

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RR-21
Korean Chronicle - III

21 May 1969
28 Uguisudani-machi
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Dick:

Our Korean trip, an encounter for which we were, in a way, ill-prepared, stimulated in us strong and diverse responses, as I've tried to point out. Nothing that I've heard or read since the visit has dispelled the welter of confusing and, to a degree, inexplicable appearances. But a number of things worth noting have emerged from the follow up. The denuded hills of Korea are not only a contemporary phenomenon, a result of the period beginning with the Second World War. The Japanese Resident-General was making gestures at reforestation shortly after the 1910 annexation. On the other hand, the direct and - for the Orient - unfettered manner of the urban Korean women represents an astonishing and recent reversal of custom. Cornelius Osgood notes in "The Koreans and Their Culture" that an overzealous receptivity to Chinese Confucian ideals placed men in such an unrealistically superior position with respect to women, that it was, as late as 1947, deeply embarrassing if not actually impossible for one to talk with his wife. A man, passing another's wife on the street and asking even a simple direction was likely to meet with an averted head and silence. Our Korean guide's relegation of women to a distant third place in the scale of acceptable male pastimes (wine, song, ... and women) was by no means an idle oversight. The women we saw appear to have assumed the manner previously confined to the kisaeng (the Korean equivalent of the Japanese geshia) who has always been free to move about and talk with men. The kisaeng was even taught to read and write, becoming, in the process, the most cultivated group of women in Korea.

A disquieting discovery - one that may or may not have a direct current validity but certainly is thought provoking - is the practice of stone-throwing. Men and boys have, for centuries, been prone to choosing sides and engaging in admittedly lethal battles, heaving rocks at one another. Such institutionalized violence, as direct and unadorned as many other aspects of Korean behaviour, is a fascinating social and psychological item. People in Japan speak with considerable awe about the brutality exhibited by Koreans who are famed for their hot tempers. Character assassination by means of rumor and generalization is a common human indulgence, but though we saw no direct evidence of violence at any point in our visit, our tendency is to credit the current of rumor and tale-telling. There is no question

but what the country and its people exhibit in large and small matters a distinct lack of the polish and reserve that one soon becomes accustomed to in Japan. This somewhat raw quality is perhaps one of the reasons we responded so deeply to Korea. Japan can become somewhat oppressively delicate at times.

While visiting the few museums of stature, we were progressively disconcerted to observe the condition of displayed items. It was not uncommon to see metalwork heavily encrusted with rust, pottery covered with dust, or display backings blotched by water stains. Traditional palaces in Seoul are in obviously bad repair, presenting themselves in the awkward condition of being too recently touched up to look authentically ancient, and too weathered to look anything but dilapidated. At the Changdok Palace in Seoul, we were treated to insistent outdoor background music that consisted not of Korean popular or classical music, but of American standards from the '40s and '50s (tunes like "The Yellow Rose of Texas"). One has no way of knowing whether the condition of monuments and museums is traceable to economic problems, to indifference, or, possibly, considering the country's melancholic history, to an inculcated cynicism.

Against the sometimes unappetizing nature of much of the preceding, I would like to contrast the thoroughly positive impression the young Koreans made. Nowhere in the world, with the possible exception of the United States have I come across more intent, eager, and seemingly intelligent audiences. The drabness of Pusan (as described in RR-17) led me to make subconscious assumptions about the nature of the people who created it and live in it. As a result, it was a distinct surprise to find more than sixty young people waiting in the small lecture room on the third floor of the American Cultural Center in Pusan. (The thick concrete walls, heavy metal gates, and generally fortress-like appearance of the present ACC building there recalls its use as the American Embassy during the Korean War.) A center staff member translated in what appeared to be an efficient way. In Japan, there is approximately a 30% increase in length for anything translated from English, but the growth increment would appear to be considerably smaller for Korean.

I played examples from four works, preceding each by comments about the composer, and suggestions about the nature of each piece and its position in the overall field of American Contemporary Music. Beginning with "Notes from the Underground" by a student composer, Robert Morris, I stressed the composer's openness to all sound-producing objects, his healthy, slightly irreverent approach to "serious" music. This was followed by Salvatore Martirano's "Ballad," which uses American pop standards as a vocal line backed by very unusual instrumental materials; Robert Ashley's "in memoriam ... Esteban Gomez," involving a serious but game-like relationship between four performers; and my own orchestral work, "Threshold." Throughout the extended musical examples (up to twenty minutes) I detected no restlessness whatever on the part of the listeners. Concluding my remarks quickly, I asked for questions and saw a dozen hands rise immediately.

Avoiding the dialectic or excessive reserve which often mar analogous situations in Japan, the questions went directly to the mark. How would I characterize the intentions of younger composers in the United States? When I answered that there was far less desire to "preach" (or to feel that one had the right to) on the part of creative persons, and a growing commitment to direct, personal involvement with the phenomena themselves (sound, light, size, speed), there was a tangible air of empathy from the audience. It was apparent that, however abstractly posed, the notion that American youth was neither propagating nor responsive to behavioural dictates or the necessarily inviolable import of traditional values pleased them immensely.

The music I played involved almost nothing in the way of what is ordinarily considered "rhythm." As in most avant garde (non-rock) music, there was no "beat," and rather more attention to allowing instruments to sound in a relaxed temporal climate. This fact drew a question concerning the functional use of the new music, for dance, for example, or sport and exercise. I began to answer by pointing out that the nature of accompanied events themselves is also changing, so that modern dance is less obviously "rhythmic" than older and more familiar forms. But at this point a young man in the audience rose to give his own perfectly sensible response. Music, he said, helps us to intensify our level of involvement in non-physical situations. The "007" films, with which he and everyone else seemed perfectly familiar, and other contemporary cinema used electronic and unusual instrumental effects, this young man felt, in order to further stimulate the viewer's imaginations. He felt that the increased variety and sheer power of sound resources used constituted a definite increase in the functionality of music. When a young girl asked whether I would consider contemporary music in the United States as "Classical" or "Romantic," there were audible groans, much as there would have been in America or Europe had this chestnut appeared. They also responded to the conspiratorial implication in my answer, that "Classical" (intellectual) means were being used for "Romantic" (emotional) ends - that the machine was being subverted to serve curiously informal and subjective ends.

The lecture in Seoul covered the same music and some of the same area in the question period. There, however, the audience was far older, more professional in constitution, more eager to see scores and question techniques. An important factor in the capital was also translator Kim Mong Pil. Fluent in English, Kim (which, incidentally, is a surname so common that one can scarcely believe it) had spent several years in the US and is the conductor of one of Seoul's three orchestras. He has a particular interest in contemporary music and has actually ventured to program some relatively advanced works. (To put this in perspective, I was told that the American Embassy considered it somewhat of a coup to have placed Gershwin's Rhapsody In Blue on a local concert,) At this point, his efforts have been

isolated and unsuccessful, and he was intent on using this lecture as an opportunity for impassioned oratory to the distinguished gathering. I had made the miscalculation of going over my materials with him before realizing the extent of his experience. When it came time for the actual talk, he felt himself in control and used each of my points as a basis for sometimes very extended personal views. Several times it was necessary for me to disassociate myself from things he had said on my behalf. Still, it was a pleasure to see such an energetic proponent of new approaches.

From the nature of the questions about scores, aims, education, and so on, it emerged that Korea is considerably behind Japan in the process of assimilating or appropriating Western approaches. I had an opportunity to hear Classical Korean court music (hyang-ak), Confucian ritual music (aak), and also various works employing Western ideals of harmony, rhythm, and orchestration. The later efforts corresponded to Japanese efforts much earlier in the century and seemed, in terms of concrete achievement, unfortunate. Traditional instruments were not, as a rule, constructed for long range projection. They tend to be intimate, unobtrusive, and subtle in timbre, and do not work well in large modern halls. Nevertheless, the public interest was attested by the several thousand persons who filled the national theater on the evening we were there, applauding - albeit rather politely - their native composers.

Many of the Korean traditional instruments bear a close resemblance to Japanese, of course. All show strong Chinese influence. A rasping, buzzing sound is more characteristic of the Korean wind family than of its Japanese counterpart. The small double-reed piri dominates, but even the taekeum flutes include an auxiliary opening over which a buzzing membrane is stretched. In the Chinese manner, there are more string instruments used in the ensembles than in Japan, and one, the a-chaing, is played with a bow of bare forsythia wood. The most commanding instruments, visually, are the two extremely valuable and ancient Chinese idiophones, the pyen-chong (sixteen bronze bells of identical shape, but diminishing thickness) and the pyen-kyeng (sixteen slabs of polished, L-shaped stone). These are displayed on ornate, brightly painted racks in two rows. Though one expects a sound of some force from them, they function, as performed in my presence at any rate, only as punctuation, and have a disappointingly short decay time.

The question period at my Seoul lecture went well over an hour and might have continued much longer. No one left. As in Pusan, the room had been full and an intense atmosphere of intelligent interest was tangible. It was hard to reconcile the vitality of these people with their physical surroundings. All indications are that Korea is making impressive economic progress, and it is, on reflection, remarkable that there are no visual reminders of the devastating war that raged there less than two decades ago. Though one should hardly need reminding, the Korean experience underlined again the impossibility of cross-cultural generalizations and pat formulas.

Received in New York May 26, 1969.

Sincerely,
Roger Reynolds