

Monolog for bassoon
by isang yun music
essay



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Isang Yun was a composer with Korean ethnicity who is well known in the music world especially in Europe as he spent a major portion of his life in Germany and died there too. In his initial years of composing, his compositions were not well known in Korea due to the political issues surrounding the East Berlin Event. Inferring from his biography, it seemed that he wished to see Korea as a unified nation.

Between the period of 1956 to 1995, Isang Yun composed music in Germany and other European countries. He also composed vast amount of pieces and his works were written in almost every genre, such as instrumental sonatas, operas, symphonies, and cantatas. While his works have been largely performed and studied in Europe, Japan, and even North Korea, South Korean officials have thoroughly prohibited his music and consider the composer dangerous politically. Isang Yun often visited North Korea without permission from the South as North Korea supported scholarships and living expenses for him. However, after a change of regime in 1982, the national symphony orchestra of South Korea first introduced his works in South Korea. From this time, Yun's music began to be studied by musicians in the South.

This paper will discuss in musical theoretical detail one of his works, Monolog for bassoon

His well composed work, Monolog for Bassoon was composed in 1983, this was the mid period of Yun's well accomplished compositional career. During this stage of his life, he had already achieved mastery over the formal techniques of the European avant-garde and had moved more into

composing within a more free atonal style. The Monolog for bassoon is quintessential of Yun's typical mature style wherein he fusions the use of free atonality with elements from his ethnic Korean lineage.

The Monolog for bassoon, which has so far been recorded by at least five prominent bassoonists, is a concrete testament to Yun's growing prominence as a 20th century composer. It shows Yun's unique compositional angle which uniquely combines ethnic Korean inspirations in a work for bassoon, which is a distinctly Western instrument. The Monolog for bassoon also warrants a close study, as it is his only solo work for bassoon, and is an emerging standard of 20th century avant-garde bassoon repertoire.

During his initial years into composing, Yun was fond of and got acquainted with European music and constantly found different sought out ways to learn more about European music history, style, and compositional methods.

Because of his inclination towards western music more so European music, he also developed inspiration in the musical traditions of his home country, Korea. It was only after his journey to Europe that Yun began to foster and incorporate traditional Korean elements into his music. Yun himself admitted this truth through the following quote: " When I was in Korea, I enjoyed and listened to our rich Korean musical traditions for entertainment. But I realized the hidden treasures of Korean traditional music for the first time only after I came to Europe." Keith Howard notes that prior to Yun's journey to Europe, his works " show no attempt to incorporate elements from Korean traditional music." Yun later removed all works from circulation that he had written prior to his study in Europe as he felt they were not representative of his mature compositional voice. Whilst presenting into radio broadcasts in <https://assignbuster.com/monolog-for-bassoon-by-isang-yun-music-essay/>

Freiburg in 1960 on the subject of traditional East Asian music, he began to develop his distinct and unique composing style. Yun also spent a major part of his time to study traditional East Asian music so he could play them in his broadcasts. Due to this research Yun was inspired to compose Loyang, a beautifully composed work that incorporated the mood of ancient court music, the sounds of traditional Korean instruments, as well as the principles of Taoism. But Yun's method of incorporating these elements was not literal in the least. Jeongmee Kim explains: " He was not interested in quoting folk tunes, nor borrowing traditional Asian instruments, nor composing nostalgic song lyrics. Yun's Korean musical heritage is expressed through more abstract, philosophical, and internalized use of ethnic materials, in particular Hauptton/Hauptklang technique. He relied on the use of Korean classical musical forms and Asian philosophy to compete with the equivalent in Europe. These shape and propel the sounds and structure of his works, while the Western musical heritage and its instruments provide the physical means to articulate Yun's complex sound world." Quite centric to Yun's music can be found a Korean view of sound. While Western ears are accustomed to hearing a melodic figure accompanied by harmonic progression, Eastern music relies heavily on the role of an individual or central tone. The tone itself is celebrated; adorned with a huge variety of ornaments. These ornaments are not intended to encompass the central tone within a melody, rather they are an essential part of how the tone is able to express itself. The concept of the central tone is prevalent in many Asian countries and spans various genres of Asian music. Yun describes this phenomenon in a speech he gave at a conference in Berlin:

“ While in European music the concept of form plays a decisive part, and notes become significant only when a whole group of them are related horizontally as melody or vertically as harmony, the thousand-year-old tradition of Eastern Asiatic music places the single note, the constructive element, in the foreground. In European music only a series of notes comes to life, so that the individual tone can be relatively abstract, but with us the single tone is alive in its own right. Our notes can be compared to brush strokes as opposed to pencil lines. From beginning to end each note is subject to transformations; it is decked out with embellishments, grace notes, fluctuations, glissandi, and dynamic changes; above all, the natural vibration of each note is consciously employed by a means of expression. A note’s changes in pitch are regarded less as intervals forming a melody than as an ornamental function and part of the range of expression of one and the same note. This method of treating individual notes sets my music apart from other contemporary works. It gives it an unmistakably Asiatic color, which is evident even to the untrained listener.”

Keith Howard discusses some meaningful reasons which explain the reason for Korean music being structured in that way. The initial part is the ironic yet well complementing relationship between yin and yang. After which is the concept of “ never-ending movement.” Nature is held in high regard in the east asian culture more so with the continuous flow of elements like water, air etc. Now from an abstract or musical view, the flow of sound is thought to be continuous as well. Music exists before sound begins, and continues after sound ends. This is one of the reasons why Yun compares the single tone to “ brush strokes as opposed to pencil lines.” A pencil line has a

definite beginning and ending, as well as a uniform shape and consistency throughout. But in a brush stroke it is hard to determine where the actual beginning and ending occur. Although to the naked eyes it may show as a single line, it can show different views in a myriad of ways and also have contrasting qualities within each unique stroke, which more precisely mimics the flow of nature. He goes on more to explain his view of continuous flow in an interview with Bruce Duffie where he quotes: “ My music doesn’t have a beginning or an end. You could combine elements from one piece into another piece very well.... Music flows in the cosmos and I have an antenna which is able to cut out a piece of the stream. The part which I’ve cut out is organized and formed through my own thought and body processes, and I commit it to paper. That’s why my music is always continuous – like the clouds that are always the same but are never alike one to another.”

Howard also suggests that the physical structure and musical capabilities of traditional Korean instruments have had a profound impact on the Korean concept of tone. While each instrument is unique in tone and structure, they all are extremely flexible in terms of pitch. Many instruments are so flexible that it can be difficult to produce a steady tone. This is directly linked to the Korean musical ideal of sound being embellished and ever changing.

As Yun mainly did composing in the sphere of Western art music, wherein a comprehensive understanding of Korean ornamentation is not mandatory, he does not leave the art of ornamentation up to the performer. He makes it a point to word minute details of the ornamentation, few of which exist within the framework of Western notation, others of which he must create new symbols and explanations for, as they are not part of the conventional

vocabulary for Western musicians. This was a challenging process for Yun because in his thoughts he held a meticulously detailed vision of what the ornamentation should sound like. On this part he was quoted as, “ I wrote down the playing techniques for instrumentalists as they are used in Korea on the old instruments, thus as a very accurate vibrato and many sorts of glissando. In Korea there are of course about thirty kinds of glissando.” To truly emulate the sounds of traditional Korean instruments, Yun had to create new, and often very difficult, techniques for the performers.

Isang Yun’s Monolog for bassoon was mainly composed between the years 1983 to 1984, however the actual roots of this work had begun some years prior along with his other work Clarinet Concerto. The Clarinet Concerto was composed by Yun in the year 1981 especially for Swiss clarinetist Eduard Brunner, who was the principal clarinetist of Munich’s Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra for about 30 years. He premiered the work in Munich on January 29, 1982. Certain points which were notable about the Clarinet Concerto is the usage of bass clarinet instead of clarinet because of the solo voice during the middle movement. In the following year, Yun removed the solo line from the second movement and then used it as the structural basis for a solo bass clarinet work. The resulting composition of this which was written for Dutch bass clarinet virtuoso Harry Sparnaay, became Yun’s Monolog for bass clarinet and was then premiered on April 9, 1983.

Expecting some changes and more likely to accommodate range, Yun also published a version of the same work for bassoon. Yun was quoted in an interview with Bruce Duffie in 1987 that he composed strictly by commission, and his scores typically included a dedication to the commissioner. However,

the Monolog for bassoon contains no such dedication and it is unknown whether it was created for a particular individual. It was premiered on February 3, 1985 by French bassoonist Alexandre Ouzounoff. Precedent for Yun's solo works being performed on other instruments had been set several years prior with Piri, a composition for solo oboe. Piri was composed in 1971 for oboist Georg Meerwin, which immediately gained quick popularity. Before long, musicians of other instruments took notice of Piri and began to perform it. Clarinetists specifically performed and recorded Piri, which also including Eduard Brunner. Wolfgang Sparrer was quoted on his observation about about Piri as: " Although it was originally written for oboe, the composer has allowed interpretations for other instruments. Due to its high demands regarding playing technique and successful balance between construction and expression, Piri achieved so much popularity within only a few years that it was often chosen as a compulsory piece in music competitions." Due to this well spread acceptance and versatility of Piri, Yun may have anticipated the idea of creating an alternate edition of Monolog for bass clarinet for bassoon. Since there are distinct differences in range, key, and clef notation between the two instruments, publishing a new version of the work for bassoon was necessary to encourage performances. As this analysis specifically addresses the Monolog for bassoon, an in-depth discussion of Yun's Monolog for bass clarinet will not be included with the exception of highlighting the differences between the bassoon and bass clarinet versions as explained below.

In a discussion of his compositional process, Yun was quoted by Luise Rinser: " I do not exhaust my possibilities in any one piece. There always remains

something unsolved in form. I make that the starting point of another work. I must always take something new as a challenge. If someday no more new ideas come up, I would stop composing.” This statement not just shows the well synergized and critical parts in Yun’s works, but also provides an answer for his use of the middle movement of the Clarinet Concerto as the basis for an expanded work that would eventually become the Monolog for bassoon.

The Monolog for bassoon well showcases Yun’s unique compositional fusion of Eastern and Western elements. Although this work at an initial look seems like a general late twentieth century avant-garde work for bassoon utilizing extended techniques within a non-tonal compositional context, Yun’s compositional approach looks to specifically convey traditional Korean philosophies, sound ideals, and instrumental techniques. Understanding his compositional method is a key to the performer’s comprehension of the work. If only viewed with a Western outlook analysis of this work, there is a possibility to overlook critical elements in the work like main tone versus ornament, or treatment of the ornaments themselves, while making other analytical associations which he did not intend, such as relying on motivic development and harmonic motion to propel the music rather than melodic growth. Just with all musical genres, it is more feasible to have a comprehensive understanding of the main composers musical perspective. This understanding also holds true for music of the twentieth-century than it is for earlier periods, particularly as modern musical influences become more and more diverse and reach beyond the bounds of traditional Western classical music.

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Musique pour Basson et Piano Vol. 2

Performer: Dag Jensen, Midori Kitagawa

Composer: Paul Hindemith, Olav Berg, Othmar Schoeck, Otmar Nussio, Isang Yun, et al. Audio CD (March 23, 1999) Label: MD&G Records