

# Points Of Intersection: American Composer Meets East-Asian Instruments

4/23/23

**Text & Interviewer** / Prof. Donald R. WOMACK

**Image** / Prof. FAN Wei-Tsu, Prof. Donald R. WOMACK, Taipei Chinese Orchestra, Chinese Culture University Department of Chinese Music,

## Preface by the translator of the Chinese version

— FAN Wei-Tsu

I first met Dr. WOMACK when performing in Seoul in October 2016. During a visit to the National Gugak Center, I was introduced to an austere looking, silver haired American composer. In the ensuing conversation, I was happy to learn we were alumni of the Northwestern University. Though our times there didn't overlap mostly, we both have some fond memories of the Evanston campus. As our conversations became more and more engaged, Dr. WOMACK's eyes turned piercingly bright, while sprinkled with radiant smiles. Later on I was able to know more of his compositions through our mutual friend YI Jiyoung, a renowned Gayageum performer and a Professor at the Seoul National University. I felt it quite fascinating that Dr. WOMACK's works have an organic vibe between his music idiom and various Asian instruments, without the strenuousness found in certain contemporary music of the genre. Many TCO fans first heard Dr. WOMACK's music, i.e. the second movement of the Gayageum concerto Scattered Rhythm, performed by YI Jiyoung in a gala concert last year. We are glad to have him in person this time as one of the keynote speakers for the 2023 TCO Academic Symposium for Chinese Orchestra, sharing his profound experience in writing new music for traditional Asian instruments from different countries.



Conducting 무노리 (Mu Nori) with the Gyeonggi Sinawi Orchestra November 2018

## Text

This article is adapted from a keynote speech I gave at the 2023 International Symposium on New Music for Chinese Instruments, hosted by the Taipei Chinese Orchestra. When I was first approached by Professor FAN Wei-Tsu of Chinese Culture University, one of the event's organizers, my initial thought was "why on earth is he asking me to give a keynote speech at a conference on composing for Chinese instruments?" After all, when you think about someone to fill that role, a white American who has not composed much for Chinese instruments is not the first person who comes to mind!!

But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Oftentimes, an outsider's perspective helps us understand ourselves better. Speaking from my own experience, living in Japan and Korea and traveling throughout Europe has helped me better understand American culture. Learning to speak Japanese and Korean, at least to the limited extent that I'm able, has helped me better understand how the English language works and to recognize limitations of which I had previously been unaware. And composing for East Asian instruments has helped me better understand western instruments, prompting me to explore approaches I had not thought of. When we encounter new ways of thinking about things that we're already familiar with, we're encouraged to do a healthy self-analysis.

This article is adapted from a keynote speech I gave at the 2023 International Symposium on New Music for Chinese Instruments, hosted by the Taipei Chinese Orchestra. When I was first approached by Professor FAN Wei-Tsu of Chinese Culture University, one of the event's organizers, my initial thought was "why on earth is he asking me to give a keynote speech at a conference on composing for Chinese instruments?" After all, when you think about someone to fill that role, a white American who has not composed much for Chinese instruments is not the first person who comes to mind!!



Introducing pipa to school kids with YANG Jing Honolulu March 2019

But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Oftentimes, an outsider's perspective helps us understand ourselves better. Speaking from my own experience, living in Japan and Korea and traveling throughout Europe has helped me better understand American culture. Learning to speak Japanese and Korean, at least to the limited extent that I'm able, has helped me better understand how the English language works and to recognize limitations of which I had previously been unaware. And composing for East Asian instruments has helped me better understand western instruments, prompting me to explore approaches I had not thought of. When we encounter new ways of thinking about things that we're already familiar with, we're encouraged to do a healthy self-analysis.

So it was from that perspective that I addressed the symposium attendees, not just to introduce my music, but to do so in the hopes that it might somehow encourage others to examine their own paths and discover things that they otherwise might not.

Toward that end, I would like to share some of my music and experiences that have led me to this point, in particular my work with Korean and Japanese instruments. To begin, a little background will be useful. How does someone like me end up composing for Asian instruments?

I live in Honolulu, where I serve as Professor of Composition and Theory at the University of Hawaii, as well as a faculty member of both the Center for Korean Studies and Center for Japanese Studies. As anyone who has spent time there can attest, Hawaii is not only halfway between Asia and America geographically, it's also halfway between Asia and the West culturally. Living in Honolulu is as much like living in East Asia as it is like living in mid-America. Everyday life is a mixture of Asian and American cultures. So when I moved to Honolulu nearly 30 years ago, I moved to what was, for me at the time, a very different culture. And, as it naturally tends to happen, gradually over time I absorbed elements of that culture, and elements of it began to seep into my work.

Then, in 2003 I met the late-Japanese composer 三木稔 (MIKI Minoru), who became a friend, and he asked me to compose a piece for his ensemble based in Tokyo. The piece was for (what I considered at the time) a strange mix of Japanese and Chinese instruments – shakuhachi, koto, and pipa. At first I wasn't interested – why would I write for these weird instruments?!! But I decided to do it anyway. And I'm very glad I did, because, as it turned out, I loved it!

I encountered in the instruments things that are not easily available when I write for western instruments. The nature of the instruments themselves forced me to take a different compositional approach, and this was liberating. Over the next several years I wrote many works for Japanese instruments, and a few for Chinese instruments as well. I spent a year in Tokyo in 2007-08 working with Japanese instruments as composer-in-residence for the ensemble AURA-J, and to date I have written about 20 pieces for Japanese instruments and another half dozen for Chinese instruments.

An equally important connection occurred in 2008, when 이지영 (YI Jiyoung, 李知玲), Professor of gayageum at Seoul National University and a highly influential figure in gugak (traditional Korean music), made a visit to the University of Hawaii, and introduced me to Korean instruments. The first piece I ended up writing for her turned out to be a gateway for many opportunities, and I am grateful to Professor YI for opening many doors for me in Korea and beyond.



Professor WOMACK was invited to deliver a keynote speech at The TCO 2023 International Symposium on the Creation of Chinese Music on April 23rd.

At this point I have composed close to 40 pieces for Korean instruments, most of which have become standard repertoire in Korea, being performed regularly. I have had the privilege of working with most of the top gugak orchestras and many of the top gugak players. I have been fortunate to receive a steady stream of commissions from Korea, and for the past decade or so I have traveled to Korea several times a year for significant performances.

Like my time in Tokyo, I also had the opportunity to spend a year in Seoul during 2021-22, where I worked with many top gugak musicians and was a visiting professor in the gugak department at Seoul National University. Further – and this honestly seems a little strange to me – my music for Korean instruments has thus far been the subject of somewhere around 25 graduate dissertations and theses at several universities in Korea and in the U.S.

With all of that in mind, I will share some of my music and experiences, in particular examining my approach to Korean instruments since that is where most of my work is being done these days.

The reader should keep in mind that while I may be referring to Korean or Japanese instruments for a particular example, the broader underlying concepts usually apply to East Asian instruments in general. I do, of course, understand that there are significant differences between Korean, Japanese and Chinese instruments, and that technical aspects require different compositional approaches. But when I speak of broader, more conceptual ideas, rather than specific technical issues, the approaches I'm talking about can generally be applied to all instruments.

The first piece I would like to present is my gayageum quartet *미로 (Labyrinth)*<sup>1</sup>, which was commissioned by the Seoul Gayageum Ensemble. Gayageum is the Korean version of Chinese guzheng or Japanese koto. Note that the traditional Korean gayageum is sanjo gayageum, which has only 12 strings. But this piece is for a quartet of 25-string gayageum, a modern modified instrument.

As an aside, I think of sanjo gayageum and 25-string gayageum as completely different instruments. The question of traditional versions of instruments vs. so-called “improved” or modified versions is an important issue, especially in Korea, but one that, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that I strongly disagree with the English word “improved” when used to describe modified instruments, as it places central importance on musical elements valued in music of the western classical tradition, usually at the expense of elements valued in traditional East Asian music, which I believe should be of at least equal importance.

This piece could never be composed for western instruments – it has to be for gayageum, as it would not work for harps, or piano or string quartet or anything else. And that is precisely the point. Every piece I write, whether for Korean, Japanese, Chinese or western instruments, should fit the characteristics of those instruments in the most organic and natural way possible.

The nature of a particular instrument and the things that instrument does well are going to influence the way that I write, so that the music fits, as ideally as possible, what the instrument does best. To put it another way, I could never start writing a piece and then decide the instrumentation later – to do so is inconceivable to me, since what I write is going to be determined by the instruments. This is a fundamentally important way of thinking for me, one that informs every compositional decision I make.

Just as important though is that the instrument fits what I do best. To write really well for an instrument – any instrument – a composer has to find points of intersection between the natural capabilities of the instrument and their own personal compositional voice.

In my case, I have done well writing for Korean instruments in particular because there are many characteristics of gugak and gugak instruments that intersect with my personal compositional interests, that offer the chance to do what I want to do, that amplify my compositional voice. Korean instruments offer me many points of intersection between their sound world and mine. In other words, Korean instruments are very good at doing many of the things that I like to do as a composer.

This, I think, is extremely important. A composer needs to find those points of intersection, those natural aspects of the instruments that closely align with the composer's own voice. A composer who finds those will usually do well. A composer who uses instruments in ways that are natural and idiomatic both for the instruments and the composer is likely to get a good result. On the other hand, for a composer who tries to force the instruments into an unnatural fit, or conversely, forces their own voice in unnatural ways to fit the instruments, things are not likely to go well.

So, I would like to share some my own experience as to how I've gone about finding those points of intersection. To do that I need to discuss some characteristics of my music, and how they fit with – in this case – Korean instruments.

--First of all, my music tends to be very rhythmic, using highly developed rhythmic textures, with multiple layers of rhythm, interlocking between instruments, polyrhythm and so forth. Korean instruments are quite good at this. Gugak is very much rhythmically oriented, much more so than the music of China and Japan, and it traditionally uses a lot of complex rhythm.

--Second, my music is often very energetic and driving in character, with a tendency to use structures based on gradual building of tension. The folk genres of gugak have a similar energetic and driving character, and their structures tend to be long builds based on gradually increasing activity, so the instruments are naturally designed to sustain those things.

--A third point of intersection between my music and Korean instruments is a focus on scoring and nuance in color, using a lot of glissando, pitch decoration, pitch bending, and playing “between the notes” so to speak. This is an area where Korean instruments – and I would say Japanese and Chinese instruments also – are an ideal fit for me. This sort of thing is exactly what East Asian instruments are naturally designed to do.

In fact, I would argue that articulation through things like timbral ornamentation and pitch bending is perhaps the most important element of Korean instruments. In a sense, whereas Western instruments are largely “about” pitch, Korean instruments largely “about” timbre. Or, as I like to think of it, western music generally uses the element of timbre to carry the element of pitch, while Korean music generally uses the element of pitch to carry that of timbre. This aspect of Korean instruments thus fits very naturally with my music.

Obviously there is a lot more to my style than just these three points, but I want to focus on these because they are my main points of intersection with Korean instruments, the things that I typically try to take advantage of when I write. If I can find things that fit both my compositional style and the natural characteristics of the instruments, then there should be a real fusion of musical elements. That is interesting to me, and is the frame of mind with which I approach East Asian instruments.

Since it is vitally important for the reader to actually hear the music, I will present two pieces for larger ensemble, each a concerto for a solo Korean instrument with gugak orchestra. First are two short excerpts from *혼무 (Dancing With Spirits)*, which is for haegeum and gugak orchestra.

<sup>1</sup> Video link to *Labyrinth*





Haegeum is the Korean version of erhu, but while they look very similar, it is important to understand that they are actually quite different. Whereas erhu has undergone extensive modification so that it is very versatile and effective at playing fast, virtuosic music, haegeum has retained its original characteristics. This has both advantages and disadvantages – modification of instruments usually comes with a tradeoff, something is gained, but something else is lost. Again, for this issue it is important to understand how instrument modification privileges or disenfranchises a particular musical tradition.

혼무 (*Dancing With Spirits*) was commissioned by the Busan National Gugak Center, which specifically wanted me to write a piece based on 동해안별신굿 (Donghaean Byolshin Gut), a Korean shaman ritual. This being a concerto, the haegeum soloist plays the role of the shaman of course.

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the features of Byolshin Gut, other than to say that it is a long ritual, which can tend to feel like a wild party. The music is very energetic, almost chaotic sounding sometimes, so I wanted to emulate that character in my piece – the chaotic excitement of the ritual.

An example of Byolshin Gut can be viewed here.<sup>2</sup> (A good representative sample of the music can be heard from about 6:30-8:00 on the video.)

In its entirety 혼무 (*Dancing With Spirits*) is about 23 minutes in eight short movements, but I will point the reader to three excerpts, from movements five, six and seven.

The fifth movement is called *Drums and Gongs*, which refers to the instrumental group that typically accompanies the ritual. This movement exhibits the wild, almost chaotic feel that can be found in parts of the ritual.

In *Shaman Songs*, the sixth movement, solo haegeum emulates the shaman singing, as the music becomes more and more active.

The seventh movement, called *Dancing With Spirits*, is the climax of the piece. Here the shaman slowly dances herself into a frenzy, where she can connect with ancestral spirits on an otherworldly plane.

Audio examples from movements five, six and seven can be heard here<sup>3</sup>, performed by the Busan National Gugak Center Orchestra, with haegeum soloist CHO Younkyung, conducted by KWON Seongtaek.

In this piece I stretched the capabilities of haegeum. I mentioned before that haegeum has not been modified in the ways that erhu has, so while the kind of actively running passages that I use may not seem particularly difficult for erhu, they are quite virtuosic for haegeum.

Relatedly, the performance capabilities of Korean instruments in general have been greatly expanded in the last 15-20 years, and there is a large group of very good young performers in Korea who are eagerly seeking out new music that expands the capabilities of their instruments. The gugak departments of Seoul National University, Korea National University of the Arts, and others are producing many exceptionally strong young performers and composers who are reshaping the landscape of what was previously thought possible for Korean instruments.

In particular, Korean traditional musicians are very welcoming of foreign composers. They understand that, historically, every culture has advanced through the introduction of influences from foreign cultures, and they see this as a very positive thing, a way to keep their traditions alive, vibrant and evolving.

Another representative example of my writing for large ensemble of Korean instruments is my first gayageum concerto,



Recording with Pro Music Nipponia

*Scattered Rhythms*. The piece is about 25 minutes long, in two movements, each of which illustrates my typical approach to Korean instruments. Both movements display many elements typical of my music, including a complex rhythmic nature, extensive use of rough and raspy sounds, and the importance of pitch bending and various articulations. In addition, both movements illustrate the use of slowly unfolding structures, especially in the case of movement two, which, after a brief fast introduction, proceeds to undertake a long, gradual build to a frenzied climax, in a manner similar to the structure of the traditional gugak genre sanjo.

A video of the entire piece (as well as several shorter audio excerpts) can be found here<sup>4</sup>, performed by the National Orchestra of Korea, conducted by LIM Heonjeong, with gayageum soloist YI Jiyoung, whom I previously mentioned as the person who first introduced me to Korean instruments. (The first movement, *The Sound of Drums Echoes Beyond the Heavens*, begins at :55 on the video, and the second movement, *Spiral Toward the Center of the Sky*, begins at 12:00.)

While most of my recent works has been for Korean instruments, I have also written somewhere around 20 pieces for Japanese instruments. It therefore may be useful to share some of that music, and examine some of the ways in which my approach to Japanese instruments differs from my approach to Korean instruments.

As a representative example of my work for Japanese instruments, I point to 雷神(*Raijin*), an 18-minute work for a septet of Japanese instruments with cello. *Raijin* is the Japanese god of thunder, which I believe is similar to the Chinese god of thunder, Leishen. He is also accompanied by god of wind 風 (*Fuujin*), similar to the Chinese god of wind, Fengbo.

This piece shares many characteristics with my music for Korean instruments – it is very rhythmic, with a driving character, a lot of bending notes, and so forth. But it also has some differences, which relate primarily to the differences between Japanese and Korean instruments, at least as I perceive them.

First, because Japanese instruments are not designed to use the type of exaggerated vibrato and rough, raspy sounds typical of Korean instruments, those sounds are not prominent in the way they are in my pieces for Korean instruments.

Second, because traditional Korean rhythms are generally much more complex than Japanese rhythms, the rhythm of this piece is a little less complex.

Finally, because moments of empty space – called 間 (*Ma*) in Japan – are very important in Japanese music and art, such moments are featured prominently in this piece, as can be heard in the shakuhachi solo in the middle of the piece, for example.

So while the overall style is still very much my own, it has some differences that come about because I'm adjusting to the characteristics of the instruments for which I'm writing.

<sup>2</sup> Video link to wizard rituals



<sup>3</sup> Music files links to the three movements of *Dancing With Spirits*



<sup>4</sup> Video link to *Scattered Rhythm*



A recording of 雷神 (*Raijin*) can be heard here<sup>5</sup>, performed by the ensemble 二本音楽集団 (Nihon Ongaku Shudan), or Pro Musica Nipponia as the group is better known outside of Japan.

These examples will hopefully give the reader a good sense of my music for Korean and Japanese instruments, and how I approach them. Again, for me it comes down to finding those points of intersection, the places where the natural capabilities of the instruments align with my own compositional interests.

When I first began working with Asian instruments two decades ago, I realized very early on that if I was going to write effectively for them I would need to find a space where I could express my own voice while using the instruments in a way that was natural for them. I understood that it would not work if I tried to simply imitate traditional music – what would be the point? But I also understood that it would not work if I ignored the traditional characteristics of the instruments, the things that make them beautiful in the first place. Instead, I had to find an approach that balanced new with traditional, that balanced what I want to say with what the instruments are capable of saying.

Fortunately, I did find that balance, an approach that allows me to do that. And I believe that my approach, while actually very simple, is the main reason for my success in Korea and Japan. If I could condense my philosophy into one brief idea it would be this: I approach Korean and Japanese instruments as if they are, in fact, Korean and Japanese instruments.

What I mean by that is I focus on the strengths of the instruments, their natural capabilities, the things they were designed to do. This may seem obvious, but it is often the case that composers neglect to do it, treating the instruments like western instruments that are different only in timbre. I believe doing that misses the point, and fails to take advantage of what is unique and most interesting about East Asian instruments, the things that make them special.

For example, it is a simple fact that Korean instruments, in general, cannot play western music as well as western instruments can. But it is also a fact that western instruments cannot play Korean music as well as Korean instruments can. And that is the point – the instruments are designed to do different things. So, no matter what instruments I am writing for, I try to focus on those things that the instruments do well.

This is not always as easy as it sounds. And even once a composer recognizes it, it still takes time to truly internalize this idea. So I will close by sharing an experience that helped click the light bulb on for me.

I had a sudden realization while working on the very first piece I wrote for Asian instruments – the piece I mentioned earlier for shakuhachi, koto and pipa. I had two adjacent strings on koto tuned to A and Bb, and in one passage where I wrote a Bb, a friend, who was more experienced than me with Japanese instruments, suggested instead of using the open Bb I use the A string and press it to Bb.

There was no need to do this. The Bb string was available and would have been simple to use. But the proverbial light bulb suddenly switched on for me. I realized that if I used the pressed A string it would be a different sound. Yes, I would still get the same Bb pitch, but it would have a different quality. It would have a little different timbre than the A string. It would, critically, have a little bend into and/or out of the pitch, which would come off as a sort of accent. And, beautifully, it would likely be a little out of tune. Microtones! So easy to get. That Bb would come to life by playing it as a pressed note in contrast to open strings around it.

From that moment, I realized that the instruments were not about pitch. They were about those many other things I mentioned, which is what gives them their vitality. I started writing for them with that in mind, and it reshaped my entire way of compositional thinking, to the point that I began searching for ways in which I could do similar things even when I write for western instruments.

<sup>5</sup> Audio file link to *Raijin*



In residence at Chinese Culture University Taipei December 2019

Perhaps it is most clear to think of it this way – if a composer writes an open Bb string for koto (or gayageum or guzheng) they do so because they want a Bb. In other words, the pitch is the main focus. But if they write a Bb by pressing the A string – even though they don't have to, even though the Bb string is available – then the focus is something other than pitch. And that, to me, is where it starts to get interesting.

As a final thought, if I could be so bold as to offer advice to composers regarding how they approach instruments: Think of them as Korean or Japanese or Chinese (or whatever) instruments. Emphasize what they do well and de-emphasize what they're not designed to do. Aim to use them in ways that don't simply imitate or try to "keep up with" western instruments, but instead draw on and expand the inherently beautiful musical traditions from which they come. Find those points of intersection between the instruments and your own compositional voice that will allow you to say something unique and personal.

There is, of course, much more to be said on this topic. As a further reference, I expand on some of these points in an article I wrote for the National Gugak Center's book about Korean instruments, in which I mention several things – some practical, some more philosophical. While I specifically address Korean instruments in the article, most of the ideas can be extrapolated to other instruments as well.

The article can be accessed for free as a PDF on the National Gugak Center website here<sup>6</sup>(under the "Appendix" link). (As of this writing it exists only in English and Korean. I expect, however, that if there were significant enough interest among Chinese composers, the Gugak Center would consider making a Chinese translation of the book as well.)

As I mentioned at the outset, I hope that the thoughts expressed in this article will somehow encourage others to examine their own paths and discover things that they otherwise might not. It is my belief that the defining feature of concert music over the course of the current century will be the integration of instruments and aesthetics from different musical cultures. Chinese instruments have a huge role to play in the development of intercultural music, and I look forward to hearing the various innovative paths composers explore in the coming decades.

<sup>6</sup> Link to the feature article

