Homecoming Recitals in Korea

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Clark W. Sorensen
Nicholas Harkness: Homecoming Recitals in Korea

- Koreans frequently study Western Classical music abroad, and some have careers abroad before returning home.
- European-style classical singing is known as sŏngak 声楽 (vocalism).
  - Traditional Korean style singing would be ch’ang 唱 or sori 소리.
  - In Korea, however, Western classical vocalism is semiotically marked as “Christian music”—and most practitioners are Protestant Christians, or Catholics.
- The homecoming recital proves to be a ritual by which those who have studied vocalism abroad are reintegrated into their Korean Christian context.
Homecoming Recital

- Hire prominent hall (like at Sejong Cultural Center)
- Recitalists and friends and relatives buy blocks of tickets to give away to more friends and relatives
  - Often fewer than 100 attend these recitals
  - Personal cost easily $8,000
- Singer proves her professional bona fides by singing an hour or so of Western classics to inattentive audience
  - At end loud calls of “encore”
  - Korean song followed invariably by a Christian hymn
    - E.g. “Far Away in the Depths of my Spirit” 내 영혼의 그윽히 기푼데서” (Warren D. Cornell)
    - Hymn is attentively appreciated
False front?

• To avoid this the concert must be “professionally” produced
  • Professional looking publicity materials
    • Graduation from prestigious foreign institution
    • Glamorous publicity photos with the singer in evening dress (gown or tux)
  • Graciously greet the audience in the lobby after the event

• If the performer does not come from a wealthy family, they must have extensive connections to acquire gifts from extended contacts (gift exchange)
Interpretation of performance ritual

- Transition from abroad to home semantically mapped as a transition from foreign to familiar, from secular to Christian
- But why make a ritual like this?
  - Ratification of training abroad is necessary for employment at home
  - Employment opportunities for sŏngak singers are almost entirely in religious music
    - Singers initially learned sŏngak in the context of the church
    - To continue singing in Korea requires extensive social connections (through family, church) and/or money
Domestic and foreign study

- Domestic study creates a structure of relationships between teacher/professors, and students that can begin forming one’s personal network
  - Purpose is to provide training so that students can succeed in auditions abroad
  - Some small amount of work through teacher recommendations (this is considered a kind of
Domestic and foreign study

- Domestic study creates a structure of relationships between teacher/professors, and students that can begin forming one’s personal network
  - Purpose is to provide training so that students can succeed in auditions abroad
  - Some small amount of work through teacher recommendations (this is considered a kind of arŭbait’ŭ—work/study)
- Korean students quite successful in gaining admission to major schools of music in Italy, Germany, & the US
  - Abroad they graduate from “singing notes” 음정을 내다 to “making music”음악을 연주하다
Nature of the audience

- In Korea
  - nonsingers—who come through social relations and are indifferent to the music
  - “the masses”—who come to hear only a few familiar hits
  - Trained singers—small group who can really appreciate the music

- Abroad (particularly in Europe)
  - Well-informed music lovers with whom they can forge an artistic bond through performance
  - Singers may themselves become this kind of music lover through learning to perform
Deteriorization of voice

• To succeed one must maintain a punishing schedule of performances and teaching in order to build and maintain the social networks necessary to keep a career going
  • Other singers are either “seniors” (sŏnbae) or “juniors” (hubae) [similar to older/younger sibling relationship]
• Pressure to sing the same thing over and over with a “big voice”
• Atmosphere of “bringing culture” to Korea rather than communicating emotion and musicality
Anthropological contextualization

- Process of cultural borrowing, but borrowing is always selective
  - Foreign institutions are not usually borrowed whole, but rather in bits and piece
  - The bits and pieces of foreign culture that become indigenized usually are transformed to fit into the host culture
    - They adapted so as to fit into the local social structure
    - Their meaning and function changes as they are adapted into the local culture
Selectivity of borrowing

- What features of classical singing do we find in Korea?
  - Western techniques of voice production
  - Western repertoire is prestigious and respected, if not exactly loved
  - Private teachers, and also school teachers of voice
  - Gigs in church singing

- What features do we find in Europe that are not present in Korea
  - Expression of feeling, tradition, and musicality
  - Network of connoisseurs who support and share the structure of feeling in Classical musical culture
Changing meaning

• Class and classics
  • Only the rich and/or well-connected can pursue this kind of singing in South Korea
  • The opulent clothes of the concert are a more essential feature than in the West
  • Yet classical music is upper class in Europe, too

• Relationship to Christianity
  • Church music is important to classical singing in Europe as well as Korea (oratorio tradition)
  • Classical vocalism is “coded” as explicitly Christian in Korea, while it is both Christian and secular in Europe
Incorporation into Korean social structure

- Need to create networks of “seniors” and “juniors” to sustain a Korea
- Importance of reciprocal gifting in sustaining an audience
  - Performer must have the connections to get people to come
  - Performer must have the connections to finance a homecoming concert
- Social relations of networking characteristic feature of Korea in all walks of life (Big man syndrome)
- High prestige and popularity of Western art music partly a sign of high-class cosmopolitanism, but even more it allows conspicuous display of affluence and networking abilities (social prestige)
Importance of Christianity in Korea

- South Korea is about 35-40% Christian, and the proportion of Christians in Seoul is higher than nationwide
- Church culture requires Western vocalism
  - Hymn singing was an early and important missionary technique, and central to church worship
  - Vocalism comes from this, but also choir conducting and other aspects