

# **Stories Summoned in the Music: Listening to the New York Philharmonic Perform in Pyongyang**

July 16, 2008

By Donna Lee Kwon

*Editor: Thomas P. Kim*

On February 26, 2008, the New York Philharmonic made history as the first American orchestra to ever perform in North Korea. The Philharmonic chose their own musical repertoire and played in the East Pyongyang Grand Theater where the hosts constructed a brand new acoustic soundshell as requested by their guests. The North Korean government broadcast the concert live with no accompanying political commentary. International news media, many of whom were on hand to witness the events, declared it a historical moment and a sign of détente between two governments whose animosities have endured since the founding of the DPRK. As the last divided nation to persist beyond the Cold War, Korea remains a symbol of a larger political and ideological struggle. As such, this concert resonated throughout the world, leaving behind echoes that will likely be interpreted and re-interpreted for years to come.

Initiated through the bilateral exchange stipulation (Item II.1) of the October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007 agreement of the Six-Party Talks, on the U.S. side the visit was intended to help establish positive conditions for the eventual negotiated denuclearization of North Korea. The State Department was heavily involved with the Philharmonic's visit, with Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs) the driving political force behind a cultural exchange that was a cause of chagrin for the neoconservatives who have opposed any meaningful negotiations with the DPRK. Perhaps this is why Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sought to downplay the significance of the event, saying that "the North Korean regime is still the North Korean regime... I don't think we should get carried away with what listening to Dvořák is going to do in North Korea." Her comments are disappointing because they not only belittle the good intentions of one of America's most venerable and longstanding musical institutions but also the power of music.

Indeed, much will be lost if we evaluate the Phil's visit solely in terms of its impact on an eventual denuclearization of North Korea. There are many unprecedented political, personal and musical gestures that were set in motion by the Philharmonic's visit, making this event nothing less than a historic milestone in US-DPRK relations. For example, the American national anthem was played alongside the North Korean anthem for the first time ever. The symbolic meaning of this extraordinary gesture was reinforced by the placement of the American and North Korean flags on opposite ends of the stage as beacons of friendship and not hostility. Broadcasted live, the event constituted a significant portrayal of Americans interacting with North Koreans in a normalized, positive manner that spoke to a potential future relationship and the power of music.

The North Koreans clearly went out of their way to facilitate the visit by the Philharmonic. If their actions do not signify a "thaw" in relations, it certainly seems to suggest that North Korea is ready to act on its longstanding desire for increased engagement with the United States. I

remember during my ten-day visit to North Korea last summer, I was surprised by their desire to open more windows into their culture and their willingness to engage with some aspects of Western culture. I was particularly astonished by the visibility of foreigners in Pyongyang and the higher-than-expected level of exposure to foreign languages, not to mention the remarkable English skills of our interpreters and guides. I was also struck by the open-heartedness of the people and the passion with which they sought to illuminate and humanize their society and people. This all came as a surprise knowing how limited North Koreans are in making contact with outsiders via phone, internet, mail correspondence, media and travel. In light of these restrictions, the face-to-face encounters that are made possible through visits like the Philharmonic's are that much more precious and significant, both in terms of impacting North Korean perceptions of Americans as well as American perceptions of North Koreans.

Much has already been written about the eye-opening experiences of the Philharmonic musicians, with those of Korean descent getting particular media attention from the New York Times, the Washington Post, and other major media outlets. Some members of the NY Phil, such as violist Dawn Hannay ([www.dawns-travels.blogspot.com](http://www.dawns-travels.blogspot.com)), have provided their own unflinching accounts on personal blogs. As varied as their stories are, they tend to share a narrative trajectory of initial trepidation and inner conflict giving way to intense feelings of sympathy, understanding, or, at the very least, tempered ambiguity. One thing is certain: most NY Philharmonic members expressed being profoundly moved at some point during the exchange. I wish that more Americans could have this type of opportunity to experience North Korean people and culture more directly; I have no doubt that this would lead to judgments that, at the very least, would be more nuanced than what the mainstream media normally affords us.

In the absence of regular direct contact, we must seek out different and creative means to engage in genuine exchange with the North Koreans, and this is where the visit, I believe, accomplished a great deal. As the conductor and spokesperson of the New York Philharmonic, Maestro Lorin Maazel asserted that "music is a powerful language in which those of us who are humane and intelligent, can speak to each other." Given this, what kinds of stories can be summoned from this musical exchange? What can we read from the choice of repertoire that was performed in Pyongyang? From the North Korean perspective, I believe that much can be read from looking at whom they chose to invite as part their commitment to increasing bilateral exchange. In terms of the New York Philharmonic implicitly and explicitly representing the United States, an entire book could no doubt be written on the musical repertoire that they chose for a concert they knew would be broadcast not only in North Korea, but really, all over the world.

Reflexive critics of North Korea have suggested that the government's invitation to America's oldest and perhaps most prestigious symphony to play in Pyongyang was driven merely by their desire to maximize bilateral musical exchange as a propaganda coup. (Had the North Koreans invited a less prestigious orchestra, I wonder if these same critics would have argued that the North Koreans intentionally sought to diminish American musical talent in the eyes of the North Korean citizenry.) I believe, however, that observers and critics have missed a critical element of the North Korean choice—namely that the symphony is a musical format in which the North Korean government has been profoundly invested in for quite some time. North Korean orchestras may look and sound a little different from American orchestras, but there is no doubt that they share a remarkably similar format. Musically speaking, the organizational format of the

symphony is one that resonates with both Americans and North Koreans, constituting a paradoxical common ground between the two countries. In the music world, the orchestra is the most hierarchical and, if one wanted to get political, “totalitarian” of institutions. Supreme power rests with the conductor and this power is never questioned directly by any of the musicians, except for perhaps a guest soloist whose own fortune is not bound to the orchestra’s. Within each section, all of the players are ranked by chair. The first violinist also holds the title of concertmaster and is responsible for supervising the tuning of the orchestra, coordinating the bowing of the strings, serving as a liaison between the conductor and the orchestra and providing secondary leadership. In this sense, the orchestra hardly sounds like an institution that represents the “free world.” And yet, paradoxically, it does. As any serious member of an orchestra would tell you, the only way to collectively realize certain aesthetic ideals on such a large-scale is to militantly and with precision follow the structure and processes laid out. In this sense, the orchestra is a microcosm of the structure and processes of North Korean life laid out in order to collectively realize socialist ideals. My point is not, of course, to suggest that orchestras are totalitarian and that we should banish them, but instead, to suggest that the enduring popularity and brilliance of the symphonic institution is living proof that paradoxes and contradictions about freedom, individuality, and collectivity are deeply embedded in many societies, even in the so-called “free world.”

As the leading maestro of the Philharmonic, Maazel could not have been unaware of the potential ideological conflict between his roles as all-powerful conductor and representative of American egalitarianism. This may explain why he chose to momentarily subvert his own power by selecting Leonard Bernstein’s exhilarating “Overture” to *Candide* as an encore—a piece in which he dramatically steps down from conducting—allowing the orchestra to proceed unfettered to an audience holding their breath in anticipation. Although he explained his decision to step down as a tribute to the spirit of Bernstein, the legendary composer and conductor of the New York Philharmonic, some critics have interpreted this gesture as a thinly veiled suggestion to North Korea’s head of state, Kim Jong-il, that he consider stepping down as well. This interpretation ignores, of course, what happens next. Does this mean that the members of the symphony can now have a say in electing a new conductor? No. Does Maazel return to the perch from which he voluntarily and temporarily stepped down? Yes, of course, in the very next piece. In short, the critic’s reading of Maazel’s gesture as invitation breaks down almost immediately. Indeed, choosing to read Maazel’s gesture as an invitation to Kim to step down ignores what the symphonic world well knows—that “totalitarian” structures exist and even thrive in some of our most hallowed of cultural institutions. In sum, if the aim of North Korea was to emphasize common ground, there is perhaps no better choice than the orchestra, which may explain why symphonic exchanges between countries on opposite sides of the “Iron Curtain” have been so effective in the past.

On the American end, the New York Philharmonic was given a momentous opportunity to communicate a message through their choice of musical repertoire and accompanying gestures—a message that will inevitably be read for all of its political, cultural, and historic implications. A single performance of a musical program by any given world-class symphony rarely bears this kind of interpretive gravity. At first glance, the program bears some resemblance to what one might encounter at a typical summer “pops” concert, with the exception of the Korean pieces:

*Aegukka* (애국가 “Song of Patriotism”, DPRK national anthem)  
*Star-Spangled Banner* (United States national anthem)  
*Prelude to Act III of Lohengrin*, Richard Wagner (1813-1883)  
*Symphony No. 9 “From the New World”*, Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)  
*An American in Paris*, George Gershwin (1898-1937)

(Encores)

*Farandole, Second L’Arlesienne Suite*, Georges Bizet (1838-1875)  
*Overture to Candide*, Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)  
*Arirang* (Korean folksong)

In preliminary discussions between President and Executive Director Zarin Mehta and the State Department officials involved in negotiating the cultural exchange, some of the main goals in selecting the repertoire that emerged were: 1) to introduce North Korea to works that they would not have heard before and; 2) to present works that were either about “America” or by American composers. Both of these goals are cleverly reflected in the Dvořák, Gershwin and Bernstein selections. Although I think they could have been much more daring in fulfilling the first goal in particular, this at least explains the absence of Russian standby composers such as Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich or Stravinsky.

Knowing about these “behind-the-scenes” goals from the American perspective of the negotiations does provide some insight into the repertoire. However, taking into consideration the order and entirety of the program (including the encores), a startlingly daring message starts to take shape—one that begins with a clearly demarcated notion of nationhood (as represented in the anthems), giving way to pieces that accentuate the vitality of the “West” and “America” but also work to unravel the fabric of their definition, and ending with a surprise demonstration of empathy for Korea’s longing for union in the final encore of “*Arirang*.” Interestingly, the “shape” of this narrative can be seen as echoing the rhetorical structure of *sijo*, a spare form of poetry distinctive to Korea. *Sijo* typically consists of three lines of text: the first line introduces the main theme (in this case, the United States in relation to the DPRK), the second develops this theme, and the third has the added challenge of introducing a “twist” or “counter theme” while also providing a resolution to the poem. In this subtle fashion, the New York Philharmonic (perhaps unwittingly) created another level of resonance by tapping into an underlying aesthetic format familiar to most Koreans.

When the New York Philharmonic goes on tour, it is customary for them to play the anthems of both countries. But given the historic nature of this event, this gesture was anything but customary. Instead, it was a profound recognition of the nationhood of the DPRK and a musical acknowledgment of a change in relations – albeit in a language established by the Western world. Rooted in the culture of military marching bands, anthems go hand-in-hand with histories of colonialism, imperialism and the concomitant adoption of Western notions of modernity and nationalism. To subscribe to the culture of national anthems is to open the door to a process of gaining legitimacy and recognition through a mastery of things Western: whether it be music, systems of governance, philosophies or Olympic sports. Given their philosophy of *juche* or self-

reliance, it is no wonder that the DPRK has been reluctant to play into this kind of “game,” which may explain why, as far as patriotic songs go, the official anthem of *Aegukka* in the DPRK does not obviously engender as much emotional weight as the *Star-Spangled Banner* for Americans. Even so, I was astonished to see so many of the New York Philharmonic members standing up during the playing of *both* anthems. As in the opening scene of a drama, the anthems deftly served to introduce “characters” drawn with distinct national identities and boundaries, going a long way in establishing a tone of mutual respect and recognition pivotal to the deepening of any relationship.

Following the anthems, the first piece of the program is the *Prelude to Act III* of Wagner’s *Lohengrin*. Within the context of the opera, the *Prelude* opens right after a hasty wedding has taken place between a maiden in distress (Elsa) and a mysterious knight (Lohengrin). Because Lohengrin must withhold his true identity as the Knight of the Holy Grail and son of King Parsifal, their love depends precariously upon trust. Although I do not advocate drawing strict parallels here, I do think that this parable on the fragility of trust between two figures caught in a maelstrom of larger forces is strangely relevant in understanding the past, present and future of US-DPRK relations.

The next series of pieces on the program proceed more directly in addressing the subject of “America.” Whereas the *Star-Spangled Banner* presents a clearly demarcated, even defiant image of America, these pieces present an America that is porous, multi-ethnic, and enlivened by the transnational movements of immigrants and tourists: in other words, everything that the DPRK is not. Interestingly, the composers selected to “tell” the story of America are “outsiders” to varying extents; Antonín Dvořák is a Czech composer who came to America in his fifties while George Gershwin was born to Russian Jewish immigrant parents. The fact that an “outsider” can give voice to what it means to be American is what lies at the cultural core of the American dream. Case in point, the New York Philharmonic is full of members with immigrant backgrounds, eight of whom are of Korean ancestry.

Perhaps because of his “outsider” status, Dvořák may have been drawn to narratives of the “New World” that focus on the marginal and oppressed communities of the US: in this case, American Indians and African Americans. In *Symphony No. 9 “From the New World,”* it is widely known that Dvořák derived inspiration from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Song of Hiawatha,” especially in the second (*Largo*) and third (*Scherzo: Molto vivace – Poco sostenuto*) movements (Beckerman 2003). Musically, Dvořák utilized pentatonicism to evoke a composite American sound, drawing indirectly from African American spirituals, Native American songs and Scottish melodies. Although there are other works (Aaron Copland’s *Rodeo* or *Appalachian Spring* for example) that conjure up the vigor and vitality of America, Dvořák’s *Symphony No. 9* is a provocative choice because it also resonates with a socialist empathy for the oppressed peoples of a society. According to accounts of North Korean reactions to the concert, this aspect of Dvořák’s *Symphony No. 9* did not go unnoticed. In putting this work so prominently on the program, the New York Philharmonic opened up a darker window to American history and society that the North Koreans could understand, and in the process, added a layer of potentially subversive complexity to a more simplistic, mainstream image of America that could have been reinforced here.

Of all the pieces on the program, George Gershwin's *An American in Paris* has the most to offer in terms of stirring something anew in the sonic sensibilities of North Koreans. With its prominently scored percussion, syncopated rhythms, seductive jazz melodies, and battery of honking car horns—all evoking the noise, dissonance and abundant richness of modern city life—*An American in Paris* beckons the listener to the lure of globalization, international travel, freedom, and the embrace of the “other” (whether this “other” be “Paris” as suggested in the title or African Americans as implied in the dominant jazz idiom). These are all qualities that North Koreans have been trained to be wary of, and yet the Gershwin was perhaps the first piece on the program to break through the stoic audience demeanor of the North Koreans, eliciting smiles throughout and robust applause at the end. In this sense, the Gershwin may be the most audacious piece of the program in terms of promoting modes of living that are extremely limited to North Koreans. Maestro Maazel raised the ante by cleverly suggesting that someone write “An American in Pyongyang” someday. However, the ultimate message of *An American in Paris* is not the celebration of getting lost in another's culture; on the contrary, the message is that we can enjoy other cultures without losing a sense of one's national identity. In bringing the “American” back “home” through a nostalgic interlude later in the piece, we realize that the experience of travel can also work to strengthen one's sense of boundaries and ties to “home.” In the context of the DPRK, this piece seems to suggest that the “opening” of the country may not necessarily lead to the dissolution of one's national identity; it may, in fact, induce nostalgia and strong forces for cultural preservation, as has been the case in South Korea.

In response to the occasion, the New York Philharmonic gave three special “encores.” The first of these was Bizet's *Farandole* from the *Second L'Arlesienne Suite*. The next encore was Leonard Bernstein's *Overture to Candide*. Born to a Polish-Jewish family, Leonard Bernstein is another example of an American composer with an immigrant background featured on this program. In many ways, Bernstein is an obvious choice, given his legendary status as an earlier maestro of the New York Philharmonic. As mentioned before, Maazel did something very unexpected here; in a tribute to the spirit of Bernstein on what would have been his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, Maazel chose to step down from the podium, allowing the orchestra to play as if guided by the disembodied spirit of Bernstein himself. With its interlocking soloistic passages, rapid tempos and use of irregular meters, this is definitely a collective feat of virtuosic proportions. Performing this piece in this fashion sets the stage for the final dramatic “twist” in the overall narrative of US-DPRK relations on a number of levels. For one, it suggests that progress may only be made if each side is willing to relinquish some power. From another angle, what better vehicle to provide this twist than a reference to *Candide*, a satire by Voltaire that critiques a particular brand of blind optimism or belief that “we live in the best of all possible worlds.” In many ways, the US and the DPRK are like mirror opposites, separated by an ideological divide where one nation's utopia is the other's dystopia. I cannot think of a more brilliant twist than this, subtly prodding us to view ourselves from the other side of the mirror.

Looking at the sequence of pieces through the filter of the poetic *sijo* form – introduction, development, and twist-resolution – the final inclusion of *Arirang* makes for a very provocative conclusion. Of a handful of songs that are beloved on both sides of the DMZ, *Arirang* is unique in its ability to elicit feelings of heart wrenching loss. The lyrics describe being left by a lover crossing over the *Arirang* pass, most likely never to return. Although *Arirang* predates the Korean War, this longing for a departed loved one is often interpreted within the post-division

context. In this sense, the simple yearning for one's lover becomes synonymous with a longing for a nation that was once whole. Ultimately, the act of having America's oldest orchestra play *Arirang* on North Korean soil is a testament to the US's understanding of Korea's tragic division. Closing with *Arirang* goes against the widely held North Korean belief that America opposes reunification.

Despite all the symbolism associated with *Arirang*, this piece almost didn't make it onto the program. In fact, its inclusion was suggested to Zarin Mehta (the executive director of the NY Philharmonic) by Yuri Kim, a Korean American state department employee who was present during preliminary discussions about the repertoire in October of 2007. It is worth noting that the New York Philharmonic went so far as to perform a North Korean orchestral arrangement of *Arirang*, further demonstrating their commitment to cultural exchange and understanding. Although *Arirang* may not have been the symphonic showpiece of the program, it certainly was the evening's showstopper. Firsthand accounts concur that murmuring in the audience could be heard as soon as the solo piccolo began to play the plaintive melody in its distinctive high register. Sounding as exposed and vulnerable as a performer balancing on a tightrope, the piccolo immediately set a tone of moody anticipation. As the piece developed, several of the audience members could be seen with tears in their eyes. As to be expected, *Arirang* was followed with warm applause. However, what was unusual was that this was accompanied with a very prolonged and emotional period of waving. Although it began with the performers waving to the audience, soon everyone was waving to each other as it became clear that no one wanted to say goodbye. North Koreans are well aware of the fact that their interactions with outsiders are fleeting at best. During my trip to North Korea last summer, saying goodbye to a group of people was always difficult. Even though we would often say our farewells with the popular song, "Let's Meet Again" (*Dashi Manapshida*), it was always tinged with a poignant mixture of hope and sadness. Without *Arirang*, I am not sure whether the concert would have crossed over into this kind of emotional terrain. Given this, I believe it is important to acknowledge the role of people like Yuri Kim as well as the value and need for diverse perspectives factoring in proceedings of this historic nature.

Although the lyrics of *Arirang* do not go so far as to actualize the state of (re)union, its performance within this context is a powerful gesture in this direction. In this way, *Arirang* makes for a remarkably progressive and hopeful resolution to the theme of US-DPRK relations. Indeed, the entire performance and the New York Philharmonic's choice of repertoire went beyond communicating a simple message of improved relations, and provided subtle cues as to how normalization might be achieved. The Philharmonic's performance in Pyongyang also conveyed a strong current of possibility and hope where words and verbal negotiations often fall short. Returning to Maazel, not only is music a powerful language, it is unique in its ability to make the impossible seem possible.

*KPI Contributor Donna Lee Kwon received her Ph.D. in music/ethnomusicology from the University of California, Berkeley. She is an assistant professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Kentucky, an elected member of the Society for Ethnomusicology Council, and a Member-at-Large for the Association for Korean Music Research. A full bio can be read at [here](#).*