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MODERN NORTH KOREAN [RELIGIOUS] MUSIC

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Resumen

Palabras clave:

Abstract

Music is a field where North Korea has been for decades engaging in consistent though not extensive international exchanges. Music is there a major national art form, on which a considerable amount of national resources is devoted, and the quality of musical education is high. Its practical uses are almost solely devoted to maintaining the legitimacy of the state and its leading dynasty up to a level where the distinction between nationalism and religion visibly evaporates. The musical establishment is hierarchically organized. At the top are court orchestras, such as the former Unhasu Orchestra, or the currently favoured Moranbong Band, whose style and repertoire is closely controlled by the highest leadership. These are then followed by a large amount of lesser ensembles. The members of these orchestras are cultural soldiers, whose commission is to defend the state against foreign cultural intrusions, most of all those from South Korea in the form of TV shows and popular music. Both because of this, and because of the tradition of socialist realism in art modelled in the Soviet Union, most North Korean music has for decades been light popular music with easy melodies, accompanied by emotional lyrics worshipful towards the party and the Kimist dynasty, so that the message can be easily consumed by the populace. Yet, the field is far from stagnant. Various international influences are cautiously imported, new styles are created, and the state actively tries to defend itself in its cultural war against the outside.

Key words: North Korea, religion, nationalism, music, court orchestra, internationalism

1. Intro

What is the sense of doing research on North Korean music? There are many methods to observe what takes place in North Korea. You can look at the country through satellite photos, as if it were in outer space. You can read its official publications, such as the Rodong Sinmun. You can interview North Korean defectors. You can interview visitors, such as businessmen, diplomats, and aid workers, and if you are not South Korean, you can easily also visit the country as a tourist. You can also watch films and videos. North Korean propaganda discovered the internet around 2009, and started to publish there newsreels, films, and music. It was only a trickle at first, but nowadays it is a constant stream. Within this flow, music is special because North Korean musical products tend to be fairly good. As Adam Cathcart puts it, "music is an area where North Korea feels proud of its achievements, understandably so".¹ Because arts are important for the regime, and have always been so, musical education in North Korea is good, and music is practically the only area where there have been periodic efforts at international interaction, which are interesting. The most promising musical talents are sent abroad for studies, so that some of them have personal international experiences. Whole ensembles also move; North Korean ones have made tours to China, Russia and Western Europe, and foreign ensembles have performed in North Korea. Music is an important venue for cultural inter-state diplomacy.

In addition, on a personal level, reading Rodong Sinmun is fairly boring, but listening to North Korean music is not. If you in a Weberian sense try to do understanding (*verstehende*) politology, it is not a bad idea to choose a research material where you can respect your research object. There is not too much that you can respect in North Korea, but its music, especially the compositions, arrangements, and performances, quite often belong to this category. This is the sense of studying North Korean music.

2. On Religion and Cosmology

Why should North Korean music be called "religious"? The sense of studying North Korean cultural life as [religion] relates to its uniqueness. North Korea is the last extant socialist totalitarian state, though already far removed from its original socialist roots. It has turned over the decades into a hereditary theocracy, and is further slowly turning into a mixed economy where also the markets are operational, but this change is not yet very far advanced. Especially at the level of propaganda, of which the music industry forms an important part, these totalitarian and theocratic elements still dominate. At the historical moment we are living now, for a politologist North Korea is *sui generis*, a particular form of political organization, which you can find nowhere else. It not only gives a

¹ Cathcart, Adam (2014) 'Kim Ki-nam: North Korea's Orchestral Politics', *Sino-NK*, June 27. <http://sinonk.com/2014/06/27/kim-ki-nam-and-north-koreas-orchestral-politics/>

relativizing perspective to all other possible forms of political organization, but it is also interesting in itself.

The concept of religion has here two layers. The most obvious one is religion as ritual, exemplified by the singing of hymns to four members of the Kim dynasty, namely to the male trinity Kim Il-song (김일성), Kim Jong-il (김정일) and Kim Jong-un (김정은), but during occasions when women need to be recognized, also to Kim Jong-suk (김정숙), Kim Il-song's first wife, mother of Kim Jong-il, and grandmother of Kim Jong-un. Watching music videos demonstrates empirically that none of these Kims are dead. In a cultural sense they are all alive, irrespective of their year of birth. This can be witnessed by the behaviour of the audience when the Eternal President Kim Il-song arrives to address his people on the video screen usually used as the background of the stage during concerts of court bands. The president speaks, the audience listens attentively, standing in military posture, and applauds profusely at the end. Sometimes on the screen is shown the Eternal General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea. He never speaks, but the audience applauds nevertheless. Sometimes on the screen appears the current Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army, who, like his father, practically never speaks on the screen, but is similarly applauded. The leading Kims do not die. They are only in different degrees distant from normal life, revealing themselves in special occasions to ordinary people, being always objects of visible reverence. This is the way gods behave, and people behave in front of gods. Songs about them are religious songs. There exists a large amount of hymns for each of the Kims.

In a wider sense religion is here connected with the concept of nationalism, which is rather pronounced in North Korea, but an easily observable social force in all integrated nations in the world. The theoretical tradition starting from Ernest Renan² has maintained that nations are faith based organizations, which stand on fabricated historical narratives, one of whose characteristics is that unpleasant elements in the history of the formation of the nation are forgotten and eliminated from public consciousness. Actually already Platon in his *Republic*³ pointed out that a stable political organization has to be based on a "noble lie" that creates group unity among the citizens, and suspicion or hatred towards outsiders. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*⁴ is the most well known treatise along this line. Klaus Sonderrmann has studied the phenomenon in connection with nationalistic music, coming from that perspective to the conclusion that rather than the official and semi-official narratives themselves, it is rather the recurring rituals that create the strongest effect at

² Renan, Ernst (1882) 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', *Conférence en Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882*, https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Qu'est-ce_qu'une_nation_%3F

³ Plato (1991) [c. 380 BC] *The Republic*, Basic Books, USA.

⁴ (1991), London and New York: Verso.

the banal level of everyday nationalism.⁵ Both singing together in groups, and the mass psychological effect of public concerts, create a strong emotion of "we", where the modern rational *societas* is transformed into an emotional *communitas*. This "we" does not stay at the secular level, but is transformed with apotheosis into a divine level, turning it into a beautified living being which is far above ordinary humans.⁶ In other words, nationalistic music as a mass phenomenon turns the nation into a god.

In terms of art objects, the lyrics of nationalistic songs border on, or cross over, to kitsch. Taken seriously, they tend to be rather queer texts. They are simplistic, straightforward, easy to comprehend, sentimental, and romantic, shamelessly expounding the virtues of the nation. Notwithstanding, when they are combined with a masterfully created beautiful melody, and presented in a festive social context, they become strong psychological tools for creating unified social experiences. Ulrich Beck has called this kind of songs the equivalents of *Pater Noster* prayers at the national context.⁷ In the North Korean context, these observations can be applied to practically all songs performed by the court orchestras, created by the central leadership, and filling not only concert halls, but also the radio and TV, as well as public squares, railway stations and similar public locations with their music. The invariable menu of these ensembles consists of, in addition to songs for the leading Kims, songs for the nation, the party, and the military. Yet, it is difficult to see the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and the Korean People's Army (KPA) as separate from the nation; WPK represents it, and KPA as the largest military establishment on the earth, involving either directly or indirectly (e.g., family members, or direct involvement during one phase of one's life) most of the population, can be seen as more or less synonymous with the North Korean nation. As in song lyrics also the leader represents the whole nation, being its father, while the WPK is its mother, all together forming a family. Thus, in practice all songs performed, whatever their ostensible theme, repeatedly tell the same collective narrative of unity and discipline. As all members of the nation partake in the godlike character of the collective, and they are lead by a line of never-dying Kims repeatedly reincarnating themselves in new godly flesh, I am inclined to call North Korean court music "religious", and regard the country as a land of gods imbued by a religious ethos.

What happens in music is congruous also with the narrative that is told regarding space, both in songs and also in architecture. Mircea Eliade, a historian and philosopher of world religions, has studied the founding myths of societies.⁸ They tend to consist of a divine act, by which an organized

⁵ Sondermann, Klaus (1995) *O Deutschland! Oi Suomi! Vielgeliebtes Österreich!: zur politischen und gesellschaftlichen Karriere vorgestellter Wesen*, Tampere: Universität Tampere, Forschungsinstitut für Sozialwissenschaften.

⁶ Sondermann, Klaus (2007) 'Kansallislaulujen poliittinen luenta', in Paul-Erik Korvela and Kia Lindroos (toim.) *Avauksia poliittiseen ajatteluun*, Helsinki & Jyväskylä: Minerva, 111-126. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-492-111-4>

⁷ Beck, Ulrich (1993) *Die Erfindung des Politischen*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 117.

⁸ Eliade, Mircea (1985) [1949] *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York and London: Garland.

cosmos is created out of dangerous chaos. In North Korean mythology chaos is represented by the Japanese occupation (1905/1910-1945), against which Kim Il-song fought with his guerrilla forces, and finally transformed the dismal situation into a cosmos. Chaos remained around North Korea in the form of hostile states, with the United States and its allies as the principal threat, but even China and Soviet Union/Russia⁹ have been unfriendly at times. Even though I have never encountered any anti-Chinese and anti-Russian songs, the unruliness of these neighbours is displayed by silences; during occasions where it would be polite to perform Chinese or Russian songs, they do not always appear. The surrounding chaos has no clear structure; it simply is something that cannot permanently be trusted.

Cosmos, in its turn, has a definite structure. It has a Centre surrounded by a Periphery, which then is surrounded by the outside world where Chaos still reigns. The Centre consists of a Sacred Mountain; in the case of North Korea we have double structure in the sense that there are two Sacred Mountains. One is the physical Mount Paektu in the north, where mythologically Kim Il-song resided during his guerrilla war, where Kim Jong-il is stated to have been born, and where Kim Jong-un poses in front of video cameras. The other Sacred Mountain is the capital city, Pyongyang. Its cosmological weight is so heavy that it acts as a mountain over the rest of the land. The absolute centre of the city is said to be located in front of the Grand People's Study House by the Kim Il-song Square, but the city is simply full of holy buildings and sites.¹⁰ They start from the Juche Tower on the opposite side of the Taedong River, to Moran Hill, where Kim Il-song gave his first speech after returning to Pyongyang in 1945, to Mansu Hill with its 22 metre high bronze statues of Kim Il-song and Kim Jong-il, to Taesongsan Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery, whose central statue is that of Kim Jong-suk. The absolutely holiest location is Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, which cannot be referred to as a "mausoleum", where both Kim Il-song and Kim Jong-il are lying in eternal sleep. The strict rules regarding visits to the place and conduct there are absolutely religious. Pyongyang is a Holy City in the centre of the universe, surrounded by the rest of the country as a heroic cosmos, which then is surrounded by the unruly chaos of hostile and unreliable forces.

This is the cosmological structure of North Korean music and national architecture. Musical performances repeatedly reproduce the cosmological structure of the North Korean life. Years follow each other with fairly similar concerts during holy days, such as the birthday of Kim Il-song (4.15), end of the Korean War (7.27), birthday of the WPK (10.10), and New Year (12.31/1.1), which signifies the end of one annual cycle and the beginning of a new. There are also many other holy dates, noticed in different degrees in different years. This is the eternal return of North Korean musical

⁹ York, Rob (2015) 'Russia craves balance on the Korean Peninsula', *NK News*, 2 November. <http://www.nknews.org/2015/11/russia-craves-balance-on-the-korean-peninsula/>

¹⁰ 李晨晨 (2014) 革命首都평양, *Wissen*, September 2014, 80-87.

life. All these important concerts by court orchestras are held in Pyongyang and televised to the rest of the country. Lesser concerts can be held on different dates and in different locations, but the holiest ones by the main ensembles always take place in the holy city.

A more sociological question is the depth of the actual religious feeling of the population. The videoed musical concerts invariably display the audience responding correctly. People listen intently, standing and applauding during the right moments. When one observes the crowds visiting holy locations, they proceed in clean clothing in a disciplined manner, carrying the obligatory buckets of flowers - a Russian cultural import - and bow at the right moments. The atmosphere is definitely reverent, but yet, at the same time rather light. The proceedings resemble quite much what takes place in holy locations in Japan, another land of gods, whether then in Kyoto with its thousands of temples and shrines, or the holy Shinto shrines at Ise, or other similar locations. Also in Japan you go reverently to the holy places, pay the money, clap and bow correctly at the correct locations, take the memorial photos, and go to eat afterwards. The religious atmosphere is unmistakably there, but it appears to be more fun and ritual than anything fanatical. Same in North Korea. In terms of the observed depth of the religious feeling, both countries appear to resemble each other. Any deeper research on the issue would necessitate thorough sociological and psychological empirical investigations, which at the moment are a bit difficult to carry through in North Korea.

Instead of dwelling on a question where we are not able to find a satisfactory empirical answer, we should instead consider the religious musical narratives as rhetorical operations. They try to imbue a religious emotion to the audiences, both in the concert halls and in front of TV sets. As is the case with all rhetorical arguments, ultimately it is the audience that decides how deeply it allows itself to be influenced.¹¹ In North Korea, as elsewhere in the world, this probably varies with time, place, and the person.

3. The Musical Establishment in North Korea

As music is one of the principal fields where the constant recreation of the North Korean cosmological structure takes place, composers and lyricists, musicians, singers, and dancers hold a respectable position within the Pyongyang high society. The concept of “court orchestra” refers to musical ensembles not only created by the leadership for central politico-religious purposes in Pyongyang, but also closely supervised by them up to the point of creating close personal relationships with them. Kim Jong-un’s mother was Ko Yong-hui (고영희, 1952-2004), a dancer at the Mansudae Art Troupe. She was born in Japan, and moved as a girl to North Korea with her mother.

¹¹ Perelman, Chaïm (1977) *L'Empire rhétorique*, Paris: Vrin.

Kim Jong-il formed a household, although not a formal marriage, with her around 1978.¹² Kim Jong-un is her second son. Kim Jong-un's wife is Ri Sol-ju (리설주), a former singer of the Unhasu Orchestra/Moranbong Chorus, whom Kim Jong-un is supposed to have married in 2011.¹³ Grandfather Kim Il-song himself was an organist, who could fluently discuss musical theory, and father Kim Jong-il was a producer of operas, founder of musical ensembles, and major theoretician of North Korean revolutionary music.¹⁴ As Adam Cathcart comments, deliberations on performances and the selection of national repertoire is likely to be a rather common event in the leadership mansions in Pyongyang.¹⁵ It is deep within the family.

The main court orchestras associated with Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un are the following ones:

1. Mansudae Art Troupe (만수대예술단) was created in 1969 by Kim Jong-il on the basis of former music and theatre ensembles. Under Kim Jong-il's supervision its first major production was to perform the revolutionary opera Flower Girl, which it has performed nearly 800 times in Korea and China. It has diversified also to other operas, and produces a large amount of song and dance numbers. Its actual size is not clearly known, but it is large, and has given birth to a number of later ensembles. It is still active.
2. Wangjaesan Light Music Band (왕재산 경음악단) was created by Kim Jong-il in 1983. Like Mansudae Art Troupe, it also includes dancers and circus performers, and has performed especially on stage, with few recordings. It employs musicians with classical education, and its musical performances vary between sweet popular songs and light chamber music. It is still active, and still recruiting young musicians and singers. It was seen last time during October 2015 in the concert series celebrating the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the Worker's Party of Korea.¹⁶

¹² North Korea Leadership Watch (2012) 'Ko Yong Hui', <https://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/kim-family/ko-yong-hui/>

¹³ North Korea Leadership Watch (2012) 'Ri Sol Ju', <https://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/kim-jong-un/ri-sol-ju-ri-sol-chu/>

¹⁴ Kim Jong Il (1991) *On the Art of Music*, Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House.

¹⁵ Cathcart, Adam (2012) 'Let Them Eat Concerts: Music, the Moranbong Band and Cultural Turns in Kim Jong Un's Korea', SinoNK, July 12. <http://sinonk.com/2012/07/12/let-them-eat-concerts-music-the-moranbong-band-and-cultural-turns-in-kim-jong-uns-korea/>

¹⁶ <https://youtu.be/wzrAAGeNzCM>

3. Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble (보천보전자악단) was created by Kim Jong-il in 1985. As its name suggests, it uses electronic instruments, most markedly organs and guitars, as well as glittering background lights during its older studio performances. One source of inspiration for its outlook may have been the glam rock period in European pop. It is a relatively small group, with its nuclear personnel remaining the same over the decades. It was also last seen in a memorial concert in October 2015, [but it no more appears to be renovating itself](#), as its musicians and singers are in their 50s and 60s.¹⁷ Most of its work has been done in studio, where it has recorded over 150 CDs. [Because its origin is the entertainment of resident diplomats and other foreign visitors to Pyongyang](#), it is a fairly international group in the sense that it has recorded songs in various foreign languages, such as Hindi, Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. The musicians tended to be all male, while most vocalists have been female. One specific female group associated with it was called Moranbong (모란봉), and after the later appearance of the Moranbong Band, it has been referred to as the Moranbong Chorus. [The first trace of the group is from 2008](#).¹⁸ Very little is known about the chorus, but there are speculations that its members were daughters of elite Pyongyang families. [It later performed with the Unhasu Orchestra](#). Ri Sol-ju was [a member of this group during 2010-2011 before her marriage](#).¹⁹

4. Samjiyon Band (삼지연악단) belongs to a new group of ensembles created by Kim Jong-il after his stroke in 2008. That event lead into a wave of various kinds of new initiatives in 2009. Samjiyon Band was one of them. It always stayed under the Mansudae Art Troupe umbrella, but nevertheless performed as a separate chamber orchestra of young musicians, playing classical music. A rare characteristic with it was that it was lead and conducted by a female violin player, Ri Sune (리순애). It has left no known recordings, only short video pieces in YouTube. It was apparently disbanded in August 2013 in connection with the mysterious upheavals among the North Korean musical elite, of which we have received only miscellaneous and unreliable rumours, [discussed sensibly by Ishimaru Jiro](#).²⁰

5. Unhasu Orchestra (은하수관현악단) was a more grandiose creation in 2009 by Kim Jong-il. It was a large chamber orchestra of roughly 50 young musicians and singers at one time on stage,

¹⁷ <https://youtu.be/bBjbyn5mzAc>

¹⁸ <https://youtu.be/SKjwDSSbwR0>

¹⁹ 민족 21 (2012) 금성학원의 독창가수, 북녘의 퍼스트레이디 되다, 09월 01일, 138호, <http://www.minjog21.com/news/articlePrint.html?idxno=5370>

²⁰ Ishimaru Jiro (2013) 'The Firing Squad Executions of North Korean Entertainers - North Korean State's Crackdown on "Political Videos"', *Rimjin-gang*, Part 1 November 17, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjingang/english/report/2013-11-17/>; Part 2 November 18, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjingang/english/report/2013-11-18/>

but altogether the number of people associated with it at one time or another rose to about one hundred. Also it started as an outgrowth of the Mansudae Art Troupe, with older Mansudae musicians helping to man the orchestra in 2009-10 until a suitable number of young ones had been collected. Unhasu Orchestra occupied the top position of national orchestras during 2010-2012, and was especially favoured by Kim Jong-il, who gave the ensemble a concert hall of its own, various presents and public praise, and attended nearly all of its public concerts as long as he resided on earth. Of course it is not necessary to see Kim Jong-il as the *demiurgos* of everything in the Pyongyang musical scene; both the Samjiyon Band and the Unhasu Orchestra could also be seen as operations through Kim Jong-il by the Kim Won Gyun Pyongyang University of Music (김원균평양음악대학), which is the cradle of high class North Korean music, having educated the major part of its composers, musicians and singers. Unhasu Orchestra also gave concerts in its *alma mater*, and systematically recruited new singers from there, even before they had formally graduated. Unhasu Orchestra and Samjiyon Band can be seen as ways for the university to launch its graduates on important national careers. Of course this strategy also had its dangers; positions in the vicinity of the top leadership are windy places, and the August 2013 events seem to have been targeted especially against the Unhasu Orchestra, with an unknown number of its members executed (3-10 are the most probable numbers), and the rest dispersed to other ensembles, or retired from musical life. There exists a Wikipedia page, with almost no real information, on the ensemble,²¹ [but a site has now been created for gathering information about it.](#)²²

6. Moranbong Band (모란봉악단) was reportedly created by Kim Jong-un in March 2012, as his first creation of this kind. It rapidly eclipsed Unhasu Orchestra as the most venerated court band. It is an all-female group, where both musicians and singers are young women, mostly also graduates of the Kim Won Gyun Pyongyang University of Music. The main performers come via the Samjiyon Band, the chamber orchestra of the Wangjaesan Light Music Band, and Unhasu Orchestra.²³ Without doubt it is also internationally the most famous North Korean band. Compared with the Kim Jong-il era ensembles, which not only had large amounts of musicians, but also choirs sometimes running to hundreds of people, the Kim Jong-un era creations are clearly smaller. There are variations in the personnel on stage, but the Moranbong Band is seldom above 20 people. Its most remarkable feature is its style; all North Korean elite musicians are skilled professionals, so excellent playing is not a special feature. The Moranbong Band style is

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unhasu_Orchestra

²² Korhonen, Pekka (2016) 'Unhasu Orchestra Discography 2009-2013', <https://unhasu.wordpress.com/>

²³ Korhonen, Pekka (2015) 'On Prehistory', <https://morandisco.wordpress.com/on-prehistory/>

making pop, light rock, and European disco music style arrangements of its songs, whether they are old party and military songs, or new compositions. Moranbong Band has disappeared from publicity sometimes for several months causing rumours of its possible disbanding, but thus far it has always resurfaced, most recently in [February 2016](#).²⁴

7. Chongbong Band (청봉악단) is the second group formed during the Kim Jong-un era, allegedly in July 2015. It appeared briefly on stage for the first time in Moscow in late August,²⁵ and gave its first independent full concert in Pyongyang in October 2015.²⁶ In some senses it can be seen as a narrow reincarnation of the disbanded Unhasu Orchestra. Many of the musicians and singers come from the Unhasu Orchestra, and it plays similar music. The musicians have classical education, with strings and horns often appearing in the foreground, giving the ensemble a light jazz type aura. The vocalists sing sweet harmonies, which were also one aspect of Unhasu Orchestra performances. However, like Moranbong Band, it is also small, about 20 members, with mixed male-female musicians and all female vocalists. As it is so new, nothing very definite can be said about it.

The list is by no means exhaustive. There are also many other ensembles from the State Symphony Orchestra (조선국립교향악단) to opera, radio and film industry orchestras, as well as folk music troupes. All the branches of the military have their own musical ensembles, topped by the State Merited Chorus (공훈국가합창단). However, the groups in the list tend to correspond most closely to the concept of the court band.

4. Characteristics of North Korean Music

Because of their propagandistic and cosmological importance, musicians and music writers are among the best-treated cultural elites within the system. They serve in an important defensive role to the regime, as they fill up much of the musical art space in North Korea, and in this way try to keep out uncontrollable foreign influences. Commensurate with their defensive role, musicians have a military rank, even though they can also perform in civilian clothing. Irrespective of their costume, they are soldiers, whose task is to fight against attempted penetrations from the outside chaos, most of all in the form of South Korean TV shows and music, which are said to be relatively easily available throughout the country, even though being dangerous to possess. This foreign competition represents

²⁴ [Korhonen, Pekka \(2015\) '2016.02.13', https://morandisco.wordpress.com/2016-02-15/](#)

²⁵ https://vk.com/video7511271_171274264

²⁶ <https://youtu.be/41Ko7PqAc-I>

a dilemma for the art bureaucracy administering the domestic scene: on one hand the religious tradition should be transmitted to new generations without interruption, but also renovations are needed in order to keep the new generations interested in the state manufactured products. This can be perceived as causing fluctuations in the musical scene.²⁷

Most foreign influences in North Korean music have come from the Soviet Union. During the era of rapid socialist development, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, Moscow used to be the ultimate foreign Holy Mountain for member states of the socialist camp. In North Korea this continues to some extent even nowadays. Much more than Beijing, Moscow used to be the place where North Koreans were sent to foreign studies, and Russian was the most widely studied foreign language. Russian Koreans and North Koreans studying in Soviet art schools brought socialist realism to North Korea, including its interpretations in the field of music.²⁸ A perfect example is Kim Ki-nam (김기남), who studied in the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and again in the early 1960s. He has held several kinds of posts, but his most important work was mentoring Kim Jong-il from the late 1960s onwards in propaganda work and arts, being over 10 years older than [his master](#), and his loyal ally. He has also been credited for a fundamental role in the creation of the religious Kimist cult, and for decades he has been the highest supervisor of North Korean media, arts and ideological slogans. Likewise he has supervised the staging of important national spectacles.²⁹ Even nowadays he still appears to be doing that, being at least 86 years old, or older.

A characteristic of social realism in art is, in addition to constant repetition of the socialist message, that the message is arranged in a fairly simple form. In the case of music this means that it has to be relatively light, or, “popular”. Russia can proudly claim a long tradition of excellent composers of classical music, whose Soviet era representatives were Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich. Following musical trends elsewhere in Europe, after World War II they engaged in various kinds of complicated experimental compositions. As a result, Stalin’s minister of culture, Andrei Zhdanov, in 1948 attacked them for work that was not only useless for socialist purposes, but also dangerous for people’s health, as it violated “the fundamental physiology of normal human hearing”, disturbing “the balance of mental and physiological functions” of listeners.³⁰ Music had to speak directly and in a healthy manner not only to ordinary people, but also state leaders, who had no

²⁷ Cathcart, Adam & Pekka Korhonen (2016) ‘Death and Transfiguration: The Late Kim Jong-il Aesthetic in North Korean Cultural Production’, *Popular Music and Society*, online publication before print, DOI:10.1080/03007766.2016.1158987

²⁸ Lankov, Andrei (2014) ‘North Korean dialect as a Soviet Russian translation. Bizarre-sounding declarations from state media often have origins in Moscow’, NK News 21 August 2014, <http://www.nknews.org/2014/08/north-korean-dialect-as-a-soviet-russian-translation/>

²⁹ North Korea Leadership Watch (2012) ‘Kim Ki Nam’, <https://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/leadership-biographies/kim-ki-nam/>

³⁰ Yurchak, Aleksei (2005) *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton and Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 46.

formal education in arts. In the Soviet Union, Josef Stalin acted as an external editor to all forms of art and cultural production.³¹ This meant that all major forms of art had to please his tastes, as well as those of other leaders, such as Zhdanov.

This system was brought to North Korea, where Kim Jong-il especially devoted considerable attention to supervising all types of art production, also writing numerous articles and books on the subject. He added to the Soviet style a strong emphasis on the depiction of emotions in art. Music goes directly into the minds and hearts of people, which makes it an indispensable tool for influencing people's minds, and their attitudes towards correct political understanding of the society.³² North Korean socialist realist music had to be so easy that all persons, the leaders included, could listen to it without endangering their mental and physical health. This meant that highly trained classical musicians played as their main occupation light popular music with easy melodies; more difficult performances could be done only in the case of occasional playing of foreign compositions. As a result, all compositions can basically be played by all ensembles. The basic repertoire of the Unhasu Orchestra, Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble, or Moranbong Band is basically the same, the differences appearing only in arrangement and style. That is not necessarily a bad thing. A good artist can display her refined skill also in light music and create excellent artistic experiences for her listeners from all walks of life.

5. Internationalism

Another factor is the degree of internationalism, and here the situation is clearly different from the Soviet Union and smaller European socialist countries. The Soviet Union was a multi-ethnic empire and a world power, which needed multi-level interactions with the rest of the world. As a result, even jazz and rock were to some extent tolerated, though not in any sense favoured. Nevertheless, this led to the emergence of small scale musical subcultures, which could not be completely controlled by the state. This phenomenon became more pronounced as time went on, and the socialist project lost its steam. In Estonia real rock bands, such as the Apelsin, could emerge in the 1970s and cooperate with Finnish rock musicians, such as Juice Leskinen,³³ as well as create songs with non-socialist satirical lyrics. Apelsin still exists and has a home page.³⁴ Music in general played a central role in Estonian re-independence from the Soviet Union, as choir singing and all kinds of concerts and rehearsals were covers for prohibited anti-Soviet and anti-Russian political

³¹ Ibid., 13.

³² Kim Jong Il (1989) *On the Art of the Cinema*, Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 149-155.

³³ Leskinen, Juice (1983) *Eesti*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CgKJTNU4IQ>

³⁴ <http://www.apelsin.ee>

organization. This is the reason why the process of Estonian re-independence is called *laulev revolutsioon*, singing revolution.³⁵

In Bulgaria, Venelin Ganev's memoirs of the black market for western rock music is also an illuminating analysis of the situation.³⁶ Even though there were occasional raids against the black market traders, smuggled in rock music was constantly available, and those youths who listened to it became systematically alienated from the state, which appeared to them as an enemy. The same thing may be taking place at the moment in North Korea in respect to South Korean soap operas, but notwithstanding, there is no information of the emergence of any kind of subcultures in music in North Korea. The situation of art production is much more tightly controlled there. The precedence of subversive music undermining state authority in the former socialist block is well known and analysed by the leadership. As Rodong Sinmun argued: "countries which were building socialism collapsed overnight because they allowed bourgeois life style, American way of life to prevail in society".³⁷ Thus North Korean musicians are front line soldiers in this defensive battle, because music so easily penetrates through cultural boundaries. Yet, even North Korea cannot be hermetically sealed off from the outside art world. Some elements have to be allowed to pass through in order to keep domestic production from ossifying too much, to integrate young generations to the religion, and also to engage in occasional, although somewhat clumsy and fruitless, formal international exchanges of cultural diplomatic friendship.³⁸

The deepest ties have continuously been with Russia. Here the role of Pavel Ovsyannikov (Павел Овсянников) has been outstanding. In his public biography it is told that he was born in 1951, graduated in 1977 from the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory, and in 1978, during the Brezhnev era, became first a conductor and later the artistic director and chief conductor of the highest Soviet national ensemble, nowadays called the Presidential Orchestra of the Russian Federation, which is based in the Kremlin. It is thus the Russian court orchestra, right in the vicinity of the central power. Ovsyannikov transformed it from a brass band to a full symphony orchestra. He is also the author of the current arrangement of the "Hymn of the Russian Federation", based on the "National Anthem of the Soviet Union". He retired in 2004, but immediately organized a new ensemble called Orchestra of the Twenty-First Century (Оркестр XXI века), with which he has travelled widely in

³⁵ Ruutsoo, Rein (2002) *Civil Society and Nation Building in Estonia and the Baltic States. Impact of traditions on mobilization and transition 1986–2000 - historical and sociological study*. Doctoral dissertation, Rovaniemi: Lapin yliopisto.

³⁶ Ganev, Venelin I. (2014) 'The Borsa. The Black Market for Rock Music in Late Socialist Bulgaria', *Slavic Review* (73) 3, 514-537.

³⁷ *Korean Central News Agency* (2012) 'Rodong Sinmun Calls for Combating Imperialists' Ideological and Cultural Poisoning', August 13. <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2012/201208/news13/20120813-08ee.html>

³⁸ Cathcart, Adam and Steven Denney (2013) 'North Korea's Cultural Diplomacy in the Early Kim Jong-un Era', *North Korean Review* (9) 2, 29–42. DOI: 10.3172/NKR.9.2.29

various foreign countries, including North Korea, in missions of cultural diplomacy.³⁹ In a rare 2002 interview by the journal *Izvestiya*, he told how in 2001 Kim Jong-il travelled to Moscow, heard a performance of Ovsyannikov's Presidential Orchestra, and was so impressed that immediately after returning home officially invited him and the orchestra to visit Pyongyang to perform and to educate local orchestras. When they arrived there in 2002, the Korean audience of 6000 people had studied the lyrics of "Moscow Nights" in Russian, all verses, and was able to sing with loud voices together with the visiting orchestra and choir. Ovsyannikov was so moved by this that he stayed awake all night in his hotel room to compose a song for North Korea.⁴⁰

Also after his retirement he made many educational visits to Pyongyang with his new orchestra. When Unhasu Orchestra made its debut in 8 September 2009, they had been trained for a week by Ovsyannikov,⁴¹ and then performed together with the Orchestra of the 21st Century, a Russian choir, and the State Merited Chorus of the KPA (in civilian clothing!).⁴² [The concert was surprisingly republished in 2015, and can nowadays be seen in YouTube.](#)⁴³ However, in addition to North Korean and Soviet military and political songs being performed, also a fair number of European classic music pieces were heard. An interesting detail was that the British composer Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1985 composition "The Phantom of the Opera" was performed under the title 가극극장의 유령, but the Korean opera singer Ri Hyang-suk (리향숙) sang it in English in front of Kim Jong-il with two Russian artists.

English is a language that is absolutely rare in North Korean concerts, as it is the language of the main representative of chaos, the United States. Russian and Chinese can be heard every now and then, and there is nothing extraordinary in those languages. There appears to be a sort of rule that either English or American compositions sung in Korean can be heard in the debut concerts of North Korean ensembles, but usually not afterwards. In Unhasu Concerts, English was never heard after September 2009. When the Moranbong Band debuted in 6 July 2012, they performed music from Walt Disney movies, as well as the Rocky theme "Gonna Fly Now" by Bill Conti. All this was noted with surprise around the world, accompanied by speculations whether the performance contained a message to the United States, but nothing specific ever resulted from it. Of course, these surprising songs did not appear alone; they were only a small part of a repertoire mainly consisting of normal North Korean religious hymns, Chinese revolutionary songs, and a large amount of European popular classics. One of them was a song usually known as Frank Sinatra's "My Way", but it is originally a

³⁹ Народный Артист, Дирижер Павел Овсянников. <http://ballet-letom.ru/?p=144>

⁴⁰ *Izvestia* (2002) Павел ОВСЯННИКОВ: "Иногда нашим оркестром дирижирует президент", 28 April. <http://izvestia.ru/news/261420>

⁴¹ <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2009/200909/news01/20090901-20ee.html>

⁴² <http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2009/09/09-08/2009-0908-030.html>

⁴³ <https://youtu.be/GIBLGFcEA0E>

French song composed by Claude François as “Comme d’habitude”. When the Chongbong Band made its independent debut in 11 October 2015, they performed “Oh! Susanna”, “Camptown Races”, and “Old Black Joe”, all 19th century compositions by Stephen Foster, an American composer. Singing was in Korean, though, and these American songs were followed by several Russian songs, so than an international cultural political balance was maintained.

It is impossible to say whether this kind of acts contain any “messages” to the outside world. Yet, they are an observable pattern, made possible because the North Korean propaganda apparatus found the internet in 2009 and started to publish there its music. Perhaps they can be considered as signs of self-confidence in respect to the outside, occasioned by the situation of starting something new. It may also be that the attention drawn by the English language or American compositions is misplaced. Perhaps the correct focus should be that a large number of foreign songs were performed in the middle of North Korean songs, and this displays self-confident artistic internationalism. Whatever it is, it does not last. Something strongly bureaucratic and nationalistic tends to take hold of these ensembles as time goes on, and foreign songs become a rarity.

6. Ethical and Poetic Art

Another characteristic during the early career of new ensembles is that they are relatively free to engage in true artistic performances - even in the classic bourgeois sense of the concept. The philosopher Jacques Rancière has employed in his analyses the concept of regimes of art, of which the ethical and poetic regimes are relevant here.⁴⁴ The ethical regime corresponds with socialist realism, whose philosophical origins are in Platon’s *Republic*: all arts, in the plural, are seen as serving the educational ethos of the republic, teaching the citizens the teleological goals of the state, and their proper roles within them. The concept of ethics here thus means the collective morality aimed at the preservation of the organization. Art forms that are not ethical in this sense are not necessary; if they do not serve the state and its ideology, they should be abolished. The poetic regime on its turn is based on Aristotle’s criticism of Plato’s art theory: art, as a singular, is an essential element of fulfilling human life, an autonomous form of existence separate from the state. The concept of fine art, referring to objects of art enjoyed solely because they are “art”, explicates the poetic regime. However, the regime is not limited to elite circles. It exists equally in all kinds of art as a specific form of doing, namely artistic creation and innovation. In North Korea, even though the content of the religious hymns is invariably ethical in Ranciere’s sense, the form, namely the style of performances, can in certain periods be clearly poetic.

⁴⁴ Rancière, Jacques (2006) *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, London and New York: Continuum, pp. 20-22.

In the case of Unhasu Orchestra, the observable changes in this sense were not dramatic. The early concerts with Russian guests were always happy events, with both the Unhasu Orchestra and the foreign guests competing in artistic virtuosity, but also purely Korean concerts were clearly poetic art. The highly trained artists performed both well and freely on stage. They wore civilian Western clothing; male solists and musicians tuxedo, female solists evening dresses, sometimes changing them several times during one concert. A visible change in the style of the Unhasu Orchestra came in May 2010. The evening dresses were abruptly banned, and from then onwards the dress of female solists became the *chosonot*. The outlook of the orchestra was thus unified, and no individual soloing in the dress code was allowed. Notwithstanding, this had no audible influence on the music itself. During spring and summer 2013 there appeared a measure of tiredness in Unhasu Orchestra performances, possibly caused by their declining position in the national musical scene, and the visible drawing of resources from them. The number of musicians and solists was waning, and they no more got the best camera crew for their concerts. There may even have been an amount of tension with the new Kim Jong-un regime; at least the Unhasu Orchestra never performed Kim Jong-un songs in any extensive manner, and in some concerts that kind of songs were completely missing. They always remained expressly a Kim Jong-il orchestra. Even if there was an atmosphere of gloom during the last months of Unhasu Orchestra's existence, its virtuosi opera singers, such as So Un-hyang (서은향) and Hwang Un-mi (황은미), never lost a bit of the poetry of their performances.

In the case of the Moranbong Band the changes are more discernible. Also in their case they looked the happiest when playing foreign songs at stage. Especially European classical pieces enabled them to display their technical skills to the full, but also purely Korean songs were true artistic performances. They always created new versions of old military and party songs, arranging the roles of different instruments, and innovating on their own previous productions. They added to their Korean melodies sometimes classical and sometimes rock elements. They also moved freely on stage, and smiled to each other happily. Also their solists strongly participated in this, even though they could at first sight be dismissed as a kind of angel choir. They might have sung sweet melodies, but their constant changing of singers, their movement at the stage, and their small dances, were all true artistic creations, both musically and visually. Their early civilian mini skirts of summer 2012 were changed to white or brown military uniforms already in autumn 2012, but still the atmosphere of the orchestra tended to remain poetic in a truly bourgeois style. During winter 2013-2014 they were absent from publicity for half a year, at least some members possibly being implicated negatively with the Jang Son-thaek (장성택) execution and accompanied upheavals in December 2013. During spring 2014 some members tended to become invisible in front of the cameras, and the final blow came in May 2014.

The 9th national meeting of artists opened in Pyongyang in May 16, with Kim Ki-nam giving the opening speech, where he chastised artists in all fields because “work in the field of literature and art fails to meet the needs of the party and the revolution”, being “caught in a snare of outdated formulae and schematism”. To rectify the situation, all national artists should be “learning from the creative work style of the Moranbong Band”, and produce “lots of masterpieces like waterfalls!”⁴⁵ The interesting thing about North Korean public proclamations is that often the words do not imply what they appear to mean, but something quite different. With hindsight we now have to interpret the words to mean that all poetic aspects were meticulously cleaned away from the band, and only the state ethical aspects remained. The sermon against outdated formulae and schematism meant exactly the return to outdated formulae and schematism. In concerts after the national art meeting the artists go through the motions, playing and singing skilfully. The music is **technically** good, but all playfulness and artistic creation is gone. There is no smiling and playing on stage, only carrying through a well rehearsed programme, without specific enthusiasm. By **October 2015** also the most individualistic members, especially violinists Sonu Hyang-hui (선우향희) and Cha Yong-mi (차영미), had disappeared from the band, and **by January 2016 that had happened also to** the most expressive singer, Ryu Jina (류진아).

Something clearly has happened, though it is impossible to know what. A possible interpretation is that the Moranbong Band indeed was a personal creation of the inexperienced Kim Jong-un in spring 2012,⁴⁶ and in the beginning he gave the artists a free hand to create art and express themselves as they pleased. He also took a close personal interest in the orchestra, supported it, and probably influenced its style and repertoire with **the** enthusiasm of a 30-year old. During spring 2014 the supervision the Moranbong Band was taken away from him back to the hands of Kim Ki-nam and his aged propaganda colleagues. Also the fact that since autumn 2014 the musical atmosphere of Pyongyang turned markedly nostalgic and backward looking points to this. The old stars of the Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble, Wangjaesan Light Music Band, and others have been performing their hits from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, while simultaneously the cult of Kim Jong-il seemed to be eclipsing that of Kim Il-song. This is the music, and these are the artists, with whom Kim Ki-nam worked in his prime with Kim Jong-il. Even the new Chongbong Band is a recirculation of Kim Jong-il era artists, and their music resembles a narrowed down aspect of Kim Jong-il’s highest creation in performing arts, the Unhasu Orchestra.

7. Conclusion

⁴⁵ KCNA (2014) ‘National Meeting of Artistes Opens’, 16 May.

⁴⁶ 趙雄鉄 チョウンチヨル (2014年) 「牡丹峰楽団は朝鮮スタイルのユニーク新しい軽音楽団」、コリア研究、第5号、173-182。

Which ever way you do research on North Korea, you can get only a limited amount of reliable information. This is the same when you look at the country through the lens of music. Nothing very definite can be said. But with this limitation we can at least say that in the North Korean theocratic system there are occasional innovations, as well as occasional periods of interest in carefully managed and limited international interactions. Yet, as time goes on, there always appears to be a return to disciplinary unification supervised in a bureaucratic manner. In terms of content the only message allowed in artistic production is the by now traditional religious message of the nationalistic Kimist cult, but in terms of style the situation allows for occasional rises to real artistic creativity. These periods tend to be short lived, and both the products and the producers are brought back to a tight state-ethical fold, imposed by gerontocratic hands, which though may be covered in velvet gloves.

There is some debate about the position of the Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un within the system. Much of the literature, especially the more popular kind, considers him to be the ultimate mover of everything, and personally responsible for everything that takes place in the country. [Fewer writers consider the system to be more](#) complicated, seeing Kim Jong-un in a limited role, even a puppet.⁴⁷ Empirically, what we can observe of Kim Jong-un is only that he is the person who stands in front of the cameras, usually without a voice of his own, but on rare occasions reading a speech, written by someone. We do not know who. We also see that he is visibly venerated by large crowds wherever he goes. “A puppet” probably is a wrong concept for understanding the function of a corporeal god in a theocratic system. A person on the position of a god has a power [sphere](#) of his own, but on the other hand, the tasks of national representation fall heavily on his shoulders, and there is not necessarily much time nor energy for the practical administration of things. This analysis through the perspective of religious music points to, though obviously cannot prove, the kind of situation where the ostensible leader has initiative power, but the actual management of a specific field can also be taken away from his hands. This may have happened even during the era of Kim Jong-il, but at least during the era of Kim Jong-un the situation has been clearly discernible. In addition, nowadays those who are able to carry through this kind of administrative operations appear to be very old people, as seen in the cultural atmosphere in Pyongyang during the past [two](#) years.

⁴⁷ A series of articles in *New Focus International*: 20.12.2013 (<http://newfocusintl.com/transformation-n-korean-politics-execution-jang-song-thaek/>), 23.12.2013 (<http://newfocusintl.com/purge-execution-jang-song-thaek-transformation-n-korean-political-procedure/>), 27.12.2013 (<http://newfocusintl.com/just-witnessed-coup-north-korea/>), and 31.12.2013 (<http://newfocusintl.com/north-koreas-hidden-power-system/>)

Korhonen, Pekka (2014) 'Is He or Is He Not? Political Authority, Media Appearance, and the DPRK Leadership Question', *Sino-NK*, 20 May. <http://sinonk.com/2014/05/20/is-he-or-is-he-not-political-authority-media-appearance-and-the-dprk-leadership-question/>

O'Carroll, Chad (2015) 'Kim Jong Un yet to consolidate power: expert', *NK News*, 2 November. <http://www.nknews.org/2015/11/kim-jong-un-yet-to-consolidate-power-expert/>

