



Reconstructing the National Heritage: *Socialist Folk Music in North Korea and East Germany, 1945–1963*

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Abstract

As the communist half of a divided nation, North Korea shared something in common with East Germany in terms of how it sought to portray itself as the true successor to the national heritage. It did this by appropriating music of the past and portraying the socialist state as its guardian and benefactor. This practice was very much in accordance with the transnational principles of socialist realism, which for music included incorporating elements of folk tradition to make socialist ideology meaningful to the broadest base possible. A look at what is referred to here as “socialist folk music” in North Korea and East Germany reveals that despite their similar origin, the finished project could look and sound quite differently. East German socialist folk music involved bringing the German classical tradition down to the popular level (either at factories and farms or concert halls for mass audiences) where it could coexist with contemporary socialist realist works the Party was trying to promote. North Korean socialist folk music, on the other hand, largely involved bringing and transforming both indigenous instruments and local music genres upward to concert halls where they could align with Western scales and instrumentation. Even as folk music was a rallying cry for collective unity, it also became a source of tension as musicians and the Party clashed over who should administer it and how it should sound.

Keywords: folk music, national heritage, Kim Il-sung, pansori, changgeuk, socialist realism

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Introduction

Closely connected with the search for new ideas in the field of music is the growing interest in folk music shown in the German Democratic Republic....In nearly all the state-owned factories and in the country, amateur circles devote themselves to the cultivation of folk music....The Prime Minister of the German Democratic Republic, Otto Grotewohl, once said that a people is nothing without great art, but art likewise is doomed to failure if it isolates itself from the people. (*Theatre, Music in the German Democratic Republic* [1957, 47])

Writers and artists should know that the real creator of great art is always the people. No excellent work of art ever fails to command the people's love, and if a work of art is not understood and appreciated by the people, it cannot be excellent. Our writers and artists must study the people's literature, folk songs, etc. and make extensive use of them in their creative activities. (Kim Il-sung 1951)¹

As leaders, Kim Il-sung of North Korea (DPRK) and Otto Grotewohl of East Germany (GDR) shared little in common,² yet as the quotes above indicate, they were both authoritative voices for a similar push towards passing down and promoting music associated with the national heritage. This phenomenon in North Korea and East Germany was part of the transnational cultural policy of socialist realism, a political and cultural movement that aimed at “a combination of the most matter-of-fact everyday reality, and the most heroic prospects,” as the Soviet Communist Party leader and cultural administrator Andrei Zhdanov formulated it at the First Writers' Congress in 1934 (Clark 2003, 10–11).³ In its political application, socialist realism stood for three criteria that all forms of art and literature,

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1. This English translation (Kim Il-sung 1981a, 340) was verified by a contemporaneous source (Kim Il-sung 1951, 7). One sentence from the 1981 translation was deleted because it did not appear in the 1951 source.
 2. Although both were nominal heads of government ministries, Kim was also head of the Party while Grotewohl was in a position subordinate to it.
 3. Although socialist realism as a concept had slightly different shades of meaning depending on time, place, and form of artwork, as a policy, it provided standards for artists and served as a metric for regulating cultural production across the socialist bloc.

including music, were supposed to possess: ideological content, party-mindedness, and being for or of the people. The last of these three, being for or of the people (referred to in Russian as *narodnost'*), was a salient aspect, if not the most salient aspect, of socialist realism when applied to the field of music (Fairclough 2018). While *narodnost'* literally means nationality, it is a multifaceted concept that encompasses “popular, folk, state, [and] national” (Clark 2013, 575) and was particularly relevant to the communist halves of divided states that were waging a two-front struggle of building support for socialism as a political and economic system while at the same time presenting the socialist state as the legitimate successor to the national heritage.

This paper investigates the circumstances surrounding North Korea and East Germany's descent into past indigenous music traditions for the purposes of socialist state-building and political consolidation. Like many communist states at the time, both the GDR and DPRK put a great deal of emphasis on reviving and mobilizing traditional forms of music, seeing them as indispensable to popular understandings of national heritage. The way they administered their national resuscitation projects, however, differed. East Germany's popularization of national music involved the state bringing the German classical music genre to the level of the popular audience, so the worker and the peasant could appreciate it as the elite had previously. North Korea's popularization of national music involved the state modifying and modernizing the existing music of the people to an advanced level to be played alongside European classical works. Even with this fundamental difference, both socialist states took great lengths to define what this national music was in order to secure hegemony over the respective nations that they were seeking to create.

As peripheries of the socialist bloc and centers of the Cold War conflict, North Korea and East Germany, in their early periods, had to make accommodations to nationalist sentiment in order to build support for a socialist system. This delicate balancing act between nationalism and socialism manifested itself most profusely in the cultural sphere, especially music, for the act of performing traditional forms of music or singing songs around a shared national identity is one of the most powerful and

representative ways for a community to demonstrate its ties with the past. Moreover, for socialist regimes like North Korea and East Germany, music in particular is an important topic to cover because it has had a tendency to be brought under state control at a later point in time than other areas of social life.⁴ This is likely because music as an art form is more abstract than representational (making it hard for the state to pin it down discursively), while at the same time resonant and central to social life as a practice. Just as musicians have been at the mercy of political leaders who can both award them subsidies or prohibit their music practice, political leaders have depended on musicians to win the hearts and minds of the population. This task of winning the hearts and minds of the citizenry and maintaining their allegiance was an especially urgent concern in the halves of divided states that emerged from postwar occupations by outside powers.

Despite this shared attribute between East Germany and North Korea, there has so far been little attempt to seek points of intersection between these two states with regards to cultural policy and its manifestation in daily life.⁵ Much of the comparative work on the two has focused on diplomatic or political history and has expressed an understandable dose of skepticism about making too many generalizations about two very different places with very different relations with the Soviet Union and the rest of the world.⁶ Nevertheless, the volatility in cultural interaction and exchange between North and South Korea makes national heritage in divided states a worthy topic for exploration, and it is unfortunate that there have not been more inquiries that look beyond the Korean Peninsula to understand what different cultural history trajectories from a common national heritage can involve and how they can evolve over time.

4. See for instance, Longyear (2011, 121).

5. While comparative works on music and/or cultural policy in North Korea and East Germany have been rare, there have been a number of comparative works on music that have looked at either North Korea or East Germany and other countries, such as David Tompkins' (2013) comparative history on the development of Socialist Realist music in Poland and East Germany and Youngmin Yu's (2007) ethnomusicology dissertation about the music practices of two diaspora groups in Japan and Los Angeles that identify respectively with North Korea and South Korea.

6. See for instance, Kelly (2011).

In order to capture both the ideological imperative of this cultural phenomenon, I use the term “socialist folk music” for the national-heritage promoting climates in the DPRK and the GDR. While folk music is typically understood as “something created spontaneously and handed down orally among the masses” (Kwon 2007, 107), in a socialist state, it can involve a more deliberate process as the state seeks to dictate what is to be passed down. I have therefore decided not to limit my analysis to what has been referred to explicitly as “folksong” or “people song” (*Volkslied* in German and *minyo* in Korean), but instead extend my analysis to any music broadly associated with the folk or the people of a given community, with emphasis on two components: popularized among a group of people and tied to the national heritage in some way.

I base this broad view of folk music on Raymond Williams’ observations (1983) about how the precise meaning of folk or folk song has evolved since its first widespread usage in the 1800s. While *folk*, since its origin, has had a general meaning of “people from particular social formations,” by the late 19th century, it, according to Williams, came to denote a “sense of ‘survivals’.. of elements surviving by force of habit into a new state of society.” As a part of a “complex set of responses to the new industrial societies” the folksong is particularly relevant for postwar socialist states because it was the form by which popular songs bridged the divide between pre-industrial songs and new industrial work songs following national crises. The contrast that the term denoted then was not so much between folk music of the people and a supposedly more refined and less spontaneous classical music. Instead, as Williams notes, it had to do with a folk music that “backdated” certain elements of popular music and set them apart from other modern popular forms of music “either of a radical and working class or of a commercial kind” (Williams 1983, 136–137).

I therefore include in my analysis disparate forms of music as seemingly far apart as opera and peasant music, particularly because making a binary distinction between the two is not always appropriate. A Korean genre like the operatic storytelling tradition of *pansori*, for instance, often incorporated local folk songs and had audiences from both the higher and lower echelons

of society.⁷ On the European side, past classical masters were lauded during the period of socialist realism for their “folk creativity” or drawing on their folk heritage (Fairclough 2018, 355). Furthermore, as cultural administrators in the North Korean and East German states sought to break down distinctions between high and low cultural art forms (as part of a socialist endeavor to break down class distinctions), they updated and constructed forms of music that were arguably popular and classical at the same time.⁸ Yet as we shall see, the boundaries between what was a legitimate popular part of the national heritage and what was illegitimate, elitist, bourgeois, and/or unnatural, were in constant flux.

While my focus on music associated with the people and the past is broad, the time period I choose to focus on is narrower. Although I include a background and epilogue section, the developments discussed are primarily from the late 1940s to early 1960s. This was a time of appropriation of music from the past and evolving strategies for keeping it in front of the people as a meaningful and ubiquitous aspect of daily experience.

The Origin of Folk Music in Germany and Korea

Before discussing music associated with *folk* and its incorporation into the cultural development policies of North Korea and East Germany, it is important to explore the relationship between *folk* and music in the Korean and German contexts. In Korean, the word for folksong is *minyŏ*, which literally means people song, and is typically used in conjunction with other words that have the character for people (*min*), including *minsok* (people’s customs.), *minjok* (people of the ethnicity and/or nation), and either *minjung* (people of the crowd/masses) in the South or *inmin* (the people) in

7. For a description of how the practice of catering to both popular and elite tastes shaped the development of pansori, see Jang (2014).

8. Fairclough prefers to use the term “middlebrow” to describe this kind of phenomenon, specifically in regards to how the Soviet Union sought to create a culture that was both “legitimate” and “popular” in order to pursue the Marxist-Leninist goal of social unification (2018, 339).

the North. While these terms are relatively recent (dating back to around the late 19th century), in Korea before this time, there were a number of native or indigenous music forms that were distinguished from the official music of the royal court derived largely from Chinese dynasties but also with some indigenous development.⁹

For Germany, the concept of folk music traces back to the 1770s when the German Enlightenment philosopher Johann Herder used the term *Volkslied* (people song) to refer to songs of the German countryside that he collected while traveling. He published these songs in a volume extolling them for their genius quality and “Germanness” (Bohlman 2002, 108). Herder’s formulation of *Volkslied* set in motion a centuries-long expedition of discovering and documenting music that was presumed to embody the essence of German national identity, which became instrumental in the quest to find national symbols following the unification of the German nation-state in 1871 (Applegate and Potter 2002). The idea of music that embodied the nation was not limited to the music of the countryside, but instead spilled over into orchestral music, as German nationalists considered compositions such as the operas of Richard Wagner to embody the German national spirit, attributing their presumed genius qualities to the notion of a German *Volk* (Grey 2002).

Herder’s notion of *Volkslied*, or songs of a nation’s people, was not only influential in Germany; it also spread to other parts of the world, including Korea where the word for folksong, *minyo*, is from the Japanese term of the same name, which is in turn a direct translation of the German *Volkslied*. In 1913, the term was used when the Japanese Governor General in Korea sought to collect information about the Korean people, including their musical culture.¹⁰ Over the next two decades, Koreans used the term *minyo* to refer to their own music and eventually formulated it to refer to “songs passed down from the distant past, without known composers” (Choe [1932, 82–89], as cited in Howard [1999, 2]). By the 1930s, with the

9. For more on this, see the various sections of Yoon (2008).

10. The term *minyo* was not absent from Korea prior to this. It was used to refer to the music of provincial areas that Confucian officials considered a barometer of the sentiments and conditions of the local people. See Choi (2009).

establishment of Japanese record companies in Korea, the term *minyŏ* had become a catch-all for various local traditional musical genres, such as the operatic, storytelling genre of *pansori* prominent in the southeastern Jeolla province region and the light lyrical music performed by women working in entertainment that was based in the Gyeonggi province region, which surrounded the capital of Seoul (Howard 1999, 7–8).

Meanwhile, in Germany, the concept of *Volkslied* had evolved and become an inescapable feature of daily life. The late 1880s witnessed the emergence of countercultural youth movements that put themselves against the prominent formal harmonic male choral societies while stressing a communal social life. In addition to outdoor recreational activities, dressing in folk outfits and singing folk songs in groups were among their most common activities. Two leaders of these youth movements, Fritz Jode and Walthar Hensel, expanded the notion of what folk music could entail. Jode universalized the notion of Volk, from beyond those of the countryside to anyone of the German nation, while Hensel, believing that it was a civic duty to sing folksongs, stressed that the essence of a folksong was its popularity rather than its link to a specific region or time period. While these two individuals did not end up having prominent positions under Hitler, their ideas would later shape the Third Reich period practice of appropriating folksongs for marching music and mass propaganda events (Sweers 2015). As Cathcart (2006, 8) points out, music specialists that supported the Nazi regime considered German folk music the “glue for a new German empire” seeing it as instrumental not only in establishing unity but also in securing world recognition.

One aspect that East Germany and North Korea shared was that during World War II, much of the founding leadership (including those who would have a hand in shaping music and cultural policy) was living in exile. For instance, Ernst Hermann Meyer, a Jewish musicologist who would later outline principles of socialist realism in music, sought refuge in the United Kingdom, and Hanns Eisler, who would later compose the music for the East German national anthem, was all over the world, including the United Kingdom, Soviet Union, Spain, Mexico, Denmark, and the United States, where he composed scores for several Hollywood films. Leading figures

of North Korea came from a narrower spread of exile. For instance, Kim Tubong, a prominent linguist and political activist who served the first general secretary of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee, was present at the Mao Zedong Yanan talks and transmitted many of Mao's ideas on literature and art to North Korea where they were incorporated into cultural policy (Howard 2010, 82). Additionally, there was Kim Il-sung who was an anti-Japanese guerilla leader in the Manchuria region of northeast China. Kim Il-sung's musical upbringing was not limited to his time abroad. Prior to his time in Manchuria, he was an organist in a Christian church set up by American missionaries, and according to his own writings, the church was where he learned the power of music to attract the interest of young people (Cathcart 2008, 95). As Cathcart points out, Kim is believed to have applied that lesson to his mission as a guerilla leader by composing songs with anti-Japanese lyrics to arouse the sentiments of guerilla fighters.¹¹

Thus, by the time socialist states aligned with the Soviet Union were set-up in North Korea and East Germany, foundations for the flourishing of socialist folk music were in place, such as the longstanding *Volkslied* practice of collecting and popularizing folk songs in Germany and the relatively recent moves to categorize and popularize *minyo* in Korea. There was also tremendous appeal in a movement to highlight and build upon a sense of national heritage. For Korea this would be anti-colonial nationalism, and for Germany it would be a chance to redeem true cultural origins from the corrupted recent past of the Nazi regime. Division of the homeland following defeat in Germany's case and liberation in Korea's case brought a sense of urgency to this appeal.

11. North Korean sources at least as far back as the early 1960s attest to Kim Il-sung's leadership role in creating revolutionary songs during the period of anti-Japanese armed struggle in the 1930s. See for instance, Yeon (1960).

Reclaiming the Nation and the Resonance of Socialist Realism 1930s–1940s

In the first few years following World War II, relations started to deteriorate between the two major victors in the war, the Soviet Union and the United States, who had the primary roles in postwar settlements. When it became clear that unified states would not result from American and Soviet cooperation, Korean and German communist leaders took matters into their hands and established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1948 and 1949, respectively, almost immediately after the founding of the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, or West Germany) in their respective other halves. With a concept of folk music already established in both of these regions, and with the formation of socialist governments that had strong ties to the Soviet Union, the Soviet discourse of socialist realism provided an important impetus for the development of socialist folk music within both emerging political systems.

It is important to point out that socialist realism, particularly in its acceptance and embrace of folk traditions, was not an inherent prescription or ideal of Marxist ideology.¹² Instead, its ideas, particularly its aspect of *being for or of the people* in relation to national heritage, gradually came about as Russian communists sought to incorporate diverse regions surrounding them into a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

In 1925, shortly after taking power, Stalin announced to national party personnel from the Asiatic republics that the new ideal for art would be “socialistic in content and nationalistic in form,” claiming that “proletarian culture does not change national culture, but gives it a content” (Tagangaeva 2017, 397). As part of his political consolidation efforts, Stalin sent Russian composers to the various parts of the USSR to collect and highlight folk songs, which were used to mobilize local nationalisms against modernist

12. Marx and Engels considered the kind of nationalism that might promote folk traditions to be a part of the bourgeois nationalist period that was a necessary step in fracturing feudal society but which would eventually decline with the emergence of capitalism, which preceded the proletarian revolution. See Silverberg (2009, 503).

schools of art and identity emanating from the West (Shreffler 2007, 462–463).

Socialist realism formally came about in 1934, when the Russian writer Maxim Gorky introduced the concept in a speech at the First Soviet Writers' Conference. According to Gorky, art should be realistic in presenting everyday life and meaningful to the proletariat; at the same time, it should be a technique for ideologically remolding people into supporting the objectives of the party. At this same conference, Andrei Zhdanov formulated socialist realism as “a combination of the most matter-of-fact everyday reality, and the most heroic prospects” (Clark 2003, 11). Although “socialist in content and *nationalist* in form” was not an explicit part of the official formulation of socialist realism, it was intertwined with one its components, the idea of *narodnost'*, or being of or for the people. We can see some evidence of this from the fact that one of the first composers in the Soviet Union to be considered an exemplary composer of socialist realism, Nikolai Myaskovsky, received praise in 1937 for meeting the requirement of “being national in form, socialist in content” (Fairclough 2018, 360).

While German communists were exposed to the idea of socialist realism from the time of the 1934 Soviet Writers' Conference, where they made up the largest foreign delegation (Tompkins 2013, 47), the concept's transmission to North Korea is a bit more elusive. North Korean sources in the 1950s, such as a 1956 handbook for teachers (Gyoyuk doseo chulpansa 1956, 10–12) acknowledge the role of the Soviet Union in “confirming” socialist realism during the postwar occupation following the 1945 liberation, but claim that socialist realism already had a long history in Korea going back to the Japanese colonial period, particularly with regard to the indigenous Korean art organization KAPF (Korean Art Proletariat Foundation) that predated the North Korean state. By the early 1960s, as one can see in an article by Bak Jong-sik (1962, 108) from a collection of essays about adapting Marxist-Leninism to the conditions of Korea, the emphasis shifted to stressing the role of Kim Il-sung. Not only is he reported to have raised literature and art to the high level of socialist realism during the 1930s anti-Japanese armed struggle, he is also credited with leading the art and

literary fields to the resolute path of socialist realism following liberation.¹³

Another source of inspiration for North Korea that merged with Soviet ideas of socialist realism was Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art," which sought to clarify cultural policy to artists and writers and which several prominent North Koreans, such as Kim Tubong, attended (Howard 2010, 82). While Mao does not outline formal principles of socialist realism in these talks, he does instruct music specialists to "pay attention to the songs of the masses" so they can maintain a close connection with them and guide them. In one part of the talks, Mao refers to two songs of the past, one of which was considered a higher level of culture but did not quite resonate with a large crowd and the other not known for its quality but still attractive to peasants:

Your work may be as good as "The Spring Snow," but if for the time being it caters only to the few and the masses are still singing the "Song of the Rustic Poor," you will get nowhere by simply scolding them instead of trying to raise their level. The question now is to bring about a unity...between higher standards and popularization. Without such a unity,...you may call this art "pure and lofty" but that is merely your own name for it which the masses will not endorse. (Mao 1942)

Although this passage does not call directly for a retrieval and putting to use of folk songs, it is tied to looking very closely at what kinds of music the masses of people like and learning from that to compose and popularize music.

Even with these transnational calls for work that appealed to a broad segment of the population, the cultural production that North Koreans and East Germans engaged in was not exactly *nationalist in form, socialist in content* at first. For German socialists and communists during the years

13. Regardless of whether socialist realism had a significant impact in Korea before liberation in 1945, we can say it was significant after that point because there was considerable cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and North Korea in the midst of the period in which the ideas of Andrei Zhdanov (a proponent of socialist realism) dominated the cultural sphere in the Soviet Union (Armstrong 2003a).

of the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), there was a sustained tradition of working-class music, and it might be more accurate to identify the cultural climate at the time as *internationalist in form, socialist in content*. For instance, at the 1931 Festival of the Red Song in Berlin, the repertoire for some of the concerts included Norwegian and French folksongs as well as German ones and songs expressing dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and the hope of revolution (Bodek 1995, 221–22). A member of the German Workers Singing League who participated in the event professed, “German workers do not limit themselves to German folk songs, but sing the songs of all the peoples of this continent...for reconciliation.” He goes on to state that, “A community of peoples united through singing, an international of the folksong...is—correctly understood...in the spirit of socialism” (Bodek 1995, 219).

For North Korea, having experienced liberation from decades of colonial oppression, the artistic climate during its early post-liberation period (1945–1950) was not so much *nationalist in form, socialist in content* as it was the opposite: *socialist in form, nationalist in content*. As Armstrong (2003b) points out, North Koreans certainly saw the Soviet Union as a model of culture as well as politics but at the same time believed in spreading a message through song that they had resuscitated the native Korea from its colonial past. Moreover, the goal of explicit appeals to national heritage was not simply to connect with the population inside North Korea, it was also to paint a picture of a heritage-promoting artistic climate that could attract outside intellectuals, musicians, and others from the South to migrate northward.¹⁴ In coordination with this move, North Korea, with the support of the Soviet Union, offered subsidies for artists and a number of opportunities for them to produce works (Armstrong 2003a). This was in sharp contrast with the South where the arts were fragmented and not really

14. A case in point here is the dance practitioner Choi Seung-hee (Choe Seung-hui). After making a request to USAMGIK to start a Korean dance studio, she was rebuffed, which was one of the factors behind her decision to venture to the Soviet zone in the North where she could set up her studio; later, she was given the opportunity to perform with her dance group in Moscow. See Armstrong (2003a, 77).

well-supported by the US Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK).¹⁵

Facing a somewhat analogous situation, East Germany modeled its musical institutions around a Soviet model yet portrayed itself as the protector of German tradition as it sought to “outdo West Germany in its Germanness” (Silverberg 2009, 518). It did this a number of different ways such as financially supporting amateur artists, subsidizing concert and theater tickets, and reclaiming the tradition of worker’s choruses and music festivals that had become prominent during the Weimar Republic era (Silverberg 2009, 505). Hans Eisler, who had written music for working-class festivals during the Weimar era, contributed to the emerging soundscape in East Germany by composing the national anthem. While the music for this anthem embodied an international form reminiscent of the scores Eisler had written for Hollywood films,¹⁶ the lyrics were all about the German nation and contained no overt references to communism, unlike the national anthems of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. As for North Korea’s national anthem, its composer Kim Won-gyun was not so much a Korean folk musician as a prominent composer of marches who had been trained in the Soviet Union and Japan. In a similar vein with Germany, the lyrics for the national anthem he wrote were not about communism but instead about the Korean nation, including one line that lauds 5000 years of history and another that declares proudly the spirit of Mt. Baekdu (located on the Chinese-North Korean border).

Regardless of the precise degrees of nationalism and socialism though, an important step in establishing music that would resonate with the people and promote the national heritage was setting up the infrastructure for cultural work, like music to be transmitted. In accordance with this, one way that Kim Il-sung enabled his rise to power upon his return from

15. As Armstrong (2003a, 73) points out, paying attention to the realm of culture in the post-World War II occupation of South Korea was initially an “afterthought of an afterthought of US military planners.” While the USAMGIK later made an effort to support cultural initiatives, the priority was on changing the negative perception of the United States rather than cultivating Korean intellectuals and cultural figures in the South.

16. As Bick (2003, 65) reveals, Eisler lifted the melody for the national anthem from a passage of one of his Hollywood film scores.

exile to North Korea was his use of “nation building rooms” or “reading rooms” to expose police-in-training to books and songs about the anti-Japanese guerilla experiences that he had been a part of (Cathcart 2008, 97). A section called “On Cultural and Educational Work” from a Kim Il-sung speech about the 1947 plan for the national economy, mentions the growth of reading rooms (along with libraries, theaters, cinemas, and clubhouse), suggesting that the emergent regime was extending the use of them beyond police cadets to the general population.¹⁷ In the same speech, Kim mentions the founding of a “central symphony,” signaling a move to make the culture of the state central to the lives of the people (Kim Il-sung 1980b, 92).¹⁸ However, without sufficient development of a Korean orchestral music at this time, the central symphony orchestra played largely Western classical music pieces (Yu 2007, 57).

While North Korea was building many of these institutions from scratch, East Germany was largely involved in a period of reconstruction. A pamphlet from the GDR published in 1957 about the second half of the 1940s mentions how, following the destruction of much of the cultural institutions like theaters and opera houses, the government put as much attention to rebuilding them as they did to basic living conditions (*Theatre, Music in the GDR* 1957, 31). As reported in a section about theatre:

The extent of the destruction caused by the war was such that in 1945 the mere thought of wanting to reopen the theatres must have seemed ludicrous...However, the artists, once freed from authoritarian tutelage or returned to their homeland, were not for long able to repress the urge to interpret on the stage the new life and humanism that were to succeed a dark past...From all over the capital, theatre-hungry people were attracted by the prospect of sharing in this cherished experience they had missed so long. The actors shivered in the unheated dressing-rooms and often they had to go on the stage with hunger literally gnawing at their vitals. Yet

17. Confirmation of the extensive use of reading rooms can be found in Ri (1948).

18. As Howard (2020, 288–289) quotes from *Kim Il-sung Works* (Kim Il-sung 1980a, 298–299), musicians were instructed to “make an active contribution to building a new, democratic Korea.”

nothing could dampen the general atmosphere and optimism pervading the theatre. (*Theatre, Music in the GDR 1957*, 35)

Such a pronouncement, while it may have certainly involved some exaggeration, demonstrates how strongly physical, cultural, and moral reconstruction impulses intersected to legitimize the postwar policies of the state.

Distinguishing the Progressive and Popular from the Backward and Reactionary: Understanding Abjection as Part of Heritage Succession

The revived embrace of local forms of music across the socialist bloc was accompanied by Soviet Central Committee chairman Andrei Zhdanov's Anti-Formalism Campaign (1946–1948). This campaign involved denouncing writers and artists whose works prioritized a devotion to artistic form over the prescribed socialist content of the party. As Longyear (2011), points out, this was a time of escalating Cold War tensions, and like the 1928 period of the consolidation of the Asian republics into the Soviet Union, Stalin sought to mobilize nationalisms (starting with Russian nationalism) against foreign influences. Emphasizing folk music as a means to combat cosmopolitan music was a part of this process. In 1948, the same year Zhdanov issued an edict castigating notable composers like Dmitri Shostakovich for creating work that was “hostile to the people,” the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in Germany held a Culture Conference after which delegates called for the continuity of folk/popular music with the classical music tradition (Tompkins 2013, 48).

By 1954, Ernst Hermann Meyer, a leading figure in music policy in East Germany, had outlined principles for socialist realism in music. Among these principles were several points related to national heritage, including, “containing and expressing the national character,” and “truly popular and closely linked to folk music without being primitive” (Tompkins 2013, 21). Meyer placed these and other traits relating to accessibility and relatability to the people ahead of what he had previously considered in

1951 to be the decadent tendencies of some modernist composers including “cosmopolitanism, twelve tone music, and American kitsch,” all of which he put under the pejorative label formalism (Tompkins 2013, 52).

Formalism became a line of attack against composers deviating from the party line and functioned as a metric for censorship. Like Meyer, Kim Il-sung used the term formalism in 1951 to denounce certain workers in the cultural sphere, not only writers of music but also performers whom he accused of overemphasizing form in their performance to the extent that they misrepresent the content of the work they were performing (Kim Il-sung 1981a, 442).¹⁹ The process of denouncing and censoring composers and other artists for supposed formalism is an important history that others have documented; for our purposes here, however, it is important to highlight that the music of the past was also subject to scrutiny. In particular, a large amount of disdain was reserved for the *pansori* storytelling opera genre. Among the criticisms Kim made against the husky-voice feature of *pansori* in a speech in the summer of 1954 were that it was unappealing for youth who wear Western clothes, it was unnatural (since it could have the same vocal parts for men and women), and it was used by clowns and drunks. In addition to critiquing the sound of the genre, Kim Il-sung also criticized it as an institution for retarding the development of the musical arts and creating barriers of entry for new composers and musicians. It is in this speech that Kim made his widely cited command to “correctly distinguish what is progressive and popular in our national culture legacy from what is backward and reactionary” (Kim Il-sung 1981b, 52–53).²⁰

Before we can discuss this issue further, it is important to outline the institutional framework in which music standards were formalized and enforced: cultural worker unions. Because these organizations were largely administered by the party and functioned to provide subsidies and opportunities for music to be showcased, they were mechanisms

19. As verified by “Munhwa yesulindeul-gwa jeopgyeon seoksang-eseo-ui Kim Il-seong janggun-ui yeonseol” (1951, 8).

20. As verified by Kim Il-sung (1954, 274).

of control that artists depended on for their livelihood and careers. In 1946, Kim Il-sung founded the League for North Korean Music (Joseon jakgokga dongmaeng) with the purpose of having musicians and composers work within the same institution and body of work, in contrast to the fragmented South Korean musical scene that was separated into European classical, popular, and traditional Korean music (Yu 2007, 51–52). The East German composers' union, called the Association of German Composers and Musicologists and founded in 1951, differed from its North Korean counterpart in that it originally did not include musicians. After much resistance from composers who feared the party would unduly influence performers against their interests, the union opened up their membership to performers although their numbers were capped to 30% and later reduced to 20%. (Tompkins 2013, 111). The fact that East German composers had any say at all in the composition of their organization is one instance of what David Thompson (2013, 5) calls “negotiated dictatorships” or ones “with attempts at total political control modified by elites and ordinary citizens participating through a willing if partial embrace of party goals but also resisting initiatives from above and actively pushing their own.”²¹

If we look at a discussion published by the North Korean Composers Alliance's Central Committee (Joseon jakgokga donmaeng jungang wiwonhoe 1954, 23–57), we can see how the cultural worker unions functioned in terms of establishing the parameters for what kind of music performance would be tolerated. The participants in the discussion are practitioners of traditional music, and they discuss how to appropriately develop the inheritance of past music. The specific issues raised are the defects of the husky (*takseong*) voice in *pansori* music, the need to separate male and female vocal parts in the genre, and the importance of updating

21. While there is not as much evidence of this occurring in North Korea, it is worth pointing out that despite Kim Il-sung's diatribes against the *pansori*, an unnamed article as late as 1959 in a music specialist journal spoke highly of the genre without any criticisms. This suggests that at least for its early period, there were elements of a negotiated dictatorship, however minimal, in North Korea when it came to performing the folk arts (Joseon jakgokga dongmaeng jungang wiwonhoe 1959, 56).

composition conventions from the use of microtones²² to the modern system of twelve tones, equal temperament,²³ and harmony.



Figure 1. Title page of *Eumak yusan gyeseung-ui jemunje* (Issues of Music Heritage Succession, 1954), a collection of essays and debates about the proper way of inheriting from past masters

Source: North Korean Composers Alliance, courtesy of Columbia University.

Despite the fact that the discussion is described as a debate, there is very little disagreement documented. Either the speakers are careful to explicitly voice their support for the positions that Kim Il-sung had already taken a few months earlier, or the people documenting the exchange had some stake in portraying unanimity. Nevertheless, from the frequent use of phrases like “certain comrades believe,” it is clear that there was an opposing point of view: the position (perhaps from *pansori* musicians themselves) that aspects

22. Microtones refer to tones that exist between each of the standard 12 tones or keys of the piano.

23. Equal temperament means the same ratio of tone difference between each note in the octave.

such as the husky voice and the microtones were special qualities of Korean music that should be preserved. What is remarkable about the discussion is not just the unanimity against certain aspects of past Korean music but also the wide range of perspectives expressed within that unanimity. One practitioner, Ri Hyeongun, in contrast to other speakers, actually concedes that microtones were a special quality of Korean music that had come from the stress of human labor. Despite how valuable microtones may be artistically, however, he declares that they must be sacrificed in order to give other aspects of Korean music, like the rich melodies, the opportunity to be developed into symphonic and operatic music and therefore be appreciated by international audiences (Eumak yusan gyeuseung-ui jemunje 1954, 36).

For the East Germans, the target of criticism of past music was not so much folk genres as much as fragments of the classical music past, particularly ones from the early-mid-1800s Romantic period. One prominent musicologist, Georg Knepler, for instance, in 1961 claimed that Romantic-era composers “advocated not for progress and a democratic future but instead for a regression into a feudalistic, Catholic past” (E. Kelly 2014, 49). This interpretation was in line with the historical premises of Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács’s belief that German history had two strands: an optimistic, humanist strand that drew its influence from the Enlightenment and a reactionary, pessimistic, nihilistic strand of romantics who enabled fascism and the Nazis to come about. In the 1950s, around the same time North Koreans under Kim Il-sung’s leadership were attacking *pansori*, Lukács was lambasting Romantic-era composers as irrational, passive, conservative, and obsessed with mysticism and religion, as opposed to earlier composers like Beethoven whom the East German state lauded as a progressive, revolutionary, proto-socialist figure (E. Kelly 2014).

One way to read this phenomenon of mixed sentiments towards national heritage is that it was a collective response to trauma from war and anxieties regarding the devolution of nationhood in Germany and loss of it in Korea. Since the national identity had been tarnished into a form that was nearly unrecognizable, national heritage could not simply be passed down; it had to be remolded and reformed as if it were a living, breathing member

of the state. Here we can relate the arbitrary process of appropriating some aspects of the national heritage and casting aside others to Julia Kristeva's concept of *abjection*. Kristeva uses this term to illustrate how a nascent individual or group, in the role of an infant, radically excludes parts of the self that are threatening and considered unclean in order to establish and distinguish a subjective identity. The parts that are cast out are associated with the mother's body and maternal space.²⁴

We can interpret the calls to cast forms of music of the past aside and not incorporate them into the national heritage to be passed down as a kind of abjection, especially considering the gendered aspect of the language used to attack previous styles of music (effeminate in case of East German attacks against the Romantic composers and visceral denunciations of female voices not conforming to gender dichotomies in the North Korean attacks against *pansori* music). It was as if cultural administrators in the DPRK and GDR were holding their semiotic wombs from which they emerged responsible for their recent crises, demonstrating in this case that the phenomenon of imagined communities that Benedict Anderson (1983) has conceived of is not just one of construction but also one of demolition.

From the Masters to the People in the GDR and from the People to the Masters in the DPRK: The Socialist Domestication of Folk Music in the 1950s–1960s

In the process of socializing local forms of folk music, North Korea and East Germany had related but disparate ways to connect party and people. East German socialist folk music involved bringing the German classical tradition down to the popular level (either at factories and farms or concert halls for mass audiences), where it could coexist with contemporary socialist realist works the party was trying to promote. North Korean socialist folk

24. As Kristeva writes, "The subject discovers itself as the impossible separation/identity of the maternal body. It hates that body...the body without border, the body from which this abject subject came." Quoted from McAfee (2003, 48).

music, on the other hand, largely involved bringing and transforming both indigenous instruments and local music genres upward to concert halls where they could align with Western scales and instrumentation.

One of the first important tasks of the League for North Korean Music following the 1954 discussion about inheriting the music of the past was to research and study Korean traditional music in order to put into practice Kim Il-sung's calls to correctly inherit the past tradition. Of particular interest was the *changgeuk*, which was a version of *pansori* performed on the stage.²⁵ Those participating in the discussion recognized *changgeuk* as music of the people but thought it was not progressive enough in its current form, particularly in its use of the husky voice and monophonic (or nonharmonic) singing. The results of these discussions were that *changgeuk* was retained but with the monophonic and husky vocal parts eliminated and replaced by a duet and chorus. In its remodeling process, *changgeuk* took modifications from another Korean folk genre called *seodo sori*, which was actually local to the northwest region of the Korean Peninsula (unlike *pansori* which was prominent in the southeastern part) and thus more familiar to those who were originally from the North (Yu 2007, 59–60). While *seodo sori* music was believed to have its own deficiencies that the state sought to remedy, namely its slow sorrowful nature, its nasal and high-pitched style of singing (more similar to Western singing than *pansori*) was a desired element to incorporate in the new music tradition (Howard 2010, 79).

One *changgeuk* composed in 1959 that borrowed from the *seodo sori* form was “A New Song is Heard from the Village Across the River” (‘Ganggeonneo maeul-eseo saemaetul deurryeoon-da’). One can clearly detect its socialist content in the titles of the signature songs “Excitement Comes from Gathering in One Place to Sit and Work” and “The Cooperative Farm’s First Abundant Harvest!” as well as lyrics depicting the joy of cooperative farm work, being thrifty and frugal, and following the directives of the party (Joseon munhak yesul cong dongmaeng chulpansa 1963, 135–147). This

25. While the singing style between the two is similar, *changgeuk* involved live action on stage with around 20–30 performers, while *pansori* is just storytelling, typically with only one singer accompanied by a drummer.

changgeuk won the approval of Kim Il-sung, who declared it a standard for national music. As Bae (2009, 159–161) points out, once this *changgeuk* was formalized in 1961, the status of musicians from the southeastern part of the Korean Peninsula (many of whom had been propagating *pansori*) began to drop as several of them were purged from positions and cultural activities in Pyongyang and ended up in the provincial areas.

Another way the state sought to elevate *people's music* was by acquiring existing folk songs and modifying their content to correspond with the state's priorities. Starting in the 1950s, music specialists in North Korea collected folk songs and divided them into categories according to their lyrical content rather than their musical features. Of the categories, the kind of folksongs that attracted the most interest were work songs (Kwon 2007, 108–109).²⁶ A book review of a compilation of folksongs released in 1954 puts labor songs at the top of a list of categories and praises group work songs, including one about rice farming, for helping to ease the burden of individual work and increasing productivity (Yun 1954, 4). We can see a reinforcement of this emphasis on collective labor in a 1957 songbook, in which a folk work song, “Barley Thrashing” (*Onghaeya*), includes the apparently new line, “Even though it's just you and I, we work like ten hands” (*Selected Korean Songs* 1957, 77), that reflected the state's call at the time for rapidly increased production.

The modification of folksongs from a previous era was not only lyrical but also musical, to make them more revolutionary sounding, easier to sing, and diatonic, which means that they assimilated to the Western scale system. A major reason for the adoption of the Western scale system was so the folksongs could be accompanied by the Western instruments keyboards and accordions, the second of which incidentally were imported from East Germany (Howard 2010, 78–79, 87).

With the new soundscape moving away from traditional Korean scales and timbres and towards Western ones, there was also a need and desire

26. In one volume of collected folksongs from 1960, songs dedicated to labor (*rodong*) make up the first section and take up the most pages, with the exception of the second section that contains daily livelihood (*saenghwal setae*) songs. See Bak (1960).

to update and transform traditional instruments. Interest in doing this began in 1952 when at its founding, the National Theater of Arts used an independent orchestra of national instruments to accompany song dramas (Noh 2012, 21). Throughout this process, music specialists in the 1950s and 1960s developed new versions of traditional instruments that were made of new materials and could play a wider range of notes. For example, the number of strings on the Korean zither instrument, the *gayageum*, expanded from four to twenty-one strings, and the material of the strings transformed from silk to nylon (Howard 2020; Yu 2007). Finally, there was a problem with orchestration. Much of the new music called for sounds that inspired a revolutionary sentiment, and the national instruments, even in their modified states, simply were not loud enough to do this sufficiently (Yu 2007, 69). Therefore, the national orchestra with the modified Korean traditional instruments eventually incorporated Western instruments to become a composite orchestra known in Korean as the *baehap* orchestra.

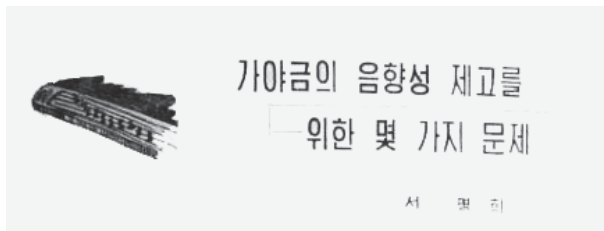


Figure 2. “A Few Issues in Improving the Sound of the *Gayageum* [Korean zither]” by Seo Myeong-hui, a representative example of the kinds of articles in the music specialist journal *Joseon eumak* (Korean Music), stressing the importance of making Korean music modern

Source: From the July 1962 issue of the journal *Joseon eumak* (Korean Music), courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Figure 3. A women's *gayageum* (Korean zither) ensemble that illustrates the collective practice of music performance at the time as well as what appears to be the updated 21-string version of the *gayageum* that could be played in the Western-scale form

Source: From the cover of the March 1965 issue of *Joseon eumak* (Korean Music), courtesy of the Library of Congress.

East Germany on the other hand, as one of the centers of the Western classical music world, had no traditional instruments to update to meet Western classical standards, so such a development did not take place there. Instead, one way the East German regime sought to create new folk music was to employ national instruments like the strings and the accordion for pieces with socialist content but in Western musical forms like dance and jazz music. Without the novelty of the instruments of these forms of music, like brass instruments and drum sets, such an approach failed to have any lasting impact on the East German musical scene (Thacker 2002, 239).

What the East German state was somewhat more successful with, however, was the move to bring the classical music tradition down from the level of the elite and the bourgeois to a popular audience. It did this through a number of means, including holding celebrations and concerts on the anniversaries of the deaths of German composers like Bach and Beethoven,

whom the party heralded as proto-socialist progressive figures, claiming itself as the successor to their legacies (Tompkins 2013, 208). Another move to connect the party of the state with the heritage of the people was the “Hour of Music” (Tompkins 2013, 226), which was a concert series beginning in 1953 that brought musician ensembles to factories and the countryside to perform directly before workers. The music included that of the German classical music greats as well as contemporary socialist realist works. In terms of transmitting the classical musical forms of the great German composers, these initiatives worked perhaps too well. As audience members attended these concerts, they resisted the more contemporary socialist realist works, preferring the past masters and lighter music instead. As a result, several regional officials continued the concerts but scaled back the ideological aims of the party’s concert agenda in order to satisfy popular tastes (Tompkins 2013, 208–209).



Figure 4. The Rudolstadt School of Folk Music in East Germany is one of the legacies of a socialist state that tried to out-Germanize West Germany. Some musicians from this school must have undoubtedly taken part in the Rudolstadt Folkfest that helped bring German musicians together in a reunified Germany in the early 1990s

Source: Theatre, Music in the GDR (1957, 32), courtesy of Columbia University.



Figure 5. This photo with the caption “Folk Music Orchestra of the Groeditz Steel and Rolling Mill,” when juxtaposed with the previous photo, alludes to the ambiguity between folk and classical music in the GDR

Source: *Theatre, Music in the German Democratic Republic* (1957, 32), courtesy of Columbia University.

Epilogue

The North Korean and East German states, for the most part, effectively appropriated and regulated music that signified national heritage within their societies. In doing so, they were able to maintain a certain degree of cultural (and by extension political) hegemony as they sought to disintegrate distinctions between that of highbrow classical music and that of the countryside, as well as between local and national music. The transnational formulation of socialist realism provided a template for how to accomplish this rhetorically, but it would take institutions such as cultural workers unions to make it work in practice.

With their folk identities contained for the most part, North Korea and East Germany would go on to face a new rival: popular musical genres emanating from the Western world, including jazz, dance, and rock ‘n roll. Political as well as geographical factors would lead one to withstand

the onslaught of these outside musical genres more so than the other one. In 1953, while North Korea was facing the end of the Korean War, East Germany had an internal legitimacy crisis in which half a million workers went on strike and were violently suppressed by East German police and the Soviet military. The sense of social solidarity from the devastation of the Korean War as well as the speedy postwar reconstruction enhanced Kim Il-sung's legitimacy as a leader and contributed to the development of a personality cult with a restrictive cultural regime as its buttress. Meanwhile, other communist countries in the European socialist bloc, following Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalin, were starting to move away from that kind of system, even to some extent embracing jazz music.

At the same time, the lack of an official end to the Korean War assured an enhanced military presence along the North-South border that minimized the opportunities for spontaneous cultural exchange. East Germany, on the other hand, had the American-protected West Berlin inside its borders, making it harder to prevent physical and cultural defections to the Western capitalist world, especially before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. In fact, as Thacker (2002, 236) points out, at the advent of rock 'n roll music in the mid-1950s, West Berlin cinemas played rock hits from artists like Elvis Presley and Bill Haley and the Comets, and quite a number of East German young people were exposed to them there.

In a letter to Khrushchev in 1961, shortly before the construction of the Berlin Wall, GDR party secretary Walter Ulbricht mentioned that two million East Germans had emigrated to West Germany and attributes this to the rise of consumer culture there (Vuletic 2014, 576). This realization would set in motion an accommodation of desires for consumer goods and appropriation of consumer products from the West, to include popular entertainment. North Korea, around the same time, instead of accommodating itself to the consumer society of the West, was pronouncing its autonomy over its own affairs, especially with the call for *Juche* (literally, 'master of the body'), first in regards to literature and art and later in regards to political, economic, and military matters. The pronouncements were explicitly directed at China and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, by holding off the cultural and political interference of these two countries to some

extent, the North Korean leadership was able to insulate the country from the culture and politics of capitalist countries as well.

It was not that the North Korean cultural sphere shied away from appropriating outside forms of music. When the regime stabilized in the early 1960s, it would incorporate more of the sounds of music from the 1930s that had a foxtrot beat and resembled Japanese *enka* as well as the largely instrumental genre with jazz instruments known as light music. Even electronic music made its way into North Korea as propaganda pop bands (named after places where Kim Il-sung had fought as an anti-Japanese guerilla fighter) sprung up in the 1980s when the state realized there was a new younger popular crowd to cater to. It was not an accident that the person overseeing all of this music reformulation was Kim Il-sung's son, Kim Jong-il, who was enhancing the hagiography surrounding Kim Il-sung while at the same time paving the way for himself to become successor. It was in this way that the objectives of music production put less emphasis on the past national heritage and more on promoting a new national heritage and cultural identity rooted in the anti-Japanese guerilla experiences of Kim Il-sung in Manchuria.

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