson Bay. A drum sound itself is produced in Korea by the most popular percussion instrument, the *changgo*, an hourglass-shaped, two-headed drum struck by the hand on the left head and a stick or a ball-headed beater on the other. In Korean shaman rituals, flutes, double reeds, fiddles, and other gongs and drums may be used that at first sight may appear rather Chinese. The sound, however, creates a totally different impression.

To the uninitiated listener, the driving polyphony (combination of simultaneous voices, or parts) of Korean music might seem closer to Dixieland jazz than to Chinese music. For example, the flute part in a small shaman ensemble may employ such devices as microtonal slides (shifts in pitch that are less than a semitone, or half step), intervals that are “out of tune” with the ancient Chinese *lü* (bamboo) tuning pipes, and syncopated rhythms, which together yield a very un-Chinese jazzlike sound. Korean music also exhibits a tendency toward a six-beat metric unit as well as a kind of polymetric character; while some parts are organized in six-beat units, others might seem to follow beats of four, so all parts come together only after 12 beats. Triplets and even five-beat forms are found as well. These stylistic features are indeed unique to Korea and are typical of the kind of music best known and loved by the general Korean populace. Less-familiar styles of court music are maintained by dedicated national music institutes and Korean scholarship.

COURT INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC



According to legend, the Three Kingdoms of Koguryŏ in the north, Paekche in the southwest, and Silla in the southeast were established in the century before the 1st century CE along with the “lost kingdom” of Kaya. The subsequent organization of courts and the introduction of Chinese religions resulted in an ever-increasing importation of various elements of Chinese music. Indications of this can be found in such sources

as paintings in a tomb (357 CE) near Anak, a colony of China at that time. A horseback band of the Chinese Han-dynasty style is seen with drums and a small bell hit with a hammer. One brave rider apparently is able to play the Chinese panpipes in transit. Deeper in the tomb a zither, a lute, and a very long end-blown flute can be seen accompanying a dancer whose long nose and costume imply that Central Asian traditions may have traveled even as far as Korea by the 4th century. The Silla dynasty domination (668–935) coincided closely with the heyday of the Chinese Tang dynasty (619–907), and the subsequent Koryŏ (935–1392) and Chosŏn dynasties (1392–1910) also tended to match parallel Chinese periods. Thus, Korea’s court-music traditions tended to reflect those of China.

Being on the border of Chinese culture, Korea was able to maintain certain ancient traditions during periods of foreign domination in China proper. Such marginal survivals are of particular importance because many have continued to the present day, thus giving extremely rare examples of music traditions long gone from the land of their origin. For instance, in the Silla period, court music was divided into *hyang’ak*, Korean music; *tang’ak*, Tang and Song Chinese music; and *a’ak*, Confucian ritual music. The instruments used for these ensembles were of Chinese derivation and included sets of tuned stones (in Korean *p’yŏn’gyŏng*) and bells (*p’yŏnjong*), mouth organ (*saeng*), and instruments in all the other eight categories of Chinese classical traditions (e.g., those based on the materials used in their construction). In the 21st century both North and South Korea, unlike China, continue to support national institutes that train players for ensembles using such instruments in the institutes themselves and in Confucian rituals. Among the many instrumental treasures still played in Korea is the *ajaeng*, a zither—with seven strings and movable bridges—that is not plucked but, most unusually, bowed with a rosined stick of wood.



Korean *p'iri*, a type of double-reed aerophone.
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other flutes is the open lower end. The lower end of the *chi* can thus be closed by the little finger of the left hand. This unique flute, known to have been in Korea by at least the 11th century, has totally disappeared from the rest of East Asia. By contrast, the *p'iri* cylindrical double-reed aerophone (wind instrument) has many relatives in Asia, but the rich saxophone-like tone produced by its deceptively narrow tube body and large reed are not heard elsewhere. It is heard in many varieties of Korean musical contexts, from folk festivals to urban parties.



Musician a *taegŭm* flute
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Musician playing a *haegŭm*, a Korean two-stringed fiddle.
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bridges, whereas the central three strings pass over 16 bridges. The instrument is played by plucking the strings with a wooden stick. A similarly indigenized Korean instrument is the *haegŭm* two-stringed fiddle. While an obvious relative of the Chinese *erhu*, with the bow passing between the strings, the neck is bent toward the strings (rather than away from them, as in the rest of the world), and the pegs seem to be inserted backward, so the strings are wrapped around the large round part of the pegs instead of the narrower end, which sticks out, unused, from the back of the neck. The warm sound of the *kayagŭm* zither with 12 strings and 12 movable bridges is surprising to those accustomed to Chinese and Japanese zither melodies, which have a brighter timbre (sound quality). It is held that the *kayagŭm* was created in the 6th century in the Kaya area; an early example of the instrument survives in the 8th-century Shōsō Repository. The *kayagŭm* is regarded as

The globular flute (*hun*), mentioned as one of the very earliest artifacts of Chinese music, has been played in Korean Confucian temples since the 12th century, as has a *chi* flute, which has a bamboo mouthpiece plugged into the mouth-hole with wax. In addition to five finger holes it has a cross-shaped hole in what on other flutes is the open lower end. The lower end of the *chi* can thus be closed by the little finger of the left hand. This unique flute, known to have been in Korea by at least the 11th century, has totally disappeared from the rest of East Asia. By contrast, the *p'iri* cylindrical double-reed aerophone (wind instrument) has many relatives in Asia, but the rich saxophone-like tone produced by its deceptively narrow tube body and large reed are not heard elsewhere. It is heard in many varieties of Korean musical contexts, from folk festivals to urban parties.

Not all the instruments of Korea are direct imports from the Chinese. The *taegŭm* flute with six finger holes, a membrane-covered hole for a buzzing sound, and open holes near the end would seem to be a Chinese instrument, except for its spectacular length of

about 31 inches (80 cm) and its gigantic mouth-hole. A 7th-century Korean musician, Wang San-Ak, is credited with the invention of the *kōmungo*, a zither with six strings that was apparently an adaptation of the Chinese seven-string zither *qin*. Two strings on one side of the *kōmungo* and one on the other have movable

Korea’s favourite native instrument, and it can be heard in all levels of Korean music and dance. The *sanjo* virtuoso solo repertoire for this zither represents one of Korea’s best-known purely instrumental genres.



Musician playing a *kayagŭm*, a Korean 12-stringed zither.

The National Centre for Korean Traditional Performing Arts

Much of what is known about the origin of instruments is derived from Chinese and Korean historical books and administrative documents, such as the grand list of presents sent by the Chinese Song emperor to Korea in the year 1111. The list includes 10 sets of stone chimes and 10 bronze bell sets, along with five iron equivalents that sound in a higher register and numerous other

instruments. Korean musicians performed successfully at the Chinese court, and Korean monks attended the international training centres in China to learn Buddhist chant. During the reign of Sejong (1419–50), new imperial shrine music and traditional Confucian ritual music were emphasized along with musical settings of epics written in the newly developed Hangul (Chosŏn muntcha) Korean alphabet. The grand traditions of China were preserved under the guidance of the court master of music, Pak Yŏn (1378–1458).

kyemyŏnjo

p'yŏngjo

ujo

Kyemyŏnjo, p'yŏngjo, and ...

Proof of the diligence and concern of these and later efforts are found in the *Akhak kwebom* (“Music Handbook”), first appearing in 1493. The nine chapters of this work contain pictures of all the court instruments along with their fingerings or tunings, costumes and accessories for ritual dances, and the arrangements of dance designs and orchestral seatings. The first three chapters deal with music theory and contain ample evidence of the continuation of the complete Chinese

Seven-tone Chinese scale (starting for ease of comparison from Western C), showing the five-tone ...

classical tradition. The only differences are the pronunciations given to the Chinese characters in which the terminology is written. Over the centuries the naming and interpretation of the pentatonic (five-pitch) modes in Korea have varied greatly. In contemporary practice, the *kyemyŏnjo* and *p'yŏngjo* modes are considered basic. *Ujo* is a variant on *p'yŏngjo*, usually a fourth (a musical interval equivalent to that spanning four white keys on the piano) higher. The exact pitch on which these modes are written or played varies.

From the short theoretical discussion above it should be evident that Korean musicians maintained a balance between native and Chinese traditions. Such a balance is seen in the standard instrumentation of the three major court orchestras. By the 15th century the Chinese-style *tang'ak* and the Confucian *a'ak* ensembles concentrated on Chinese instruments such as bell and stone-chime sets, and the texts of surviving *tang'ak* pieces such as *Luoyangzhun* ("Spring in Luoyang") follow the Chinese *ci* poetical form. Processional military music (*ch'wit'a*) begins in the style seen in ancient drawings, with drums, gongs, and accompanying conch shell and straight trumpets, in addition to a "barbarian" oboe with a conical body. This ensemble is followed by a softer one with the more typical Korean hourglass drum (*changgo*) and cylindrical oboe (*p'iri*), the unusual Korean fiddle (*haegŭm*), and flutes (*taegŭm*). The softer ensemble can also be heard in dance music (*samhyŏn*), whereas chamber music (*chŏng'ak*) softens this group further by using a smaller oboe along with the later addition of the Chinese "western" dulcimer (*yangqin*, or, in Korean, *yanggŭm*). The most famous suite of movements in this and in orchestral traditions is the *Yŏngsan hoesang*, which consists of nine pieces—normally performed eight or nine at a time—that together may take nearly an hour to play. The title is based on a former religious chant about the Buddha preaching on Yŏngsan (Mount Yŏng), but the pieces attached to this general name have since lost their vocal tradition. When the Korean ensemble (*hyang'ak*) plays pieces such as *Sujech'ŏn* ("Long Life as Immeasurable as the Sky"), one hears a more indigenous combination of the hourglass drum, oboes, flutes, fiddles, and the special bowed zithers (*ajaeng*).



Musician playing an *ajaeng*, a type of bowed zither, in a ...

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The survival of so many old traditions is partly due to the preservation of notation books. Many are in the traditional Chinese forms. In the late 15th century, however, a Korean mensural system (i.e., a notation showing time values) was created that, through the use of columns of 16 squares, gave a clearer indication of

rhythm and tempos than do most Chinese notations. This system, usually with modifications into 6- or 12-square groups, continues to be used to notate the six-beat rhythms of Korean music.

VOCAL MUSIC

Vocal music is another important facet of the Korean tradition. One of the longest and rarest older forms is the *kagok*, which consists of 26 five-section solo songs and one duet.

Accompaniments and interludes are provided by a small ensemble that usually consists of a *kŏmungo* (six-stringed zither), a *se'piri* (a small double-reed aerophone), a *taegŭm* (large bamboo flute), a *haegŭm* (two-stringed fiddle), and a *changgo* (hourglass drum). *Sijo* is a three-line form of classical Korean lyric poetry that may be sung to the sole accompaniment of an hourglass drum; in formal settings, however, the drum is normally joined by a double-reed aerophone, a flute, or a fiddle. Narrative songs are found in the genre called *kasa* accompanied by a flute and drum.

Kagok, *sijo*, and *kasa* are all types of court music. The dominant narrative form of music performed today, however, is the folk genre *p'ansori*. It is traditionally performed by a singer-narrator (*kwangdae*) and a drummer (*kosu*), who marks phrases with rhythmic patterns on a barrel drum (*puk*) and with vocal interjections (*ch'uimsae*). Spoken narration and dialogue (*aniri*) are balanced with songs (*ch'ang*), body movements, and fan gestures as hours of epic drama unfold. It may be that *p'ansori* emerged from ancient shamanistic entertainments of the gods before it became popular with the aristocracy. The earliest written records of it date to 1775. Of the many stories noted in later sources, five have survived both in written form and in popular folk tales. In the late 20th century, government support revived the tradition, so that *p'ansori* epics are available on recordings and in professional performances. *P'ansori* is also celebrated in such films as *Sŏp'yonje* (1993), which depicts the lives of two *p'ansori* singers in the 1950s, and *Chunhyang* (2000), which is an adaptation of the love story recounted in the *Ch'unhyangga* song cycle; both were by film director Im Kwon-Taek.

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