

ISANG YUN: THE INTEGRATION OF EAST-ASIAN PHILOSOPHIES AND KOREAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN HIS COMPOSITIONS FEATURING WORK FOR SOLO PIANO: SHAO YANG YIN (1966)

By: Dr. Eloise Kim

USC Thornton School of Music

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Introduction:



- ❖ South Korean-German composer
- ❖ Faced constant political turmoil throughout his life
- ❖ Sought to find inner peace through his musical language and dreamt of the unification of South and North Korea

"A composer cannot view the world in which he lives with indifference. Human suffering, oppression, and injustice... all that comes to me in my thoughts. Where there is pain, where there is injustice, I want to have my say through my music." (Isang Yun, 1983)¹

Isang Yun (1917-1995)

Photo by Tongyeong International Music Foundation

Influences:

- East-Asian philosophies: Taoism, Yin and Yang
- Korean court music: (Gugak) singing and traditional instrumental sounds
- Western Europe compositional styles: 12-tone technique, Composers Arnold Schoenberg, Stockhausen, Boulez and John Cage

Works written by Isang Yun for Solo Piano:

- *Five Pieces for Piano* (1958), Inspired by Arnold Schoenberg's Op. 23 set
- *Shao Yang Yin* (1966)
- *Interludium A* (1982)

¹ Stodtmeier, Maria. "Isang Yun in North and South Korea." *Isang Yun in North and South Korea: A Mediator Between Two Countries*, Medici.tv, 2013, <https://www.medici.tv/en/documentaries/isang-yun-in-north-and-south-korea/>.

The East Berlin Affair (1967)²



Pictured above: “Arrest of North Korea’s East Berlin communist espionage,”
Pyongyang Newspaper, July 8, 1967³

In 1967, the South Korean KCIA abducted Yun from a misunderstanding that he was a spy for North Korea. Yun was kidnapped, tortured during questioning, and sentenced for a lifetime in prison. This incident was also known as the East Berlin Affair, where several Korean students in Western Europe and West Germany interacted with North Koreans stationed in East Berlin.

In Yun’s case, he had accepted an invitation to visit North Korea in 1963 because he wanted to use this opportunity to see the Goguryeo wall paintings for inspiration to his music. Isang Yun was granted permission to continue composing while in prison.

During imprisonment, he also devoted his studies to Taoism philosophies. Yun’s imprisonment and kidnapping caused several countries to form action committees. Many important composers and political figures in Germany and across other European countries sent multiple letters to President Park Jung Hee to release Isang Yun. So his lifetime imprisonment was eventually broken after huge international pressure to the South Korean country. In 1969, Isang Yun was released and exiled from South Korea. Isang Yun moved to Germany and became a German citizen. He never stepped back to his home country again.

² Yun Isang and the East Berlin Case of Fifty Years Ago. *Koreatimes*, 19 July 2017, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2020/01/633_233285.html. Accessed June 10, 2020.

³ Chang, Hannah. “Yun Isang, Media, and the State: Forgetting and Remembering a Dissident Composer in Cold-War South Korea.” *Yun Isang, Media, and the State: Forgetting and Remembering a Dissident Composer in Cold-War South Korea*, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 1 Oct. 2020, <https://apjjf.org/2020/19/Chang.html>.

Korean Traditional Court Music:

Isang Yun sought to create sounds of Korean traditional music in his compositions for Western instruments. He incorporated Korean music techniques into his symphonies, concertos, chamber music, cantatas, and solo instrumental works. Yun also continued to maintain his German westernized-music training in his works. This allowed him to blend both eastern and western musical concepts into his compositions.

The genre that represents the entire field of national Korean traditional music is called *Gugak*. The rhythmic structure of *Gugak* moves in a circular motion, based on cycles and patterns. The cycle usually follows a 6 beat or 12 beat pattern, either symmetrically or asymmetrically. The example below shows the four main types of rhythmic cycles in *Gugak*:⁴

Rhythm:⁵

Examples of Rhythmic Patterns in Korean Traditional Music

Example 5: Four Rhythmic Patterns in Korean music.

The image displays four musical staves, each representing a different rhythmic pattern in Korean music. Each staff begins with a time signature of 12/8. Staff (a) is labeled '(a) Chinyangjo' and shows a sequence of notes with various rests and accents. Staff (b) is labeled '(b) Chungmori' and features a more complex rhythmic structure with many notes and rests. Staff (c) is labeled '(c) Chungjungmori' and shows a simpler pattern with fewer notes. Staff (d) is labeled '(d) Chn/mori' and features a pattern with a prominent 7-beat rest. The notes are represented by stems with flags or beams, and rests are indicated by vertical lines with dots or horizontal lines.

A drummer often performs this rhythmic pattern, as an accompaniment to a vocalist or instrumental ensemble. In the previous generations of Korean music, there was no notation that recorded the tones, the rhythm, the number of repetitions, or tempo of the music. Therefore, there is no regular meter in Korean music. The beat is flexible and has an improvisatory element to its style.⁶ The idea of controlling sound with the ‘breath’ and expressing the words or character of the music are crucial to the performance, especially in Korean vocal music. This performance practice symbolizes the emotional aspect of human life.⁷

⁴ Moon, Chaekyung. “Isang Yun's Piano Music: Fusion of East and West in Twelve-Tone and Atonal Contexts.” *International Journal of Musicology*, vol. 1, 2015, pp. 183. www.jstor.org/stable/43858072. Accessed 18 June 2020.

⁵ Choi, Soo-Yon, “Expression of Korean Identity Through Music for Western Instruments (2006). Florida State University Dissertations.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Korean modes and melodic patterns:

Korean traditional folk music is based on a pentatonic scale. One of the most common types of modes used in Korean music are called *Pyong-jo*. *Pyong-jo* consists of the first, second, fourth, fifth, and sixth degrees of a scale.

For example, if using the G scale, the pitches would be:

G A C D E

Intervals: M2 m3 M2 M2

A famous Korean folk music example that uses the *Pyong-jo* mode is *Arirang*:



The performance characteristics of the *Pyong-jo* are vibrato on the first note, and a descending glissando on the second and fifth notes.⁸

Although Isang Yun did not restrict himself to using just pentatonic modes in his compositions, he frequently used these intervals from above in his works to represent a ‘Korean’ sound. He was also inspired by Korean music’s frequent use of small motives and melismatic writing.⁹

⁸ Choi, Soo-Yon, “Expression of Korean Identity Through Music for Western Instruments (2006). Florida State University Dissertations: p. 32.

⁹ Yoo, Youngdae, "Isang Yun: His Compositional Technique as Manifested in the Two Clarinet Quintets." (2000). LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses.

Performance Practices of Korean Traditional Music:

The technical requirements and performance practices of Korean instruments are explained in a treatise written by Bak Yeon (1378 – 1458), titled *Akhak Gwebeom*. This treatise focused on the Korean musical instruments of the 15th century. *Akhak Gwebeom* was a huge influence to Isang Yun's compositions, and gave him ideas of how to deliver Korean performance practices on Western instruments.

The four main techniques of ornamentation mentioned in this treatise are:

- 1) *Yoseong*: vibrato, such as trills
- 2) *Jeonseong*: grace notes
- 3) *Chuseong*: ascending glissandi
- 4) *Toeseong*: descending glissandi.¹⁰



Akhak Gwebeom, Published 1493
Image from Wikimedia Commons



Gugak performance: Korean national music
Image from National Gugak Center Web.

In comparing Korean music to Western styles, Yun observed that rather than developing harmony, Korean classical music brings a 'main tone' to life with these surrounding ornamentation techniques above. The natural vibration of every tone is a symbolism of human expression.¹¹

¹⁰ Westby, Alan. *Eastern and Western Sounds Combined: Korean Composer Yun Isang*, 29 May 2018, www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/korean-composer-yun-isang. Accessed June 10, 2020.

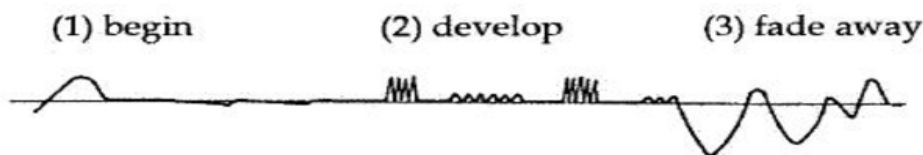
¹¹ *Ibid.*

Isang Yun's Hauptton Compositional Technique:



“The Oriental philosophy of Taoism speaks of the concept ‘Staying While Moving,’ which explains that things move in the midst of non-movement. They move away constantly but at the end, they return to where they were. For instance, the stars in the sky make circles as they move, but they are always in the sky and constantly return. “Tao” means both movement and non-movement. In other words, it is only an internal movement. The universe in which people live their lives is just a small universe among others.” (Isang Yun, 1993)¹²

Isang Yun's sketch of 'Hauptton' (diagram below):



Inspired by traditional Korean court music and Taoist philosophy, the 'Hauptton' compositional technique consists of two elements:

- 1) Main tone that often appears as a long sustaining note/pitch
- 2) The decorative and embellishing musical gesture around this central note/pitch

¹² Walter-Wolfgang Sparrer. Paths to Understanding Isang Yun's way of Composing, trans. Kyo-chul Chong and In-jung Yang, (Seoul: HICE Co, 1994), 28.

Shao Yang Yin, for Solo Piano (1966) by Isang Yun

- 8-minute work for solo piano
- Written in 'fantasy' form and improvisatory → similar to the structure of Korean traditional court music, *Gugak*
- Uses frequent changes of dynamic and rhythmic patterns, and spans a wide range of the instrument registers → Represents Western compositional techniques of the Second Viennese School
- Incorporates the Yin and Yang (title: 'Yang Yin') Taoist philosophies → Symbolizes the balance of life

ISANG
YUN

Shao Yang Yin

1966

Klavierfassung von
Kaya Han

Piano Version by Kaya Han

1996

BOOSEY & HAWKES
BOOTE BOCK

Shao Yang Yin score cover photo: Boosey and Hawkes edition

The image shows a page of musical notation for the piece 'Shao Yang Yin'. It features two systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef. The notation is dense with notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Key markings include 'lunga', 'legato', 'dolce', 'ff', 'p', 'mp', 'mf', 'pp', 'molto rit.', and 'rit.'. There are also tempo markings like '(♩)ca.96', '(♩)60', '(♩)86', and '(♩)60'. The score includes various intervals and registers, with some notes marked as 'ff yang' and 'pp yin'. The notation is complex and reflects the 'fantasy' and 'improvisatory' nature of the work.

Example (left): Opening first three phrases of *Shao Yang Yin*

- Opens with pitches from the 12-tone row
- Large range of register of the instrument and dynamics → contrast of 'Yin' and 'Yang'
- Frequent use of m2/M7 and m3 intervals to represent East-Asian sounds

Use of Western Compositional Techniques in *Shao Yang Yin*

In 1957, Isang Yun moved to Germany to study at the Berlin Music Hochschule, where he adopted various atonal techniques from the Second Viennese School. He studied 12-tone techniques with Josef Rufer, a former disciple of Arnold Schoenberg. Yun's training in Germany led him to participate in the New Music at Darmstadt in the summer of 1958. *Shao Yang Yin* uses pitches from the 12-tone row. The prime form is introduced immediately in the opening of the work, and labeled at the figure below.

Prime Form (P₀): [F#, C, B, C#, G#, G, F, E, A#, A, D#, D]



Based on the prime row, this is the matrix table below (using fixed do):¹³

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| | I ₀ | I ₆ | I ₅ | I ₇ | I ₂ | I ₁ | I ₁₁ | I ₁₀ | I ₄ | I ₃ | I ₉ | I ₈ | |
| P₀ | F# | C | B | C# | G# | G | F | E | A# | A | D# | D | R₀ |
| P₆ | C | F# | F | G | D | C# | B | A# | E | D# | A | G# | R₆ |
| P₇ | C# | G | F# | G# | D# | D | C | B | F | E | A# | A | R₇ |
| P₅ | B | F | E | F# | C# | C | A# | A | D# | D | G# | G | R₅ |
| P₁₀ | E | A# | A | B | F# | F | D# | D | G# | G | C# | C | R₁₀ |
| P₁₁ | F | B | A# | C | G | F# | E | D# | A | G# | D | C# | R₁₁ |
| P₁ | G | C# | C | D | A | G# | F# | F | B | A# | E | D# | R₁ |
| P₂ | G# | D | C# | D# | A# | A | G | F# | C | B | F | E | R₂ |
| P₈ | D | G# | G | A | E | D# | C# | C | F# | F | B | A# | R₈ |
| P₉ | D# | A | G# | A# | F | E | D | C# | G | F# | C | B | R₉ |
| P₃ | A | D# | D | E | B | A# | G# | G | C# | C | F# | F | R₃ |
| P₄ | A# | E | D# | F | C | B | A | G# | D | C# | G | F# | R₄ |
| | RI₀ | RI₆ | RI₅ | RI₇ | RI₂ | RI₁ | RI₁₁ | RI₁₀ | RI₄ | RI₃ | RI₉ | RI₈ | |

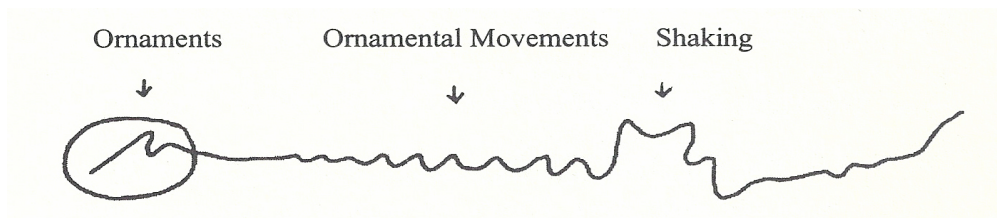
¹³ <https://www.musictheory.net/calculators/matrix>

Examples of 'Hauptton' compositional technique in Shao Yang Yin (1966)

'Main tone' (Hauptton) on pitch 'B': After embellishments, the 'Hauptton' pitch always returns

A handwritten musical score in treble clef, 4/6 time, showing a melodic line with various ornaments and vibrato. The main pitch is B. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *mp*, and *stacc*. Handwritten annotations in red ink include "dolce e legato", "decorative gestures + vibrato", and "rest on main tone". Blue arrows point from a text box above to specific notes in the score.

Motion of the embellishments of this Hauptton technique resembles Chinese calligraphy brush strokes:



'Main tone' (Hauptton) on pitch 'E'

A handwritten musical score for piano and oboe. The piano part is in treble clef, and the oboe part is in bass clef. The main pitch is E. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *mp*, and *f*. Handwritten annotations include "3rd grace note", "Klavier", "3rd grace note", "tremolos", "F# BC", "F# A", "tremolo", "oboa", and "f". Blue arrows point from a text box above to specific notes in the score.

Example below: 'Main tone' (Hauptton) on high F (highest pitch of the music):

- The ending is marked with *p* dynamic level, and chords roll in ascending motion.
- Concluding the work on its highest pitch 'F' in *Shao Yang Yin* represents the success of reaching the ultimate goal of Taoism: letting go of one's self desires and reaching final inner peace.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for 'Shao Yang Yin'. It is written on a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The score includes various dynamics such as *f*, *mf*, *p*, and *pp*. There are several handwritten annotations in red and black ink. At the top, a dashed line indicates a pitch level of 50, with a blue arrow pointing to a high F note. Other annotations include 'GAMMA', 'loco', 'Sieme', 'CHANGE', 'lunga', and 'm2'. The score also features a 'POWER + ACTIVITY' section and a 'rest' section. The piece concludes with a 'fall out' section. The score is printed in Germany by Arno Brynda GmbH 1/3c0298.

Concluding Thoughts:

When Isang Yun's mother was pregnant, she had a dream of a dragon flying through the sky, but the dragon suddenly fell and was wounded.¹⁴ In many older Korean generations, people link dreams during pregnancy to the fate of the child's upcoming life. A dream about a dragon usually implies a great success of a son. However, a wounded dragon is a gloomy foreshadowing of Isang Yun's ups and downs in his life. Throughout Isang Yun's life, he lived through constant political turmoil and social unrest. Music became a source for him to express his desire for peace and philosophical thoughts.

Shao Yang Yin (1966) combines East Asian philosophies and the sounds of Korean traditional music Yun heard in his childhood. Yun uses Western 12-tone compositional techniques in *Shao Yang Yin*, but frequently departs from the strict structure of the rules to incorporate his own language: the *Hauptton* technique and develop his distinct language.

This work brings technical challenges especially due to the limitations of the modern piano instrument. The piano is unable to bend or vibrate certain pitches as typical Korean traditional instruments or historical vocal performance practice. However, Isang Yun gives detailed instructions in his music through his selections of pitches, large use of register, rhythmic character, tempi, and dynamic range. It is no question that composing music served as an important role to Isang Yun's life. So as a performer and a Korean-American myself, it is crucial that we must go above and beyond in our practice, both technically and emotionally, to fully understand Yun's complex language and continue to share his legacy through our performances.

¹⁴ Luise Rinser and Isang Yun, *The Wounded Dragon: Dialogues of the Life and Works of the Composer* (Seoul: Rando House), 25.

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