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Singing in the South Korean Christian Diaspora:

Reflections on Voice, Memories, and the Cold War

In October of 2008, I accompanied a Korean American church choir to the 'All Nations Heritage Multicultural Christian Music Event' held in a Protestant church in Chino Valley, thirty-five miles east of downtown Los Angeles. The dynamics of this event conformed to a tried-and-true template of Southern California multiculturalism: a predominantly white American church invited a Mexican American Christian band, an African American gospel choir, and a Korean American choir to perform. Given the staging among strangers, the event was somewhat awkward: there was no dialogue among the invited groups during the event or during the dinner before the performance. The only visibly excited participants seemed to be white American leaders of the hosting church, who kept complimenting the event as an illustration of 'biblical diversity.'

One segment of the event surprised everyone: a performance by a North Korean female singer. The host announced that she did not appear on the printed program because she was a last-minute addition to the event. The singer introduced herself as a defector from North Korea and a former member of a prestigious performance troupe for the North Korean state. Except for the members of the Korean American choir, who were from South Korea, the other participants at the event did not understand the content of this woman's Korean-language songs, but it was clear that they were captivated by her performance.

Numerous aspects stood out about her performance. It was the only one that featured an individual singer, a life story, a pre-recorded soundtrack, and traditional attire. The style of song and singing was also exceptional. She drew on microtonal vocalization

techniques throughout. She also moved quickly and fluidly between timbres (e.g., tense, raspy, and breathy) as she glided into the final note. These techniques, in conjunction with the minor pentatonic feel of her melodies, gave the impression that she was wailing from an inability to contain her emotions. Even I, born and raised in Seoul until the age of twelve, found the singer's techniques enthralling. In my mind, her vocal techniques evoked *minyo* (folk music), *p'ansori* (musical storytelling), and *t'ŭrotŭ* (a South Korean popular music genre)—all genres not particularly popular in urban South Korea and its diasporas. I also felt captivated by the theatricality of her performance: as she sang, she opened her arms upward, closed her eyes, and raised her head, performing a suffering subject.

Her life story was narrated on stage by a male Korean American missionary who managed her Christian performance group, which was made up of three North Korean defectors now living in the United States. According to the missionary, who spoke in English for the audience, she had been a distinguished performer in North Korea and only recently had left her home country with the assistance of missionaries working near the North Korea-China border. His introduction rehearsed the standard components of the North Korean exile narrative: state oppression, unbearable famine, perilous escape, and newly found happiness and gratitude to the 'plentiful' nations of South Korea and the United States.

The sense of overwhelming approval that I felt coming from the non-Korean members of the audience made me think that they were impressed by the cultural and religious authenticity of her performance and that they saw this as an evidence of the cross-cultural workings of Christianity. But the members of the Korean American choir, who had

performed a SATB diatonic choral piece just before the North Korean woman took the stage, showed very different reactions. During the performance, their facial and bodily expressions showed disapproval (e.g., scowls, frowns, and head shakes). Some reacted more strongly: a soprano who was sitting in my row, also the oldest member of the choir, said quietly but firmly, 'That is not the right way to praise God.' She stood up half-way through the North Korean's performance and left the church.

Protestant music in South Korea and its overseas communities has received very little attention in ethnomusicology despite the fact that Protestant Christianity was one of the most popular religions in twentieth-century Korea.[1] This has not only meant the near absence of discourse on what was likely the most widely practiced music in twentieth-century Korea, but it has also meant a missed opportunity to factor in the musical impact of the church which mediated experiences between South Korea and the Cold War West. This article explores the politics and ethics of music style within Korean American churches, institutions that emblematized South Korea's positioning in the Cold War as a symbolic site of the United States-South Korea alliance as well as a key network that channeled the flow of people, ideologies, and practices between the two countries.

The core of this article is an ethnographic study of a diasporic church choir in Orange County, California, conducted from 2008 to 2010. I describe the singers' objections to neotraditional choral music, a small sub-category of the Korean-language Christian choral repertory that communicates an aesthetics of suffering coded as 'Korean.' I argue

[1] To my knowledge, the only published work on Korean Christian music is the following. Roald Maliangkay, 'There is No Amen in Shaman: Traditional Music Preservation and Christianity in South Korea', *Asian Music* 45/1 (2014). In other fields such as history, anthropology, and sociology, Protestantism in Korea has been an actively researched topic.

that the choir singers' identification with Euro-American styles and disidentification with ethnicized ones must be understood as a product of transnational memories and experiences shaped by the Cold War, rather than as a simple assimilation of 'Eurochronology.'[2] I suggest that their musical values stem from a desire to voice a historicized time of progress and an unwillingness to situate themselves in a past associated with shared suffering within a time-space matrix laden with both Christian triumphalism and Western historicism. Nicholas Harkness, in *Songs of Seoul*, has argued along similar lines about the ritual function of what he calls a 'clean' voice in expressing a peaceful present among affluent South Korean Christians.[3] In this article, I highlight the specific memories that shape the musical preferences within the diaspora, as well as turning to the analytical issue of what music scholarship of Korea and, more broadly, East Asia should consider as the appropriate object of study.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section situates Korean American communities that formed as a diaspora within Cold War geopolitics. I show how this diaspora's self-image was shaped by traumatic Cold War histories and mediated by Christian institutions. This discussion serves as a framework for understanding the musical dispositions and judgments formed in the diaspora's most emblematic institution, the church. I detail these dynamics in the second section, through an ethnography of a church choir in South California (2008-2010). In the final section, I build on a number of interviews with the choir members to argue that their musical dispositions and judgments

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[2] Apparadurai used 'Eurochronology' to refer to the 'hyperreal' and 'hypercompetent' reproduction of American popular songs in the Philippines, as well as to critique the effect of this reproduction on Filipino national memory. See Arjun Apparadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 29-30.

[3] Nicholas Harkness, *Songs of Seoul: an Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 6.

are contingent on their understanding of South Korea's historical trajectory in the wider world.

The Cold-War South Korean Diaspora: Memories and Self-Image

Studies of Asian American communities have conventionally relied on the framework of identity politics borne of the Civil Rights movement, a framework that privileges minority political agency in the context of U.S. liberal democracy. A number of scholars have pointed out that this has had the effect of rendering 'Asian American' as a different-and-transparent identity—to use Spivak's words, an 'Other with an inside'.[4] Some critics have turned to diaspora as an analytical framework that reveals more powerfully the 'experiences of hybridity, difference, displacement, and transgression' in Asian American communities.[5] An important component of this turn has been an increased recognition of the influence of the immigrants' memories and experiences of their home country on how they navigate their lives in the United States. For studies of Korean American communities, this has meant taking seriously how their members 'engage both the U.S ideological landscape and the South Korean memoryscape.'[6]

The framework of diaspora has been a useful one for 'Korean America' as the history of this community did not overlap meaningfully with the Asian American movement, which unfolded as part of the larger Civil Rights movement. Diaspora helps to underscore the degree to which the South Korean migration to the United States was powered by a

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[4] See, for example, Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). Also see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-332.
[5] Su Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.
[6] Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11.

transnational structure of inequality during the Cold War. Between 1950 and 1965, about 15,000 South Korans migrated to the U.S. They included the so-called 'Korean war brides' married to American GIs, adopted children from Korea, and students with national or transnational funding. Large-scale immigration of Koreans from South Korea to the United States began in 1965 due to the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act. The Korean diaspora was the third largest group of immigrants to move to the United States from 1976 to 1990.[7] Historians such as Jodi Kim have demonstrated that such migration pathways were bound up with the U.S. hegemony in the Pacific, reinforced through the U.S.'s involvement in the Korean War and the Vietnam War.[8] Similarly, Ji Yeon Yuh has emphasized the need to re-conceptualize the trajectory of many Korean immigrants to the U.S. as 'seeking refuge from the consequences of the Korean War', whether they arrived between 1950 and 1965 or after 1965.[9] The impact of Cold War/Korean War displacement on this diaspora is further suggested by the fact that a prominent immigrant subgroup was Christians who had previously moved to the southern part of the Korean peninsula to flee communist North Korea around or during the time of the Korean War.

A consideration of the shared memories and the self-image of this diaspora may begin with an examination of the U.S. presence in South Korea in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950-3). At this time, the United States was the twofold liberator in South Korea's public imagination: first, the liberator of Korea from Japanese colonial rule in 1945,

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[7] Pyong Gap Min, 'Koreans' Immigration to the U.S.: History and Contemporary Trends', *The Research Center for Korean Community Queens College of CUNU Research Report No. 3* (2011), 8. My summary of Korean American immigration is consistent with Ronald Tataki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*, considered a comprehensive and authoritative historical work on Asian Americans. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998).
[8] Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
[9] Ji Yeon Yuh, 'Moved By War: Migration, Diaspora, and the Korean War', *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8/3 (2005), 278.

and ‘a protector of democracy against the Soviet and North Korean threat’[10] during the Korean War. After the Korean War to at least the end of the 1960s, the power and wealth attributed to the United States were lived through the experiences of the body in South Korea. Not only were American media contents consumed in South Korea as sensuous images of modernity, but also the American military controlled the ‘alimentary channel’ in a society impoverished by one of the deadliest wars of the twentieth century—a war that was perpetrated by the very GIs who were reconfigured as liberators.[11] The association of the U.S. military with food was evidently so strong that these phenomena became literary tropes: in fiction and songs, American GIs gave away ‘candies, chocolate, and chewing gum’ to poverty-stricken Korean children and distributed ‘grain…under the P.L.49 food aid program.’[12]

Food was one component of the ‘shock of material plenty’[13] ascribed to the United States. Other components were U.S. military and industrial equipment and developmental aid given to South Korea. A commentary by Mark Clark, a U.S. general in South Korea, from 1954 suggests both the condescending attitude held by some overseas American military personnel as well as the widespread desire for all things American among many South Koreans:

> The ROK [Republic of Korea] saw the wonderful equipment our industry produces for our American Army. He saw mechanical hole diggers for telephone poles. He saw bulldozers. He saw helicopters carry supplies atop mountains that ROK bearer would take many hours to climb. He saw hot food and ice cream delivered in giant tins to Americans in the frontline bunkers. He soon wanted all these things.[14]

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[10] Quoted in Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and The Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 115. For some Koreans, this positive image was also tied to the work of U.S. missionaries in Japan-occupied Korea (1910-45). They were perceived as potential crusaders for the Korean cause of independence from Japan. Chang, Hyun Kyong Hannah. ‘A Fugitive Christian Public: Singing, Sentiment, and Socialization in Colonial Korea’, *The Journal of Korean Studies* 25/2 (2020), 292-3.
[11] Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 62.
[12] Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 57; John Lie, *Han Unbound: The Political Economy of South Korea* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 29.
[13] Lie, Han Unbound, 41.
[14] Quoted in Lie, *Han Unbound*, 40-41.

The stark contrast in power was evident in all forms of transactions including the economy of the sexual labor involving so-called 'camptown women.' As historian Grace M. Cho argued in *Haunting the Korea Diaspora*, Korean women who engaged in sex and entertainment work for the U.S. military workers embodied the ambivalence that marked South Korea's 'indebtedness' to the United States: the sex worker 'simultaneously provokes her compatriots' hatred because of her complicity with Korea's subordination and inspires their envy because she is within arm's reach of the American Dream…the dutiful daughter who works to support the very same family that shuns her.'[15]

As suggested above, the Cold War self-image of South Korea was formed in the context of humiliating inequality vis-à-vis the United States, and this explains why a diaspora that was so thoroughly constituted through the Cold War as the South Korean diaspora in the United States has been marked by a desire to transcend a traumatic past through enforced forgetting. As a number of Asian American cultural theorists have maintained, this diasporic desire is partly rooted in the ambivalence of the United States as both the 'protector' and the 'aggressor' within U.S.-South Korea relations. Grace M. Cho writes: 'The acknowledgement of a traumatic past is systematically disavowed by a matrix of silence, the major components of which include the institutions of U.S. global hegemony and social scientific knowledge production.'[16] Jodi Kim identifies similar structures of amnesia and repression in her study of Cold War-era Korean American fiction. She argues that this body of work demonstrates an 'inability to

[15] Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4. Also see Chungmoo Choi, 'Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea', in *Dangerous Women: Gender & Korean Nationalism*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998).
[16] Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora,* 13.

narrate what really happened' during the Korean War, and stresses the impossibility of Korean War narratives being anything other than a 'Cold War knowledge project.'[17]

Importantly, Korean immigrants' memories and psyches rooted in the devastation and the abjection resulting from the Korean War tended to make Korean American communities more amenable to American hegemonic notions of race, social mobility, and assimilation. Not only were such notions already known in South Korea through American institutions—the military, especially—and media texts[18], but Cold War-era migrations from Asia to the United States were mediated strongly by the discourse of the 'model minority.' The model minority discourse singled out Asian Americans as a minority group possessing the 'aptitude for conforming to dominant models of "proper" American citizenly values and practices'[19], and as such served as an ideological rationale for the inclusion of Asian Americans in the U.S. national body. Karen Shimakawa notes that the model minority discourse reverberated particularly strongly with Korean and Vietnamese Americans as their arrival to the U.S. was accompanied by memories of the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Both wars triggered salient emotions in the mainstream U.S. imaginary, such as guilt, pity, and vengeance.[20]

The nodule of desires and pressures I have sketched so far seem to explain the somewhat contradictory positioning of this diaspora vis-à-vis the 'mainstream' of the United States. On the one hand, there has been a strong aspiration to transcend racialization within

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[17] Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 150. Also see Hosu Kim, 'The Parched Tongue', in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, eds. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 34-46.
[18] Nadia Y. Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
[19] Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 13. Also see Deborah Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian American Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 161-194; Henry Yu, *Thinking Oriental: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[20] Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 14.

the diaspora. As noted by Rebecca Kim in her study of Korean American Christian groups on university campuses, this racialization was specifically premised on an assumed equivalence of ethnicity with class in the diasporic imagination: 'Ethnicity is viewed largely as a working-class phenomenon—something that immigrants and their descendants need and want to shed as they acculturate, obtain economic mobility, and incorporate into the dominant society.'[21] On the other hand, there has also been an inclination toward preserving and reproducing the language, values, and ritual practices associated with South Korea, not only among the first-generation but to some degree also among the subsequent generations, who are typically more comfortable with the English language.

Given this bifurcated diasporic condition, the affinity of Korean Americans towards Protestant Christianity should come as no surprise. This religion signaled not only U.S. modernity but also a claim to a kind of sameness with the dominant religion of their new country.[22] But Christian faith has not meant dissolving into the mainstream, as it were, because the immigrants created churches that soon became the privileged sites of diasporic socialization. Much more than being a place of faith, Korean American churches have become a central diasporic institution that socialized immigrants for fellowship and business, maintained Korean language for immigrant families, celebrated traditional Korean holidays such as Lunar New Year and Moonlight Festival (in addition to American holidays such as Thanksgiving), and offered Korean food every Sunday.[23] As mentioned above, this

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[21] Rebecca Kim, God's *New Whiz Kids? Korean American Evangelicals on Campus* (New York: New York University, 2006), 4. Also consider Nancy Abelmann's comment on the idealistic attitude of Korean American college students toward notions of Western modernity, which they constantly measured themselves and their families against. Nancy Abelmann, *The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problems of Segregation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 7-8.

[22] Kim, *God's New Whiz Kids,* 12.

[23] On the social functions of immigrant ethnic Korean churches, see Pyong Gap Min, 'The Structure and Social Functions of Korean Immigrant Churches in the United States', *International Migration Review* 26/4 (1992): 1370-1394.

ethnicization of religious practice is not exclusive to Korean-born first-generation (*ilse*) migrants but has continued into subsequent generations. For these groups, who typically do not have the same emotional connection to the Korean language or traditions, the main motivation to maintain ethnic segregation is intergenerationally inherited memories, values, and ideologies, as well as shared experience of the broader racial politics of exclusion in the United States.[24] Curiously, while certain cultural artifacts like food, language, and ritual have fostered a share ethnic identity in the United States, traditional Korean music genres have not. This, I suggest, has to do with the fact that these music genres directly call back suffering associated with colonialization and the Korean War and require that participants too voice such sufferings. Because of this, church members abhorred the integration of traditional Korean singing styles and choral genres into what might otherwise be spaces of safe ethnic cultivation.

In the next section, I turn to a South Korean diasporic church and its choir in Southern California. Southern California is home to the largest number of ethnic Koreans outside of Korea. There were over 600,000 self-identified ethnic Koreans in 2010, and many of them lived in Los Angeles, Buena Park, Garden Grove, and Anaheim among others. I suggest that the diasporic self-image I discussed in this section shapes the reception of different music styles in Korean American churches.

[24] According to Rebecca Kim, 80% of the members of all Evangelical Christian groups at the University of California, Berkeley and University of California, Los Angeles were English-speaking (and mostly U.S.-born) ethnic Koreans, who 'have shed most of the practices and rituals of their ethnic community and embrace dominant, white Evangelical practices and rituals, yet maintain ethnic segregation.' Kim, *God's New Whiz Kids*, 3. Similarly, in an ethnographic study of Korean American students at the University of Illinois, Nancy Abelmann noted: "At the U of I there is a Chicagoland Korean American mainstream typified by normative ideas of certain suburbs, specific life trajectories, and a particular practice of Christianity. For many Korean American students, a single largely ethnic Protestant church at the U of I stood most profoundly for both this mainstream and a troubling ethnic intimacy in college.' Abelmann, *The Intimate University*, 5.

Ethnography of a South Korean Diasporic Church and Church Choir

I conducted ethnographic research with a church from 2008 to 2010 while working as a part-time piano accompanist. The church, which I refer to as pseudonymously as 'KC' to protect its anonymity, was located in the city of Westminster, a major commercial and cultural center for diasporic Koreans in Orange County California since the 1980s. Since it was founded in 1978, KC has catered to first-generation (born in Korea) immigrants whose first language is Korean. It is affiliated with the Independent Reformed Church, a denomination characterized by a conservative theology similar to Presbyterianism. During the time of my research, KC had approximately 450 members and offered two services on Sundays. The morning service catered to people who had migrated to the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s as part of the post-1965 immigration from South Korea. About 350 attended the morning service. The choir I worked with sang during this service. The afternoon service catered to people in their 20s and 30s who had come to the United States in the last ten years. Unlike most other diasporic Korean churches of comparable size in Orange County, KC did not have much success in cultivating an English ministry, which is typically developed for the children of first-generation members. The members' children usually attended other churches in Orange County, someof which were megachurches with membership numbering in the thousands.

KC was a classic diasporic church in that it was strongly shaped by Cold War distinctions. The church was established by a group of Koreans who had fled North Korea during the Korean War. Many members had also experienced the harshness of the Korean war directly as well as South Korea's poverty in the 1950s and 1960s, which they

mentioned to me during lunchtime conversations outside of rehearsal. Typically, the church members would say something general and vague such as "back then Korea was so poor," "there was nothing to eat during the war," and "you would not know this because you are young, but it was really hard to make money back then." They would then express gratitude for having been able to come to the United States and would end their stories with accounts of their children's success in 'mainstream' U.S. society.

The pastor's sermons also conveyed the Cold War-orientation of the church. He mentioned the Korean War quite regularly during his sermons, praising the American missionaries' humanitarian work during the war years. He also demonstrated an ongoing interest in North Korea and recent North Korean Christian refugees. In addition to invoking these topics during the sermon, he invited the North Korean woman and her performance group I mentioned in the introduction to KC for a special event. During this event, they shared testimonials of their life in North Korea, escape, and conversion, which were very strongly inflected by memories of hunger and gratefulness for the abundance of food in South Korea and the United States.[25] Another noteworthy event was a fundraiser concert of the Sŏnmyŏnghoe Children's Choir, associated with the South Korean branch of World Vision, a multi-national Christian humanitarian organization.[26] This choir's concert, which was staged in the main hall of KC, began with a video presentation that traced the choir's origin to a Korean orphans' choir formed during the Korean War. This choir was funded by and performed for U.S. missionaries in Korea. The presentation at KC highlighted the transformation of this choir from a product of the Korean War to a

[25] 9 November 2008.
[26] 2 January 2009.

prestigious choir in Seoul that currently recruits some of the most talented young singers in South Korea.

While I met many church members during the two years I worked at KC (2008-2010), my main interaction was with the church choir. This choir had 25 to 30 members, and most of the singers were in their 50s. About two-thirds of the choir were married couples. I participated in the rehearsals and accompanied the choir during the morning service. Occasionally, I accompanied the choir on external festivals, such the All Nations Heritage Festival mentioned in the introduction. Besides interacting with the choir members during various musical events, I socialized with them in coffee shops and restaurants after the rehearsal. The conductor of the choir, a recent immigrant, was also part of these social occasions. He and I became good friends because we were close in age. We were also the only two people who commuted from Los Angeles every Sunday and the only two who were paid choir members.

What became clear to me during my first months at KC was that the choir was as much a space for socialization as it was a singing body. The rehearsals in particular provided them with the time and space to talk and catch up. I could see that the members had sung in the same choir for a long time because most of them called one other by their given names without any formal title (in Korean language, this form of address is not the default, and used only among very close friends). I came to know a great deal about many of the choir singers (especially the sopranos, who were seated next to the keyboard) because they chatted constantly throughout the rehearsal despite the conductor's attempts to minimize background noise. They made reference to personal histories of illnesses, deaths in the family, stories of their children, inside jokes, business fortunes, and similar

topics.

The friendly, lively atmosphere of the rehearsals disappeared only under one circumstance: when the singers found the musical style of the selected choral piece questionable. This shift in the rehearsal environment was palpable because the singers would cease their habitual chitchat and pay an unusual amount of attention to the music. Almost always, this change took place when the conductor chose a neotraditional choral piece. Neotraditional pieces were programmed rarely: of the 107 pieces that I accompanied over two years, only seven belonged to this style (6.5% of the total performed pieces). All of the other pieces were in styles rooted in Euro-American Protestant vocal music. They included extended choral settings of hymns and gospel songs,[27] pieces excerpted from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European sacred music, and the so-called 'Praise and Worship' music that showed the influence of African American styles.

The seven neotraditional pieces in question were associated with a mode of suffering known as *han*. *Han* (限) refers to feelings of sorrow from unresolved resentment. In twentieth-century Korea, this concept was appropriated by different political interests as a kind of theory of Korean identity: for the Japanese colonial intellectuals, *han* was the core of the 'Beauty of Sorrow' thesis that formed Korean colonial exotica. South Korean activists in the 1970s and 80s used *han* strategically to invoke a psycho-social state of suffering caused by a historical or class-based structure of victimization.[28] Colonial and postcolonial popular culture imagined and presented *han* as

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[27] These constitute a repertory that harkens to nineteenth-century American composers such as Robert Lowry (1826-1899) and Will Lamartine Thompson (1847-1909).
[28] Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, 'Korean *Han* and the Postcolonial Afterlives of "the Beauty of Sorry"', *Korean Studies* 41 (2017).

an audible attribute found in particular genres of traditional Korean vocal music, such as *p'ansori* (musical storytelling).[29]

Neotraditional Christian choral pieces mimic the musical aesthetics of *han* attributed to traditional vocal genres. They do so through the use of slow tempo, slow harmonic rhythm, minor pentatonic scale, and short descending figures that seem to express suffering. These techniques depart from the pervasive reliance on the diatonic major mode and conventional melodic developments, which, in conjunction with the lyrics and vocal timbre of European-style classical singing (what Nicholas Harkness termed 'clean voice'[30]), assert qualities of joy and triumph as the hallmarks of the post-Korean War Christian choral repertory.[31] Neotraditional choral pieces can thus be understood as rare moments in this repertory that use a different set of musical aesthetics and attribute Korean identity to this difference.

Whenever the choir practiced neotraditional pieces, I observed the familiar atmosphere of fellowship being replaced by an environment of anxiety and discomfort. The singers became visibly dissatisfied with the selected piece although none of them made open objections to the conductor during the rehearsal. In what follows, I show how a representative neotraditional Christian choral piece was received by the KC choir singers by describing the rehearsal during which this piece was practiced.

Rehearsing Neotraditional Music

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[29] Heather Willoughby, 'The Sound of Han: P'ansori, Timbre, and a Korean Ethos of Pain and Suffering', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 32 (2000).

[30] Harkness, *Songs of Seoul*, 6.

[31] Ethnomusicologist Heather Willoughby the aesthetics of crying as follows: 'When performing a song of lamentation…a performer will often elongate the sliding tone, thereby emphasizing the sounds imitating crying.' Willoughby, 'The Sound of Han', 27.

At this particular rehearsal in May 2009, singers drifted into the rehearsal room in threes and fours following the post-service lunch and collected the sheet music from the conductor. Seated on the piano bench, I leafed through 'Hoegae wa ch'anyang' (Penitence and Praise) to check if I had played it before.[32] I was familiar with the South Korean Christian choral repertory in general from my earlier experience of playing piano for Korean churches. Korean church in Guatemala (1993-2000). South Korean diasporic choirs around the world select from the same pool of choral music books published in South Korea, which are either obtained by courier or purchased during a member's visit to South Korea. I did not recall having played 'Hoegae wa ch'anyang.' But I could see that it was a neotraditional piece as the piece was in the key of F minor and used minor pentatonic scale for the sopranos' melody (F, Ab, C, Eb, and F).

As usual, the sopranos practiced first. They tried to sight-sing measures 12 to 14, with the lyrics 'my soul cries tears of joy and my mind becomes humble' (Fig. 1). I doubled the sopranos' melody on the piano and the conductor clapped the pulse. But they could not get past the second beat of measure 13 because they were confused about the grace notes fixed to E^{b} and B^{b}. It was clear that they did not know how to realize these descents as such ornaments are not regular features in the choral repertory. The sound of the whole-tone intervals (F-E^{b}-C-B^{b}-A^{b}) also alienated the singers, who are used to diatonic scale. Per the conductor's request, I played measure 13 several times, although I also was uncertain how to best realize this measure.

[Fig. 1 here]

[32] I was familiar with the South Korean Christian choral repertory in general from my earlier experience of playing piano for Korean churches. Korean church in Guatemala (1993-2000). South Korean diasporic choirs around the world select from the same pool of choral music books published in South Korea, which are either obtained by courier or purchased during a member's visit to South Korea.

As I played, I noticed that some of sopranos were wincing or frowning. The sopranos reluctantly gave it another try following my demonstration, but the conductor interrupted them as soon as they finished singing. He said, 'You have to sound sadder than you are sounding right now. Let's do it again.' The sopranos tried again, but the conductor cut them almost immediately, saying that they were not singing in the way that the phrase was meant to be sung. After some thinking, he used descriptive language to explain the function of the grace notes: 'You have to sound like you are lamenting. Sing as if you are crying. Don't just sing.' The sopranos tried again, but it was clear that they were at a loss. The conductor intervened, 'Try to feel like you are singing *p'ansori*.' The sopranos were becoming visibly distressed at this point, some raising their eyebrows. The conductor interrupted the sopranos' third attempt and referred to *han*: 'It is said that we are a people of *han.* We've had people invade our country. The Japanese. Our ancestors suffered a lot from the Japanese invasion. Now let's think about *han* on a personal level. Imagine that you have been wronged, terribly wronged. You are at a point in life where you cannot even express your sorrow in words because you have been wronged.' He then sang measure 13 a couple of times (and to me it was not clear how his demonstration was much different from the sopranos' attempts).

As the sopranos' sectional went on, the background chatter from the rest of the choir disappeared. The basses and tenors, who were seated facing me, looked angry, disapproving, or anxious as the sopranos grudgingly rehearsed the rest of the piece, which included two other similar descending figures. Deacon Pak, who is endearingly known among the choristers as the "ill-behaving bass," staged a thinly veiled mockery of the proceedings, faintly laughing through his nose so that it was just audible. From my

experience I knew that this was his way of expressing objections to the conductor's choices. When the conductor switched to the men's sectional, they engaged with the music only halfheartedly. I began to feel awkward as the sound of the piano rang in the rehearsal room more loudly than usual. I could also hear the sopranos whisper: "What is wrong with him [the conductor]?", "What does he want?", "I don't understand why he wants to do this song."

During the donut break, Mrs. Yi, an alto who regularly gave me packaged home-cooked food every Sunday, approached me and asked what I thought about the piece we were rehearsing. Mrs. Yi said: 'I am not fond of this song. It's too dark. I wish the conductor wouldn't put us through songs like this. We don't know how to do it." Another one chimed in: "Yeah, I don't know what he is trying to achieve.' I did not signal approval or disapproval because I did not want to appear to challenge the conductor, who was already in the difficult position of directing a group of Koreans older than himself in an age-conscious Korean-language environment. I was used to the occasional neotraditional piece, but even I could not help but feel ambivalent every time I had to play them. One aspect that I could not appreciate was the harmonization of the minor pentatonic melody; the melody usually collided against the diatonic habits of modern SATB choral writing. In the case of 'Hoegae wa ch'anyang' (Penitence and Praise), the piano accompaniment in measure 15 (refer to Fig. 1), which concludes the second four-bar phrase, also felt immensely out of place. It called to my mind *t'ŭrotŭ,* a South Korean popular music performed with 'an abundance of vocal inflections.'[33] A genre broadly influenced by traditional vocal techniques, *tŭrotŭ* is popular among older groups in rural South Korea and has been

[33] Min-Jung Son, 'Regulating and Negotiating in T'ŭrorŭ: A Korean Popular Song Style', *Asian Music* 37/1 (2006), 51.

considered the musical Other of urban, aspirational Korea. [34] I felt almost embarrassed to play this motive.

The rehearsals of all other *han*-infused neotraditional pieces were marked by a similar lack of enthusiasm. A particularly noteworthy piece was 'Minjok ŭl wihan kido', ('A Prayer for the Korean People').[35] The conductor selected it for the Sunday closest to the national independence day of Korea (August 15th). Not only did this piece use all the usual attributes of the neotraditional style, but it also made the singers repeatedly enunciate the word *minjok*, a word that refers to Koreans as an ethno-national community, similar to the concept of ethnicity.[36] As such, it positioned the singers explicitly as Korean people rather than unmarked universal subjects. Of all the pieces I rehearsed with the KC choir from 2008 to 2010, this was one that was the most grudgingly rehearsed.

Interviews: Overcoming Suffering

The unwillingness of the singers to perform tropes of *han* entailed in neotraditional Christian music points to their historically shaped conditions of listening. Most importantly, it shows how the singers are affectively and psychically attuned to South Korea's trajectory from a country devastated by the Korean War—and prior to this war, a country colonized by Japan—to an 'advanced' country. In other words, for the singers to perform *han*, an utterance that signals Korea's sad past and the sufferings of Koreans, is to situate themselves 'before' the attainment of progress within a time-space matrix laden with both Christian triumphalism

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[34] For more on how recognizable vocal timbres operate as a mechanism of social differentiation in contemporary South Korea, see Nicholas Harkness, 'Culture and Interdiscursivity in Korean Fricative Voice Gestures', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 21/1 (2011).

[35] Rehearsed on 9 August 2009 for performance on 16 August.

[36] On a critical historical treatment of *minjok*, see Henry Em, 'Minjok as a Modern and Democratic Construct: Sin Ch'aeho's Historiography', *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, eds. Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), 336-339.

and Western historicism. As Nicholas Harkness put eloquently in his work on the semiotics of voice in Korean Christian singing: 'Th[e] voice is treated as a qualitative emblem of a broader cultural transformation from a suffering, war-torn nation to one that has received "God's grace."'[37]

It should also be noted that the singers' unwillingness to sing neotraditional music is indicative of their lack of training in traditional vocal music. Vocal inflections such as the one called for in 'Hoegae wa ch'anyang' cannot be performed convincingly by people who have been practicing European-style classical singing for decades. As Nina Eidsheim reminds, singing is an action mediated through recurring physical training rather than 'a medium that communicates '"truths" about a singer's identity.'[38] This aspect of singing is often missed by the creators and the promoters of neotraditional pieces (e.g., composers and conductors).

From talking to a number of singers, I explored connections between their musical preferences and their understanding and experience of South Korea's trajectory. These conversations motivated me to take up longer interviews with nine singers. These interviews were loosely structured around the themes of musical preferences in and outside the church, memories of South Korea, and life in the United States. All of the singers I talked to favored hymns and choral music, as well as *kagok,* a Korean word for secular art songs typically composed by Christian composers. Most of them connected these genres with the experience of overcoming suffering. During the interview, I also brought up the North Korean woman's performance at the All Nations Heritage and asked what they thought about her Christian music. Many of them (but not all) said that it was an incorrect style for Christian worship.

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[37] Harkness, *Songs of Seoul*, 3.
[38] Nina Sun Eidsheim, 'Race and Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre', *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, eds. Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Keffrey Kallberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 365.

Below I discuss three noteworthy interviews.

My interview with Mr. Ryu (b. 1954) was conducted in a small bible study room at the KC.[39] Mr. Ryu studied theology and choral conducting in Seoul in the early 1970s. He conducted children's choirs and worked in a Christian press for about fifteen years before moving to Buena Park, California in 1989. In Buena Park, he was an assistant pastor before taking on landscape maintenance work. He described his job as 'hard on the body but still more high-paying than many office jobs in Korea… but not as high-paying as the kinds of jobs that white people have.' When I asked him to talk about his favorite Christian music, he said, 'choral pieces that are close to classic hymns.' To explain why these are meaningful for him, he narrated a history of Korean Protestant music that began in Christian schools in Pyongyang during the colonial period (before the division of Korea); it was in these schools that North American hymns were popularized among young Koreans and the would-be composers of Korean-language Christian choral music studied Western music with missionary teachers.

Then, Mr. Ryu talked about how simple Christian hymns helped him, his family, and other Koreans weather challenges in the aftermath of the Korean War:

> I think God works during difficult times. That was my case too. I was young and the Korean War ended not long ago. There was nothing to eat. My mom mended uniforms thrown out by American GIs to clothe us. My father was a military serviceman, and I was born in Seoul. We moved a lot. That's the life of a serviceman, never staying in a place. My mother… She suffered a lot [*koseng i manŭsyŏtta]*. We didn't starve because my dad was a serviceman and it was the time of military government. But anyways, when things got difficult and when there was nothing to eat, I would still see my father and mother praying and going to the church. And you know, it was really, really cold in Korea. Nowadays, it doesn't get very cold because of global warming, but back then it used to get really cold. But they would still go to early morning prayer meetings [*saebyŏk kido*] in that weather and prayed. And when we were building the church, who had the money to contribute? We went to the mountain to find stones to lay down the foundation of

[39] Interview conducted on 13 September 2009.

> the church. I think that's why I like the hymns. Because each one has a personal history. We sang them during this time of difficulty. Some say that it's outdated, but I still prefer an old woman [*halmŏni*] just singing a simple hymn to anything else. That kind of passion is long gone in Korea these days… Things that happen in today's megachurches are just a show these days.

Mr. Ryu said that for the purposes of Christian music, he did not approve of styles other than those that called for European classical singing. He counted the North Korean woman's performance that both of us had seen at the All Nations Heritage event as an example of an 'unnatural' style. He tried to imitate the refugee's vocal timbre for a few seconds and stated that it was 'too emotional' and 'almost unnatural.'

For Mrs. Pak (b. 1948), a former sociology professor in Florida, Christian vocal music was also interwoven with her memories of difficulties in Korea.[40] During my interview with her, which was conducted in her house over dinner, her husband volunteered to participate as well, although he was not part of the KC choir. Mr. Pak (b. 1943) was somewhat of a revered figure in the church: he is a Korean War exile from North Korea who moved to Boston in 1964. He had a distinguished career as a professor of engineering at a university in the Midwest. He was retired at the time of interview.

The couple used to split their time between Orange County and the Midwest until a few years prior to the interview, attending a diasporic church in Orange County and a predominantly white American church in the Midwest. They had spent over two decades in the Midwest, where 'the Korean population is so small as to be insignificant,' and this seemed to explain why they constantly positioned themselves as insiders and outsiders in both cultures during the interview (this was also the only bilingually conducted interview). When I asked Mrs. Pak about her preferred music, she said 'classic hymns, *kagok*, and choral music that

[40] Interview conducted on 6 December 2009.

sound like them.' Then she contextualized these genres in shared difficulties:

> Mrs. Pak: We learned these songs when there was so much suffering [*koeroŭm*]. I think that's why churches were so popular back then. I got into these songs because I attended a church and joined the church choir … It was a privilege to be part of the choir… My father also sang hymns all the time. He also prayed all the time although things were not easy for him. That is why I respected my parents. I had to stop playing records of hymns and *kagok* once I went to Florida [in the early 1980s] because it made me so nostalgic about Korea and got in the way of me adapting into the American society…
> Mr. Pak: Yeah, life was hard back then. That's why Koreans have early morning prayer meetings [*saebyŏk kido*]. When Christianity first came to Korea during the Japanese colonial period, well, it actually came in the late nineteenth century, Koreans were oppressed. So people woke up early to get things going. That's why I like Korean churches… These early morning prayer meetings. I was born in P'yong'anbukdo Sŏnch'ŏn [now North Korea], one of the first towns where Christianity was introduced. It got really loud in the churches on Sunday mornings, with all the prayers and hymns.

Mrs. and Mr. Pak were also the only people among the interviewed singers who demonstrated an ironic, humorous attitude toward the 'Korean' singing style rather than dismissing it:

> Author: Did you listen to any Korean popular music or traditional music while growing up?
> Mrs. Pak: Not while growing up. My parents banned popular music at home and no one was really interested in traditional music. My education was basically learning to read music in school and singing in the church choir. I also learned to play some piano at school. But actually we are learning some popular music now, some *t'ŭrotŭ* [laughter]. My husband knew nothing about *t'ŭrotŭ* because he left Korea so early, but then he learned them recently when we bought a karaoke machine. We even had parties with some Koreans a month ago. Now he even sings Christian songs like *t'ŭrotŭ*. Like this [demonstration]. I sing *t'ŭrotŭ* like I'm singing Christian music and *kagok* [demonstration].

It seemed to me that they had no qualms caricaturing 'Korean'-style singing because they felt quite distant from Korean culture. From their life stories, it seemed that they had only each other to speak Korean to for at least two decades. Also, Mr. Pak said that he wanted his children to assimilate to the United States as much as possible, so he did not teach Korean to his children from previous wife.

Mrs. Shin (b. 1952), a soprano who had studied vocal performance in Salzburg and Manhattan in the early 1980s, met with me in KC's kitchen on a Saturday afternoon; she had just finished preparing broth for the lunch that would be served for the congregation the next day.[41] As a professional trained singer, she was something of a star in the choir. When I asked about her favorite choral pieces, Mrs. Shin said 'classical, classical, and only classical. I can't help it.' She cited Handel's Messiah as her all-time favorite sacred choral piece and sang several melodies from it (in Korean).

When I brought up the North Korean woman's performance in the All Nations Heritage event, she was firm that it was unacceptable as Christian singing:

> Don't get me wrong, I liked the whole event [All Nations Heritage]. I get really touched when many ethnicities come together in one place to praise God and I love the feeling that God is praised by people of different languages. So I'm thankful. What was negative [about the event] was the North Korean refugee. When she sang, I just wished that she had not come. The performer may have been inspired by God, but the piece was not selected correctly. It was not appropriate for the event. With her, I thought, she does not fit in this place at all. I do classical vocal music, so I have the techniques for that. The technique that she was using was so childlike, and the text was inappropriate too. It's just not the kind of text that praises God. It was really artificial. I feel that without that performance, the event would have been good.

The topic of the North Korean singer led her to elaborate on what she considers to be Christian and not Christian. She understood Christianity as a tool for disavowing 'backwardness.' Her view on Christianity had absorbed racist taxonomies of places and people rooted in Western colonial discourse:

> When I was living in Korea, my family was Christian but when I went to non-Christian families, I felt a lot of foreign elements. Idolatry and superstition. This attitude that X is good and Y is how this should be done. It's not a custom or tradition but is related to idolatry. But even now, Koreans are still like this. Thank God we don't have those in this country… What is really strange in Korea nowadays is that the city is filled with shamans, fortune readers, and Buddhist monks. They are as common as coffee shops. They confuse and mislead people.

[41] Interview conducted on 28 November 2009.

> They existed when I was living in Korea too. But not my family. My family was isolated. Well, not isolated, but my family is Christian. Peaceful and clean. In other houses, I felt scared. There were some pictures and knives thrust into the walls. I felt like I was in Africa, as if in some other ethnic people's house [*tarŭn minjok*]. That trend is rising again in Korea. I really hate that. I was always really happy that I was born into a Christian family. Life should be simple and comfortable.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the relationship of history, memory, and self-conception through music in the South Korean diaspora through a study of a particular church choir. I have detailed the socio-psychic dimensions of diasporic memories and juxtaposed this with an ethnography of the diasporic choir at hand. In this account, the goal is not to depict the choir members as victims or to judge their musical tastes. Rather, it is to portray them as historically constituted subjects whose memories and experiences motivate their aesthetic and moral judgments.

When singers resisted 'Korean' styles of music, this appears to go against many of the assumptions between ethnicity and music in music scholarship. (Ethno)musicological narratives about Korea, other East Asian nations, and their diasporas have largely been built on an equivalence between ethnic heritage and ethnic music, which in turn is grounded in a multiculturalist paradigm. When it comes to these areas, however, searching for music cultures that fit this paradigm is problematic. This is especially true of Asian America: the majority of Asian Americans participate in music others than those with Asian 'origin.' In this regard, Paul Jong-Chul Yoon's final comment in his 2001 article on a taiko group based in New York bears mention. Yoon stated that by choosing to study a musical group that draws young, educated Asian Americans interested in learning taiko drumming, he has 'virtually ignored the millions of Asians in America who refuse to position themselves as "Asian American."'[42] It would be wrong

[42] Paul Jong-Chul Yoon, '"She's Really Become Japanese Now!" Taiko Drumming and Asian American

to assume that such people do not know who they are or that they are claiming proximity to whiteness. Rather, this refusal might be treated as an illustration of the ways in which 'Asian American culture…refuses to be a cooperative native informant.'[43]

More studies of music in Korea and its diasporas are needed that articulated the critical framing of Asia as a 'position' rather than an 'identity,' to borrow Gayatri Spivak's phrasing.[44] It is time to ask what ideologies—and whose ideologies—are embedded in research in which the music scholars implicitly think of themselves of *advocates* of musical practices that are considered to represent the identity of a particular country in Western discourse or in the country's nationalist discourse. Can we, instead keeping with categories of and around identity, 'cultivate a self-reflective attitude that requires us to look simultaneously at ourselves within the context of East Asia, and at East Asia within us'?[45] Can we, to quote Chen Kuan-hsing's *Asia as Method*, 'develop historical experiences and practices in Asia…as an alternative horizon or perspective…as method to advance a different understanding of world history?[46] Perhaps it might be difficult for these attitudes to find a home in Anglophone music disciplines given their predispositions, but we should ask if the models we use in teaching and research end up excluding the voices and the histories of the people we hope to include.

Identification', *American Music* 19/4 (2001), 435.
[43] Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 6.
[44] See Yan Hairong, 'Position without Identity: an Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *positions asia critique* 15/2 (2007).
[45] Young-seo Baik, 'Conceptualizing "Asia" in Modern Chinese Mind: a Korean Perspective', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 3/2 (2002), 278.
[46] Kuan-Hsing Chen, '"Asia" as Method', *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies* 57 (2005), 140.

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