

# Choral Music Composers in Korea

*Chun Koo, President of the Korean Choral Directors Association*

Since 1990, professional choirs in Korea have been invited to participate in major international choral festivals, which has continuously motivated Korean composers' creation of choral music. A resident composer system has consequently been established for major choral groups, thus boosting enthusiasm for composition. Nah, Woon Yeong (1922-1993), a prominent composer in Korea, observed that any piece of music not based on ethnicity and the spirit of the times cannot be seen as genuine art, and that ethnic elements may be found in indigenous rhythms and melodies and that harmony should include modern influences.

Based on these concepts, this article will present significant Korean composers and their choral works, in which indigenous Korean rhythms and melodies are artistically combined with modern harmonies. A list of choral works by the new generation of Korean composers will be provided at the end of this article.

Kim, Hui Jo (1920-2001) led choral music with his arrangements based on Korean folk song melodies. His works *Baet No Rae*, *Gang Gang Sul Lae*, *Milyang Arirang* and *Gyeong Bok Gung Tareyong* have gained local popularity.<sup>[1]</sup>

The organist and composer Hwang, Cheol Ik (born in 1932) has focused on Korean traditional elements mixed with Western musical languages and has also tried combining Gregorian Chants with Korean traditional poems. Additionally, he has rearranged Korean traditional rhythms and melodies, as shown

in his famous choral works such as *A Flower Girl*, *The Lost Chicken* and *New Mong Geum Po Ta Ryeong*.<sup>[2]</sup>

Lee, Young Jo (born in 1943), one of the leading composers and educators in Korea, has written not only choral music but many kinds of instrumental music. He always considers Korean traditional music to provide the main tools for these compositions: traditional themes, scales, rhythm, and instruments. He tries to mix these traditional materials with modern Western techniques, as shown by his representative choral works: *Full Moon* (1983), *Buddhist Dance* (1980), *Farmer's Dance* (1985) and *Soyoyu* (1983/1998).<sup>[3]</sup>

Nah, In Yong (born in 1936) has always sought out ways to combine the unique emotions of Korean culture with new musical techniques from Western countries. During his stay in Germany and the United States between 1980 and 1988, he delivered many presentations and lectures on Korean traditional music in an effort to globalize it. His best works *The Judgment Day* (1974) and *Gashiri* (1978) were commissioned for prominent music festivals, and the latter was awarded a grand prize at the World Choir Festival held by the BBC.<sup>[4]</sup>

Park, Jung Sun (born in 1945), is a prolific leading composer. His major works include *Three Choral Songs* (based on Korean folksongs), *Three Choral Songs* (based on Korean traditional children's songs), and *Incheon Mass*. His ideas on sound and melody are based on inherent Korean emotions such as 'Han' which means 'deep sorrow'. Mr. Park has tried to introduce these feelings into his music with his own harmonic languages, mixed with traditional Korean inspiration. His works have been performed at major international choral symposia and festivals such as the IFCM symposia (1996, 2002), Asia South Pacific Symposium (2001), and Alliance World Festival of Women's Singing (2004). Others have also acknowledged the importance of his works, as seen by Nick Strimple's presentation of him

in *Choral Music in the Twentieth Century*.<sup>[5]</sup>

One of the leading female composers, Hurh, Bang Ja (born in 1944) is famous for her compositional techniques, combining Korean folk styles and Western harmonies. Her best works *Colored Flowers are in Full Bloom* and *Red Pigtail Ribbon Mt. Bird* were performed at the Seoul Music Festival (1976) and the Oregon Bach Festival (1995).

Lee, Dong Hoon (born in 1945) has shown an interest in the human voice and the symphonic poem as explorations of how to introduce Korean emotions into his music, as revealed in his choice of titles for these works, and in his choice of subjects, scales, and even harmonies. His major works include *Korean Sanctus for Samulnori and Choir*, *Eobu Sashisa*, and *Baek Lok Dam*.<sup>[6]</sup>

Lee, Geon Yong (born in 1947) considers his audience to be the subject of his musical activities and tries to expand this musical audience by using materials from daily life for the texts of his choral pieces. His major works include *Memilmuk saryeo*, *Missa for AILM*, and *Song of Lazarus*.<sup>[7]</sup>

Woo, Hyo Won (born in 1974) is one of the leading contemporary female composers and an internationally acclaimed choral composer. Her music shows a new trend in choral music through her mixture of Korean traditional musical elements with contemporary techniques. Her creative activities with the Incheon City Choir (conducted by Yoon Hak Won) over fifteen years has contributed significantly to the development of choral music in Korea. Her experiments are paving a new way for Korean contemporary choral music. Her works have been performed at major international choral festivals such as the World Vision International Children's Choir Festival (2002), Niigata Asian Culture Festival, Asia Youth Choir, and 2009 World Youth Choir (IFCM). In particular, her Gloria was

awarded the grand prize in 2003 at Marktoberdorf Choral Festival in Germany. Her other works, *Me-na-ri* and *Pal-So-Seong* received tremendous praise at the ACDA National Convention (2009).



*Composer Hyowon  
Woo*

The choral works of Korean composers have gained popularity for their artful combination of Korean traditional elements with Western musical styles, and these works of theirs are now being performed world-wide. The author hopes to see growing exposure for Korean Choral compositions among choral music lovers all over world.

### **A List of Choral Music Composers in Korea<sup>[8]</sup>**

Composer	Title	Scoring	Year
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Ahn, Hyun Soon (b. 1972)	Mt. Sanbang, created by Okhwangsangje, the highest King of Heaven	SATB	2001
	Ayoung Goyoung (Seemed to know or not)	SATB	2008
	Potato	SATB	2010
Ahn, Hyo Young (b. 1981)	O Magnum Mysterium	SATB	2011
	Nilririya	SA	2011
	Wu Ya Huei	SATB	2012
Cheon, Kyung Suk (b. 1966)	Saranga	SATB	2010
	O Magnum Mysterium	SATB	2010
	Saeya Saeya	SATB	2011
Cho, Hye Young (b. 1969)	To the Butterfly	SATB	2009
	A Wind from the South	SA	2010
	Evocation	SATB	2011
Choi, Gee Wuk (b. 1968)	Easter Cantata on a hill far away	SATB	2009
	Christmas Cantata 'Joyful Christmas'	SATB	2010
	Guichun	SATB	2010
Huh, Cool Jae (b. 1965)	Missa Arirang	SATB	2002
	Spinning Wheel Song, Bird Song, Women Diver's Song	SATB	2006
	Missa IEODO	SATB	2008
Kim, Junbum (b. 1970)	Violet	SA	2001
	Dorazi	SATB	2007
	Arirang	SATB	2011

Kim, Young Sik (b. 1974)	From the Persian Fable	SATB	2002
	Cantata, 'I know that my Redeemer Liveth'	SATB	2009
	Day of dry shoes	SA	2012
Kook, Hyun (b. 1967)	Five choral cycles of 'Scenery sounds drawn from four seasons'	SATB	2008
	Nine choral cycles of 'A person whom I love'	SATB	2011
	Dona nobis pacem	SATB	2011
Lee, Hyun Chul (b. 1973)	Oh, the best friend to have is Jesus	SATB	1996
	Mountain Flower	SATB	2001
	The Children, Africa	SSA	2011
Lee, Min Jeong (b. 1977)	Spring Frost	SATB	2008
	To Nostalgia	SATB	2010
Lee, Sun Tak (b. 1973)	Gloria	SATB	2006
	Alleluia	SATB	2007
	Surround Arirang	SATB	2008
Lee, Ho Jun (b. 1972)	Arirang fantasy	SATB	2011
Oh, Byung Hee (b. 1975)	Horn Mass	SATB	2008
	Bat No Rae	SATB	2010
	Go Classic	SATB	2010
Park, Ji Hoon (b. 1973)	Firefly Missa Brevis	SATB	2002
	Musical Cantata 'Jesus'	SATB	2005
	Musical Cantata 'Two Disciples'	SATB	2008

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[1] 'Baet No Rae' – A boating song; 'Gang Gang Sul Lae' – A traditional piece involving dancing and singing, with women moving hand-in-hand under the full moon; 'Milyang Arirang' – The arirang that used to be sung in Milyang area; 'Gyeong Bok Gung Tareyong' – A song for GyeongBok Palace

[2] 'New Mong Geum Po Ta Ryeong' – A song for Mong Geum Harbor

[3] 'Soyoyu' – A life of enjoying and appreciating the arts and nature

[4] 'Gashiri' – A farewell song

[5] Nick Strimple, *Choral Music in the Twentieth Century*, Pompton Plains; Amadeus Press, 2002, 287.

[6] 'Samulnori' – A traditional percussion quartet; 'Eobu Sashisa' – Fisher's four seasons; 'Baek Lok Dam' – The lake on Mt. Halla

[7] 'Memilmuk saryeo' – A song for selling buckwheat jelly; 'AILM'- Asian Institute for Liturgy and Music

[8] This list has been made in collaboration with the Korean Composers Association, the members of which have been actively composing choral music over the past few years

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