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Title: The Samjiyon Orchestra as a North Korean Means for Gender Based Cultural Diplomacy

Year: 2020

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

Korhonen, P., & Mori, T. (2020). The Samjiyon Orchestra as a North Korean Means for Gender Based Cultural Diplomacy. *European Journal of Korean Studies*, 19(2), 57-82.

<https://doi.org/10.33526/ejks.20201902.57>

This article appeared in the
European Journal of Korean Studies, Volume 19, No. 2, pp. 57-82.
DOI: 10.33526/ejks.20201902.57
The British Association for Korean Studies, 2020

The Samjiyon Orchestra as a North Korean Means for Gender Based Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

In 2018 it appeared that a peace process on the Korean Peninsula got underway. Lots of publicity was produced on inter-Korean relations and many types of messages and diplomatic actors started to move across the border with South Korea. One important element in this process was cultural diplomacy, conducted partly by athletes and cheering squads during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games, and partly by musical ensembles. Selection of the Samjiyon Orchestra for the Pyeongchang events sheds light on the kind of image the North Korean leadership wanted to display of the country on the international stage. This article analyses the characteristics of the orchestra, where it came from, and why was it suitable for cultural diplomacy. Our wider goal is to understand music as an element in North Korean foreign policy. Evidently, music is considered an important tool for specific occasions, though its use is intermittent rather than regular.

Keywords: North Korea, Samjiyon Orchestra, cultural diplomacy, women, musical politics

What is the Samjiyon Orchestra?

Spring 2018 witnessed considerable high-level diplomatic activity aimed at reviving the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. State leaders as well as high ranking politicians and diplomats met in front of the gaze of global watchers. One part of this was cultural diplomacy, conducted partly by athletes and cheering squads of supporters during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games, and partly by musical ensembles. In this, a particular North Korean orchestra stands out: Pyongyang sent an ensemble, the Samjiyon Orchestra 삼지연관현악단, to perform in Gangneung on February 8, 2018¹ and in Seoul on February 11, 2018.² South Korea's president, Moon Jae-in, attended their performance. After returning to Pyongyang, the orchestra was warmly received by Chairman Kim Jong Un. They had a photo session with him on February 12,³ and held a concert in honour of his father, Kim Jong Il's birthday on February 16.⁴ South Korea sent its own musicians to perform in Pyongyang. They gave one concert on April 1, attended by Kim Jong Un,⁵ and another one on April 3 that included also a short performance where the Samjiyon Orchestra joined southern artists.⁶ A video of the performance exists.⁷ A further cultural diplomacy performance by the orchestra was directed at China, in honour of a visiting Chinese opera troupe in April.⁸ The summit meeting between the South's President Moon Jae-in and the North's Chairman Kim Jong Un at Panmunjom on April 27 further included a small performance by some Samjiyon musicians in the relaxed atmosphere of the evening retreat. Thus, between February and April there were six separate occasions where the Samjiyon Orchestra performed, five of them in important functions relating to cultural diplomacy.

During the summit, a dinner was organized for diplomatic officials. In the list of North Korean representatives, Hyon Song Wol was introduced as the leader of the orchestra, listing her past achievements as "leader of the Moranbong Band and singer of Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble." The guest list included a number of other musicians, namely the conductor Jang Ryong Sik (also representing Samjiyon), violinist Cha Yong Mi (Moranbong Band), and mezzo-soprano Hwang Un Mi (Mansudae Art Troupe). We also know from the news media that when Kim Jong Un visited China on January 7–10, 2019, he took Hyon Song Wol and Jang Ryong Sik with him, although their names were not mentioned by the official KCNA report on January 10.⁹

Visits of musicians and musical administrators do not necessarily lead to concerts, but the presence of such people attests to the fact that cultural diplomacy in the form of musical

ensembles is an essential element in the North Korean diplomatic tool-kit. Certainly, the Samjiyon Orchestra was the main organ for this in 2018. The selection of the Samjiyon Orchestra for the Pyeongchang events in spring 2018 represented an interesting phenomenon which shed light on the kind of image the North Korean leadership wanted to display on the international stage. This article attempts to shed light on what the orchestra is, and where it came from. Our wider goal is to understand music as an element in North Korean foreign policy, since, apparently, it is considered an important tool for specific occasions, though its use is intermittent rather than regular.

The grand beginning notwithstanding, the diplomatic peace process started to ground to a halt later in 2018, and the year 2019 was a period of waiting for a new breakthrough, which never materialized. Consequently, there was scant need for cultural diplomacy. Only two Samjiyon concerts were announced, both of them domestic ones. One was for the Day of the Sun celebrations for Kim Il Sung's birthday on April 15, without any specifics revealed.¹⁰ The other one took place on 31 December for celebrating the New Year. Year 2019 was a lean one also in other cultural aspects. Big state orchestras gave relatively few concerts. To some extent the responsibility for public performances appeared to be delegated to work units, military bands, and educational institutions. The Moranbong Band and the Chongbong Band, famous only a couple of years ago, practically disappeared from visibility. Production of new songs and films ground to almost nothing. All this seems to imply that state funding had become tight because of international sanctions and consequently resources were withdrawn from the cultural sector. In this general lacklustre situation, it is remarkable that the Samjiyon Orchestra not only continued to exist but was employed during main national events. It is an ensemble worth studying.

On interpreting North Korean phenomena

Doing research on North Korea is notoriously difficult, because the state systematically attempts to control the spread of all information, both essential and apparently non-essential, outside of the country. This hampers even well-meaning and mutually beneficial cooperative ventures.¹¹ At the same time North Korea is a member of international society, which necessitates constant communication with the world outside its borders. A researcher thus faces a narrow stream of information emanating from the country, administered by a cluster of propaganda workers who try to make specific arguments without revealing any inside information. This necessarily leads to conducting research using small, disparate pieces of information. During the Cold War, "Kremlinology" developed into a distinct brand of studies on the Soviet Union, specializing on interpreting small hints in the order of names, the placing

of photographs, and similar items. What is sometimes referred to as “Pyongyangology” continues this same tradition. The situation, of course, does not make research actually difficult, but it is a specific condition which is not abnormal in many disciplines. For instance, historians and philosophers are able to write sensible books about various aspects of human history based on scant evidence, such as J. O. Urmson’s interpretations of classical Greek ethics. Interpretative studies are naturally open to criticism, and counter-interpretations can always be made, but opposing comments notwithstanding Max Weber’s study on protestant ethics, or Quentin Skinner’s major work on the Mediaeval foundations of modern European political thought, are regarded as modern classics. As Skinner argues, historians do this not only by thoroughly interpreting the various bits of information that they have, but by relying strongly on what can be identified as historical contexts and plausible understandings of the intentions of the actors.¹² The results can of course be considered as speculative guesswork, but this is what has to be the case when information is scarce.

Our small elucidation of the role of Samjiyon in North Korean cultural diplomacy may not rise to the same level of historical importance with the above-mentioned classics, but we nevertheless take from Skinner the idea that our research object is to develop arguments in relation to specific political contexts that have specific political intentions. What we understand here as arguments can be specific verbal utterances on domestic or international issues, but also can be ordinary North Korean news about events and topics that take verbal and pictorial forms, the repertoires presented in concerts, and the costumes worn by performers. The ostensible purpose of these news is to present North Korea as a functioning, “ordinary” country despite the hardships it faces, and to enhance its prestige—especially that of its leadership. Items relating to music fall in a special category: because North Korean ensembles produce polished popular music that is easy but intriguing to listen to, there is an international audience for them. Music performed by highly trained artists in thoroughly rehearsed concerts is plainly considered to enhance national prestige, in addition to its possible propaganda value. Prestige is a constantly accented element in North Korean discourse.¹³ We judge the importance of music from the fact that North Korea chooses to give a fair amount of information about its ensembles in the form of publications of concerts, discussions in literature, and regular items in news outputs. Taking orchestras as part of political discourse becomes utilizable research material because, in a situation of general scarcity, a moderate array of information emanates about them.

Little has been written previously in English about the Samjiyon Band or the Samjiyon Orchestra, and there is little information about the Mansudae Art Troupe from which its members came, despite the latter’s long history and importance among the various

North Korean ensembles and arts organizations. General analyses of music have been published, mostly in Korean and Japanese. Bak Yeong-jeong has written about the system of cultural administration during the Kim Jong Il era, analysing various art education institutions, the ideological ethos of training, cultural facilities in the country, as well as the different ensembles and their repertoires. Lee Shu-an is not an academic researcher, but he has published a book containing important first-hand information. He is a second-generation Korean resident in Japan, and has been involved for a long time in music exchange between Koreans in Japan and North Korea. He has written about developments in the musical sector from the beginnings of anti-Japanese partisan music—which was created between 1926-1945—the Korean War and reconstruction period, the ascent of Kim Jong Il as the major influence on the art scene from 1965 onwards, the military-first period under Kim Jong Il, inter-Korean reconciliation, and the “light music” of Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble, Wangjaesan Light Music Group, and Moranbong Band. There is also a recent South Korean PhD dissertation by Ha Seung-Hee that deals with the history and development of North Korean orchestras.¹⁴ Keith Howard has for a long time observed the North Korean musical scene from various angles, creating the English language basis on which further studies can be built (2004, 2005, 2011).¹⁵ Adam Cathcart has systematically followed North Korean musical diplomacy (2009, 2013).¹⁶ Recently, as North Korean activity on the internet has increased, especially on YouTube, Youku and Bilibili, analyses on specific ensembles have appeared, especially on the Unhasu Orchestra¹⁷ and the Moranbong Band.¹⁸ Our analysis of Samjiyon Orchestra aims to add to such studies on specific ensembles and their role in North Korean musical politics. Specific discographies of the Unhasu Orchestra, the Moranbong Band, the Chongbong Band, and the Samjiyon Band/Orchestra are available that analyse individual concerts of specific ensembles. These are useful tools for research when the content available on YouTube and similar sites tend to be rather volatile, and VCDs and DVDs are available only to a limited extent.

Our research material consists of four main types. The most important is videos of the Samjiyon Band and Samjiyon Orchestra, which allow us to make empirical observations of behaviour, outlook, material, and repertoire; this is our only direct form of material. The second category consists of mentions of the orchestra and its predecessors in North Korean media; this gives historical information on dates, persons, and so on. The third type is books, articles, and comments written by international researchers, which is available mainly in Korean, Japanese, and English, although, as already mentioned, there is little on Samjiyon. The fourth type is news, videos, photos, and other material published by the international media. This last is necessarily miscellaneous, comes in various languages, and may not satisfy

the standards of strict scientific research, although, in a situation where data sources are scarce, its use can be defended. We have strived to use systematic source criticism on all the material we utilize. We locate our research on the field of political history; that is, we are not looking for immutable general laws covering North Korean cultural diplomatic behaviour, but humbly attempt to portray the specific characteristics of one actor in it.

What is there in an orchestra?

The diplomatic usefulness of the Samjiyon Orchestra lies in the specific characteristics of its predecessor, the Samjiyon Band of the Mansudae Art Troupe 만수대예술단 삼지연악단. The names, the visual outlook, and the style of music of these ensembles are very similar. In practice, the orchestra adds musicians from other ensembles, as well as new conductors and a new leader. Hyon Song Wol served during 2012–2017 as leader of the Moranbong Band, which until 2017 was the top North Korean ensemble—when measured in terms of performances at important anniversaries, appearances together with the supreme leader, and flattering commentary in the North Korean media. Its chief conductor, Jang Ryong Sik, earlier worked as chief conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra and the State Merited Chorus. These had both been top musical groups, hence prestige and experience moved from pre-existing ensembles to the new Samjiyon Orchestra in early 2018, when it was chosen to be the national cultural representative of the state.

In North Korean thinking, the difference between a band (*aktan* = “music group”) and an orchestra (*gwanhyeon aktan* = “symphony music group”) seems to be twofold. On one hand, it denotes size. Bands are smaller, usually featuring about 10–13 musicians and 8–12 singers for a concert. On the other hand, it seems to denote organizational independence. The Chongbong Band of the Wangjaesan Art Group used to have 13 musicians and about 10 singers, but in terms of organization it was only a section of a larger group. The Samjiyon Band was bigger, but was part of the much larger Mansudae Art Troupe, containing over 50 musicians, so roughly the same size as the Unhasu Orchestra, both of which had been established in 2009 by Kim Jong Il. Size notwithstanding, the Samjiyon Band remained in the “band” category because it was only a section of a larger troupe, while the Unhasu Orchestra was an independent organization.¹⁹ Thus, it appears that at the beginning of 2018, the Samjiyon Band was organizationally separated from its mother organization and given a new administrative and artistic leadership, which was then reflected in the change of name. This then facilitated a rise in prestige and foreign usefulness.

A major organizational overhaul, a specific photo session with Kim Jong Un, and a number of musical instruments donated by Kim Jong Un to the ensemble on April 6 2018, coupled to documentation in accompanying speeches about developing it as a world class orchestra, seem to point to a planned longevity.²⁰ The Samjiyon Orchestra is, therefore, likely to remain a central diplomatic tool for some time, provided there is room for cultural diplomacy in North Korea's foreign relations.

The Mansudae Art Troupe

The history of the Samjiyon Band is deeply embedded in the development of the Mansudae Art Troupe. The latter is one of the oldest, most important and most celebrated North Korean organizations for staged performance. Its origin was the Pyongyang Song and Dance Troupe, established in 1946, whose task was to entertain and spread socialist propaganda in collective farms, factories and military units.²¹ On September 27, 1969, Kim Jong Il enlarged it into the Mansudae Art Troupe.²² Organizationally, it was placed directly under the Worker's Party of Korea (hereafter, WPK). Understanding the organizational structures in North Korea is notoriously difficult, and musical ensembles can be found within different organizations. In principle, all art and propaganda work falls under the Department of Propaganda and Agitation within the Executive Bureau of the Central Committee of the WPK, but day-to-day supervision of ensembles is handled by additional organizations. Military orchestras fall under military units, but when one reads North Korean materials one gets the impression that most are directly under the Ministry of Culture, including the opera troupe established by Kim Jong Il, the Sea of Blood Opera Troupe.²³ The organizational affiliation of some ensembles has so far proved impossible to decipher; one of the current authors has asked several North Korean art experts where the Moranbong Band is organizationally placed, but nobody seems to know. However, it is clear that the organizational location of the Mansudae Art Troupe was directly under the Party, and thus also the Department of Propaganda and Agitation, which attests to the important role given to it. This location is also logical because Kim Jong Il, its creator and personal mentor, was in the late 1960s working in that department. Its present organizational location is not known.

The Mansudae Art Troupe specialized in producing revolutionary operas, music and dance, and by way of these activities in spreading national ideology.²⁴ This naturally included building up the personality cult of Kim Il Sung. The most famous of North Korean revolutionary operas, "The Flower Girl", was produced by the troupe in 1972. The play on which it was based had allegedly been written by Kim Il Sung, but the opera was a collective

undertaking supervised by Kim Jong Il. Ko Yong Hui, the mother of the current leader, Kim Jong Un, was a dancer in the Mansudae Art Troupe, and this indicates a close relation between the troupe and Kim Jong Il. We do not know its current size, but we have information from 1973, when the troupe contained 304 artists, including 54 dancers, 80 singers, and 120 musicians, with composers, music arrangers, conductors, choreographers, and scenery artists.²⁵ We do not believe that the troupe is drastically smaller nowadays, since it is still one of the major musical organizations, both in respect to stage performances and education, where young artists who have graduated from colleges gain further training and experience.

The Mansudae Art Troupe has a long history of cultural diplomatic activity. In the 1970s, after North Korea had been widening its trading and diplomatic networks well outside of the Socialist countries,²⁶ the troupe travelled and performed widely in Europe (France, Switzerland, Britain and Italy), Africa, South America,²⁷ China²⁸ and Japan.²⁹ In 2002, at the time of South Korea's Sunshine Policy and when relations between the North and South were relatively amicable, it even performed in Seoul. What the Samjiyon Orchestra started doing in 2018 therefore has a long, if rather sporadic, pedigree.

The personnel of the troupe are picked from Pyongyang-based and regional music ensembles and institutions on the basis of skill and ideological purity—the latter relates to a good family pedigree and therefore confines its members to élite families. North Koreans are divided into different strata according to their class status in 1945, and the closeness of members to Kim Il Sung's guerrilla group at that time. The system is known as *chulsin-seongbun*, and only those with a high status are considered ideologically reliable. They have easier access to good education and to important jobs in the administrative structure. The troupe is divided into a creative group, which composes and arranges music, a symphony orchestra that also includes players of modified Korean instruments, a dancing section, a male choir, a female choir, and a specific section for female musicians.³⁰ Kim Jong Il relates in his *On the Art of Music* that he established an all-female instrumental group within the troupe, whose skills he systematically developed over the years.³¹ His work started in the 1960s, and in 1979 the group was reorganized as a special section, the Merited Female Instrumental Ensemble.³² The long-time female conductor of the Samjiyon Band, Ri Sune gave an interview in 2015 for the party newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, where she identified herself as a former member of this section, emphasizing its central importance in the development of female musicians; she thanked Kim Jong Il for his personal guidance through the years.³³

In the first decade of the current century, Kim Jong Il wanted to raise the level of North Korean ensembles, to make them international in standard. One means to do this was

for artists to acquire education in highly regarded foreign institutions, hence several young musicians, singers, and conductors were sent to countries like Italy, Austria, Russia, and China.³⁴ Another method was to concentrate on the best artists in North Korea. For this reason, a special group of young musicians was selected within the troupe in June 2007 on an experimental basis, with the Merited Female Instrumental Ensemble forming the core.³⁵ Kim Jong Il guided their rehearsals in November and December 2007 as well as in April and November 2008, emphasizing that in addition to technical skills, they were to develop a style which would be pleasing to the North Korean population in general, and that they must also perform foreign melodies with skill and artistic touch.³⁶ These were the years when North Korea discovered the usefulness of the Internet and started uploading music to the Chinese Youku and American YouTube. A systematic cultural offensive directed at foreign audiences was planned, and on January 16, 2009, the year of the fortieth anniversary of the troupe itself, this special training section formally became the Samjiyon Band, taking a name given by Kim Jong Il himself.³⁷

The Samjiyon Band

Samjiyon translates as “Three Ponds.” These are real ponds, situated in Samjiyon County in Ryanggang Province near the Chinese border in the foothills of Paektusan (White Peak Mountain). As with many names of North Korean ensembles, this connects with Kim Il Sung, as it is one of the locations where he is supposed to have conducted guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. This history makes the ponds an ideologically highly symbolic area.

The home base of the troupe is the Mansudae Art Theatre, but because it is a very large ensemble, from 2007 it started using the East Pyongyang Grand Theatre as its performance and rehearsal location.³⁸ The latter was built in 1989 and renovated in 2007. The theatre houses a major music library, as ordered by Kim Jong Il (*Joguk*). This is where the Samjiyon Band gave its first public concert on April 15, 2009 during celebrations for the Day of the Sun—the birthday of the Eternal President of the North Korean nation, Kim Il Sung.³⁹ No published video exists of this concert, so not much is known of it. This is also where the New York Philharmonic Orchestra performed with the State Symphony Orchestra on February 26, 2008, because it was a venue large enough and with good acoustics.⁴⁰ A few months after its debut, Samjiyon’s second concert took place on September 9, 2009, resulting in a DVD that features selected songs. From this DVD we know that the repertoire consisted of the usual North Korean songs, mainly eulogies for the nation and the leaders, but also foreign popular classics such as Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Flight of the Bumblebee,” Bizet’s

“Carmen Suite,” and Johann Strauss’s “Radetzky Marsch.”⁴¹ These are common pieces in the foreign repertoires of North Korean ensembles. The concept of the band was as Kim Jong Il instructed: popular, and featuring a mixture of domestic and foreign compositions. As the Band did not have any singers, much of its presentation was purely instrumental, but a few Mansudae Art Troupe singers performed some songs.

The first director of the Samjiyon Band was Kim Il Jin,⁴² and the violinist Ri Sune acted as concert master. However, Kim was soon elevated to the position of director of the whole Mansudae Art Troupe, so his name did not appear in any of the available published programs. Ri Sune became director and conductor of the band, while continuing to play violin and giving the most important solos. She had the rank of merit artist; North Korea has two ranks of distinction for its artists, of which merit artist is the lower, while people’s artist is usually given for older artists with a long and distinguished record of serving the state. Ri studied at the Pyongyang University of Music and Dance, and after graduation joined the female instrumental section of the Mansudae troupe.⁴³ She was obviously talented and capable as leader, as she was able to get her young musicians to perform very well. An important aspect was the amicable atmosphere of early concerts, which is clearly discernible when observing Samjiyon videos and comparing them with concerts of other ensembles, or the same ensemble nowadays. North Korean orchestras do not necessarily display stern military discipline, but they tend to perform in a well-rehearsed and matter-of-fact style, with no informal behaviour or displays of emotion visible. Ri’s musicians seemed happy and one can fairly often see them smiling to each other, as well as mutually communicating with their eyes or gestures during numbers. In addition to the typical repertoire choices for North Korean musicians, namely songs for the leaders and the party that the artists had been rehearsing throughout their educational period, Ri made them perform also interesting music; sometimes beautiful, sometimes difficult, usually foreign. This appeared to spark the interest of the artists. The cordial atmosphere was not exceptional during the late Kim Jong Il period, and one can sometimes observe it in other ensembles. Trust and approval was apparently being bestowed on ensembles, and their productions were appreciated; artists were important members of society and they knew it.⁴⁴ However, this appears to have been more so with Ri’s Samjiyon Band than in other groups.

The third Samjiyon Band concert took place together with the Unhasu Orchestra. Both had been established in 2009, but the second later than the first, on May 30.⁴⁵ Their joint concert took place on October 10, during celebrations for the 64th anniversary of the Worker’s Party of Korea, in front of Kim Jong Il. This, we consider, to have been an important event as it allows us to make empirical comparisons. Both orchestras represented

Kim Jong Il's international ambition, and the personnel of both were largely picked from the Mansudae troupe, or directly from the tertiary training institution, which by then was called the Kim Won Gyun Pyongyang University of Music.⁴⁶ Notwithstanding this, the Unhasu Orchestra was clearly more prestigious. When both ensembles played together, they were conducted by the Unhasu conductor, Ri Myong Il. Ri Sune conducted only her ensemble. The internationally educated members were all placed in the Unhasu Orchestra, and although both ensembles were composed of relatively young artists, the average age of Unhasu artists appeared to be a bit older. Most Samjiyon musicians appeared to be in their early twenties, not long graduated, although the band still had a few veterans from the Merited Female Instrumental Ensemble. Unhasu was slightly bigger, with 68 personnel, mostly male, while Samjiyon had only 54 members, mostly female. Unhasu played more forcefully and with greater technical skill, while Samjiyon featured softer and lighter melodies, although there were of course exceptions. When it was time to prove their skill in performing foreign music, Samjiyon played Aram Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance" while Unhasu played Pablo de Sarasate's "Zigeunerweisen." Both are virtuosic, high-skill numbers, but the former is more boisterous. Visually, the clearest difference was in clothing. Unhasu members wore designer clothing made of expensive-looking cloth, but Samjiyon members wore dresses of cheap-looking cloth with simple, traditional cuts. Unhasu looked a richer, and Samjiyon a poorer ensemble.⁴⁷ And one was an independent orchestra while the other one was only a band.

Whatever the original plans for elevating North Korean music to world standards, the result was two different ensembles, one of which ostensibly received the bulk of investment, remaining at the pinnacle of the North Korean art scene for four years. However, a peak is a windy place, and Unhasu exists nowadays only in memory.⁴⁸ Samjiyon remained in its shadow while Unhasu existed, and from 2012 onwards it remained in the shadow of the Moranbong Band, until its turn came to ascend the national central stage in 2018 under a different name, as an orchestra. There were reasons for this, which we can now contemplate.

The Samjiyon concept

The Samjiyon Orchestra is a separate organization from the Samjiyon Band, which in turn is part of the Mansudae Art Troupe. However, if seen in a Platonic way—namely that ideas are eternal but their physical forms vary and change—both can be interpreted as incarnations of the same concept. Within this, Samjiyon may not be eternal, but has at least already lasted for 10 years. There is a clear ideational continuation from 2009 to 2019, coupled to a continuation in personnel. About 10 musicians (violinists, wind instrumentalists, one

percussionist) have remained in the orchestra without any apparent interruption from the start. On the other hand, 80 percent of the original 2009 personnel had changed by 2019, which suggests there has been a high turnover of musicians during the ensemble's existence. Nevertheless, the concept has remained, and the most important way in which this is the case is the high number and visibility of female musicians. To understand the importance of this, we have to go back to the 2008 visit of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra to Pyongyang. Members interacted with their North Korean counterparts before the evening concert, giving both individual and group lessons, as well as rehearsing together. One of their reported concerns was the number of male musicians they met, especially at more senior levels. Concert master Glenn Dicterow commented:

They were all men in the State Orchestra. So I asked my minder, my interpreter: "So, why is this so?" He says: "We use the model of the old orchestras of the last two centuries, like Vienna." I said: "Well you know that even in Vienna they even have some women now and in New York Philharmonic we have 50 per cent women." And he says: "Well, that's very interesting, but we don't do that yet."⁴⁹

This exchange of views was certainly carefully thought about afterwards by the northern administrators. The comment implied that North Korea was behind the times, and not at a high international level. A year later, when both the Samjiyon Band and the Unhasu Orchestra began, both had a high percentage of women among their musicians, and on the basis of the temporal sequence we suspect that the visit of the American symphony orchestra influenced the decision on gender balance. The Samjiyon Band had a greater proportion of female musicians between the two, and in its first published concert from October 2009 it featured 53 musicians, of whom 29 were female and 24 male. In addition, its leader and conductor was female. It was more than 50 percent female: North Korea had beaten the Americans! Later, the proportion of female musicians increased further, thereby surpassing the representation of women in a typical European or US symphony orchestra.⁵⁰ The male members were, of necessity, still present, because this allowed the Samjiyon Band to be placed in the centre of orchestral music, rather than occupying a separate category for women's music. But, its front rows were always reserved for women in colourful clothing, men in grey tuxedos being placed in the background. Occasionally, though rarely, a male musician would also appear in the front row.

A second essential characteristic of the Samjiyon concept is that it is civilian. Its musicians have never been observed wearing military dress in any published video or photo.

Perhaps even more important is that it has almost never performed military songs. During 2017, when tensions were especially high, there were two instances when military songs appeared: the KCNA reported that in its concert in Hamhung during July 2017 its repertoire included “serial songs of guerrillas,”⁵¹ but this concert has never been published. Also, for its March 2017 International Women's Day concert, it performed “*Nyeoseong haeampo byeongui norae*” (Song of Coastal Artillery Women), which is certainly associated with the Korean People’s Army but which can also be considered a historical feminist song, fit for presentation under the theme “*Seongunsidae nyeoseong changa*”—women in the military-first era.⁵² Apart from these two cases, military songs have been conspicuously absent. For some reason, the Band has also never been observed performing the national anthem, even though other ensembles such as Unhasu, the State Merited Chorus, the Moranbong Band and the Chongbong Band have regularly performed it. This is curious, because the anthem is not a military song. The band has, though, played and sung paeans praising the leaders, the Party, and the nation, just like any other ensemble does, but a large part of its repertoire has always consisted of songs for or about women, families, and children. There have been occasional songs about the seasons, and a lot of foreign songs. All in all, the Samjiyon concept has, throughout the history of the band, remained as civilian as it is possible for an ensemble to be in North Korea.

A third conceptual element is the inclusion of foreign songs. Perhaps no other North Korean ensemble has performed as many foreign songs as has Samjiyon. They have been a regular ingredient in nearly all of its concerts over the eight years to 2017. Only rarely have national instruments been used, although the *jangsaenap* shawm was observed once in 2015 and once in 2017, and the *kayagum* zither appeared once in 2017. These were “improved” (*kaeryang*) versions, upgraded from traditional instruments to fit performances with modern orchestras using Western instruments. North Korea’s *juche* ideology basically demands that Korean elements are held as superior against foreign ones in all aspects of life, although in practice foreign ingredients can be fused with national ones when deemed more efficient. In case of instruments this has meant retaining traditional timbres but developing instruments so that they are tuned to the diatonic scale. Western orchestras were found to be simply more efficient in propaganda work because of their wider sound range.⁵³ The Unhasu Orchestra often used improved traditional instruments in its performances, to enhance the nationalistic aura of its sound, but Samjiyon Band did not attempt to do the same. In effect, this candidly downplayed a *juche* element; again, the band has offered mainly a Western outlook in terms of its instrumentation, much as in its repertoire.

Foreign melodies have proved a special problem for North Korean musicians, because the official state ideology requires domestic production to be pre-eminent. Kim Jong Il recommended adopting good elements from the foreign, but he forbid “mechanical copying” without being specific about what he meant.⁵⁴ The usual and safe solution has been to use medleys, which can be seen in many concerts by many ensembles. A piece from “Tico-tico” is attached to a piece such as the “Radetsky March”, followed by “La Paloma”, and so on for about 10 minutes. Cutting and reassembling in this way involves artistic reinterpretation of the foreign material, but after one hears a medley, though in a slightly different order, for the tenth time, the practice starts to appear mechanical. Samjiyon Band, especially under Ri Sune’s leadership, often performed foreign melodies in their entirety, without slicing them into segments. Her approach was brave, but within the bounds of what Kim Jong Il taught. She chose interesting foreign compositions, and because she herself was a highly skilled professional musician, the result was a North Korean interpretation with originality. Logically, it could not be otherwise, so although this may sound tautological, the point is ideologically important. Ri Sune was a creative artist, whose repertoire was wide, and she produced enjoyable work whether the original composition she used was Korean or foreign. Ri was followed by Kim Ho Yun, a male conductor, in 2016. Although he had appeared briefly back in 2011 and was a good conductor, the band under him became more “normal” according to North Korean standards. For instance, although a high proportion of foreign songs continued to be performed, the predictable medley format became standardized. We do not know what Ri Sune is doing nowadays and where, as she has not been seen in public after 2015, but quite often established virtuosos move into education after quitting the stage.

A fourth element of the concept was that prior to 2018 Samjiyon had been considered a second-class ensemble. We touched on this above when comparing it with the Unhasu Orchestra. In spite of its level of artistry, it had not been among the most important national ensembles, either during Kim Jong Il’s life nor after Kim Jong Un took over as leader. The Unhasu Orchestra, the State Merited Chorus, the Moranbong Band and the Chongbong Band all performed at important national events, while the Samjiyon Band seldom did so, and if it appeared it was not the main orchestra. Samjiyon usually performed at solar and lunar New Year celebrations, but even then not during the main night but, typically, one, two or more days after the main event. Again, their audience tended to be ordinary people rather than high party and state officials. Other typical dates for their performances were the International Women’s Day (March 8) and Mother’s Day (November 16). Their second-class status prior to 2018 can also be seen in the fact that, with the exception of the one concert with Unhasu in December 2009, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un never attended their concerts. There may of

course have been private concerts, and guidance sessions, but the participation of the supreme leader in public concerts would certainly, had it occurred, have been announced by the North Korean media.

Higher level bureaucrats such as Kim Ki Nam have occasionally been seen in their audience from 2016 onwards—as the band’s star began to rise under the tutelage of Kim Ho Yun, and as that of the Moranbong Band started to wane. An indication of this is that Samjiyon did not have any of its own special hits or signature songs until 2016. Composers and lyricists are attached to specific ensembles, creating songs for them, but apparently none were specifically assigned to Samjiyon, which as a result merely recirculated songs first given by other ensembles. In 2016, however, a song appeared that can be called a signature song in their Mother’s Day concert on November 16. The song was “*Urineun mallimakisu*” (We are mallima riders!), composed by Hyon Gyong Il. *Mallima* in the title literally means “10,000-ri horse”; as a Korean *li/-ri* is roughly 400m, the expression suggests a horse that can run the hefty distance of 4000km in a day. This winged horse comes from classical Chinese literature, although the original can run only 400km a day, being thus appropriately called *Chollima* or the “thousand-ri horse.” When Kim Il Sung launched the Chollima Movement to speed up reconstruction efforts after the Korean War in the 1950s, the *Chollima* speed became a standard reference to rapid collective construction efforts, until in 2017, the leadership made a rhetorical renovation and increased the speed to ten times more. The Mallima Campaign simply meant that under tightening international sanctions the people must intensify its efforts in all sectors to maintain and increase production. A person who participates in doing so, at least metaphorically, is a *mallima* rider. The Samjiyon Band performed its song with a special spirit, and continued to do so in later performances. The arrangement was complex, and included references to older songs. This was the first time an important propaganda song had been premiered by Samjiyon, and only later was it performed by the Moranbong Band.

The Samjiyon Band never gave many concerts. Based on mentions in news archives, between one to three concerts a year that were large enough to merit a notice was quite usual, though we cannot know anything about private concerts or smaller activities such as factory visits. The Unhasu Orchestra, during its active years, used to give between four and 13 concerts a year, and the Moranbong Band four to eight, though 2017 was exceptional, when the number of concerts given during a lengthy provincial tour rose to about 200. The Samjiyon Band was utilized by the state much less frequently. During 2009–2011, there was considerable publishing activity, with DVDs printed and some concerts uploaded to YouTube and Youku. The years 2012-2015 were lean in this sense, with almost nothing uploaded to the internet, and the media seldom mentioned the band. This roughly corresponded with when the

Moranbong Band was at its height, pushing aside other ensembles. In 2016, the Samjiyon Band became more heavy-duty, with a new director, new pink dresses made of expensive looking cloth for both female and male members, and a concert video uploaded to YouTube in November.⁵⁵ In 2017, the ensemble performed two full concerts in Pyongyang and made three trips to regional cities and factories in Wonsan, Ryanggang province and Hamhung. The band took on its share of propaganda work for the Mallima Campaign, although the State Merited Chorus and the Moranbong Band made more extensive provincial tours for the same purpose.⁵⁶

A Clean Ensemble

According to our interpretation, the Samjiyon concept is a combination of civilian femininity, an international atmosphere created by a relative abundance of foreign music, and a relative peripheral role within the musical establishment prior to 2018. The State Merited Orchestra, the Moranbong Band, and the Chongbong Band, which were all used extensively in national and international propaganda throughout the years leading up to 2018, wore military uniforms, sang military songs, and behaved on stage with strict military discipline. They were in a sense too contaminated for diplomatic promotion. Perhaps most foreigners would not have noticed, because most do not understand what songs are about or what an outfit signifies, but South Koreans understand such nuances. The Samjiyon Band was, in this sense, as clean as possible for its transformation into an orchestra. There was also the National Symphony Orchestra, which these days also employs a number of female artists, but this was not very marketable in the sense of popular music. The decades-old history of the Mansudae Art Troupe as an envoy for cultural diplomacy may also have played a role in the transformation that occurred for the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games.

Fusing the Samjiyon Band's clean concept with elements taken from other orchestras, such as adding the beautiful and diplomatically savvy leader from the Moranbong Band, and two male conductors in white civilian dresses from the State Merited Chorus, did not prove to be difficult. The second conductor, Yun Bom Ju, had worked with Unhasu, and since that orchestra's demise he had worked with the State Merited Choir. A female singing squad came from the Chongbong Band, and lots of musicians were added from these and other ensembles. But the essential concept did not change: the new Samjiyon Orchestra still appeared very feminine with its pink clothing, retained its civilian image, and easily adapted foreign songs, both whole and as parts of medleys, including South Korean songs. The only significant

change was that Samjiyon moved from being a second-class ensemble to a first-class one, and suddenly became a major part of North Korea's cultural diplomacy.

Conclusion: Music and Females in North Korean Cultural Diplomacy

Spring 2018 offered one in a row of more peaceful attempts at inter-Korean and international reconciliation. Years of the South's Sunshine Policy (between 1998–2008) had been a previous, relatively long period, though full of tense moments and setbacks. Rüdiger Frank comments on northern policy making, especially regarding the economy, but in a way that works well for international diplomacy, that it is a matter of “one step forward and two steps back.”⁵⁷ The metaphor is a bit rough, but policy making appears rather tempestuous. One reason for the dynamic stalemate in tension over the Korean peninsula lies in the policies of the USA, South Korea and Japan, with their changing governments;⁵⁸ another reason is undeniably the rather inelegant tool kit North Korea uses to deal with different situations. Positive approaches are quickly followed by very negative acts if something irritates the leadership, but sometimes without any obvious reason.

This has been the case in recent times. In 2013, Adam Cathcart and Steven Denney offered an interesting analysis of North Korean cultural diplomacy.⁵⁹ Spring and summer 2012 had seen a period of exceptionally heavy activity on that field. The Unhasu Orchestra had given a concert in Paris, and the Sea of Blood Opera Troupe toured China. The Moranbong Band had been established, and although it did not journey abroad at that time, its concert videos and its short-lived Facebook account created a sensation abroad. The same happened when fashionable photographs circulated in international media of Ri Sol Ju, the wife of Kim Jong Un and a former singer of the Unhasu Orchestra. In addition to music-related events and people, there was a photo exhibition in New York, and joint film projects were planned with Chinese counterparts. This all contributed to a rapid change in international impressions of North Korea, replacing the image of Kim Jong Il's dangerous military state with images of an internationalizing nation that was opening up under a new, reforming leader. North Korea appeared to acquire considerable soft power capability. At the same time, North Korea tested missiles, made rather bellicose pronouncements in its media, and, in a final blow that shattered its short-lived new image, in December 2012 successfully launched the Kwangmyongsong 3-2 satellite using the Unha-3 carrier rocket. Cathcart and Denney call this the “strange ‘hammer and *hanbok*’ public relations strategy,” where the hammer refers to bellicose behaviour and the *hanbok* is traditional Korean female dress (actually, this is a misnomer, because *hanbok* is a South Korean expression, while North

Koreans call the costume *choson ot*).⁶⁰ Anyway, the expression neatly describes the rather obtuse duality of the North's diplomacy, in which emphatically hostile acts and words contrast warm overtures for peaceful contacts with foreign states.

Sometimes the two styles overlap, as happened in 2012, and sometimes they alternate over time. In 2017, much that came out of North Korea was about nuclear developments and missile testing, military drills, and aggressive pronouncements. Spring 2018 then presented an exceptionally strong flow of actions that suggested the possibility of progress towards alleviating tension and the peaceful coexistence of the North with its neighbours. At the core of this soft power strategy was music and female musicians, with the arts in general forming a field from which additional elements could be picked. The diplomatic offensive contained not only the mostly female and civilian Samjiyon Orchestra, strengthened by a female singing squad. Also, the visit of Hyon Song-wol to Seoul on January 21–22, created what was called the “Hyon Song-wol syndrome,” as the South Korean and international media intensely ran her pictures, especially close-ups of her face.⁶¹ The North Korean delegation to the Winter Olympic Games was formally led by Kim Yong Nam, the nominal head of state, but the centre of the delegation was Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong, who personally invited the southern president Moon Jae-in to visit Pyongyang. Also her photos were taken profusely by South Korean and international media. The delegation included a 230-member, all-female cheer squad, which also gave its own performances and dances during its visit. The only combined sports team with South Korea was the female ice-hockey team.⁶² There was lots of feminine aspects in this diplomatic effort, with South Korea to some extent answering in kind.⁶³

So, what is there in a North Korean woman that makes her the ideal actor for the softer type of international public relations? The status of women has fluctuated over time. Officially, after the establishment of North Korea, as in all socialist countries, women's legal status became equal to that of men—in all fields, including politics, economy, culture, and suffrage. As all citizens became workers, the share of women in the workforce increased rapidly, especially when the state assumed responsibility for day care and education. The large number of women in professional roles dates from this time, and also includes professional artists. During the 1980s, when the northern economy started to stagnate and less workers were needed, women found themselves treated in a more traditional style, and large numbers returned to being housewives. This was partially heightened during the 1990s, as many state sectors collapsed, but at the same time famine provided opportunities for women to become breadwinners of families in markets.⁶⁴ The female roles are described well in memoirs of North Korean defectors (e.g., Lee Hyeonseo). The record is thus mixed, but in

cultural terms both Koreas have been found in numerous studies to maintain strong elements of patriarchy, with preference for male children, who get higher social, economic and educational support, leading to easier access to promotion in life. Irrespective of the legal situation, this practice creates a clearly gendered society.⁶⁵ In addition, the military field is particularly highly male-dominated, even though many women participate.

In a patriarchal society, women are not powerless; they merely have less power than men, and their social and cultural value is different. They represent the domestic and reproductive elements, of care and maintenance. When we add to this the element of beauty among younger women, the ingredient of sexual charm is brought into play. When we finally add orchestral music as a form of high culture, we also add advanced civilization to the image. The Samjiyon Orchestra embodied all this in its 2018 concerts. Female musicians were shown to be a potent tool of soft power for North Korea. They gathered lots of media attention and made a strong impression that the nation was ready for diplomatic breakthroughs. The only problem was that North Korea never uses its soft diplomacy elegantly, continuously, and congruently. Employing it tends to be part of short-lived operations, and if not accompanied by hammers and banging, invariably tends to be followed by hostile action. This may point to a unified leadership style in which personal mood plays a big role, or to a fragmented bureaucratic system where different branches of the state act without consideration for others, or both. Or it may simply point to an understanding in North Korea that presenting a confrontational image abroad is safer and more efficient than offering an image of peace, especially when very few concrete results have followed from the initiatives started in spring 2018.

In this sense the New Year concert for 2019 is interesting. It took place in the Samjiyon Orchestra Theatre, a specific concert hall in central Pyongyang on the bank of Pothong River renovated and renamed for the ensemble in October 2018. The concert followed the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea, where Kim Jong Un had given a lengthy speech criticizing the United States and the sanctions regime created by it. As a policy response this meant ending the period of waiting for more peaceful international relationships and instead concentrate again on self-reliant economic and military development.⁶⁶ Samjiyon Orchestra was chosen to present the artistic interpretation of the new policy, and pointedly the concert was published, being its first published concert since spring 2018.⁶⁷ The signal song of the concert was perhaps *Uriye chongchangue phyŏnghwaga itta*, or "Peace is on our bayonets", a 1993 composition by Ri Jongo. This song is usually performed during periods of international tension, as it implies that peace does not lie on diplomatic negotiations or summit meetings, but on North Korean

arms. A similar message was delivered by a long poem titled *Yöngwönan Josönye henggungil*, or “Eternal Korean marching road”, recited with exquisite pathos. Its basic message was that the future will be the same as the past. Citizens and foreigners alike, be ready!

This might look like the Samjiyon concept had changed. To some extent it has happened. Because the orchestra has now risen to the pinnacle of North Korean musical politics, it delivers the messages of the leadership, and this now includes also military songs. This fact notwithstanding, much of the concept is still the same. The orchestra is still predominantly female, performs fine art, and wears civilian attire. A remarkable fact was that its choir was formed by the State Merited Chorus, but instead of military uniforms, the male singers wore tuxedos, which is very rare. Conceivably we can read from this that in spite of the rather confrontational tone of the supreme leader’s speech, the new policy was not about direct military conflict, but rather about a protracted contest of wills with the United States and other foreign powers. This is a diplomatic message, and the Samjiyon orchestra is thus still fulfilling the role it was given in 2018. The Samjiyon concept is even now intact enough for the ensemble to deliver also friendlier messages if the international political climate was to become warmer again.

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⁴⁶ The naming history of the highest institution for North Korean musical education is extremely complicated. It has been restructured many times during its existence, and each major overhaul has apparently demanded a name change. There is only conflicting information available about these changes in English; the following is our attempt to trace them, based on a wide reading of North Korean materials. The highest North Korean institution specialized in musical education was established in 1 September 1946 as the Pyongyang Music School (평양음악학교), but soon the school was reorganized into Pyongyang Music College (평양음악전문학교), implying lower university level education. In 1 March 1949 this institution was elevated into the National Music School (국립음악학교), which meant that it became the nationally highest educational institution in music. In 1952, during the Korean War, the name was changed to Pyongyang University of Music (평양음악대학). In August 1956 the Pyongyang Dance School (평양무용학교) was established by amalgamating the Department of Dance of the General Art School (종합예술학교) with the National Dance Research Institute (국립무용연구소), and this combination was later reorganized into the Pyongyang University of Arts (평양예술대학). In February 1972 these two art universities were combined, the result becoming the Pyongyang University of Music and Dance (평양음악무용대학). In 2003 the Department of Dance was separated from the university and named Dance Institute (무용학원), while the university reverted back to the name Pyongyang University of Music (평양음악대학). In June 2006, in memory of the composer of the national anthem and other classical compositions the name was changed into Kim Won Gyun Pyongyang University of Music (김원균명칭평양음악대학). In 2015 a number of middle and high schools specialized in music education were attached to the university, and the name was changed into Kim Won Gyun General University of Music (김원균명칭음악종합대학). It appears that between September and October 2019 a new reorganization of the university took place. It is not clear what exactly was done, but both North Korean media and the Ministry of Culture of the DPRK reverted back to calling the institution as Kim Won Gyun Pyongyang University of Music (김원균 명칭 평양 음악 대학). Strictly taken, on the new website of the Ministry opened in November 2019 (<http://www.korart.sca.kp/index.php>), the English name is “Kim Won Gyun Pyongyang Conservatory,” but we have here continued with the appellation “university”, because it is a direct translation, and is useful for consistency. No reason for the change has been announced, but we speculate that the 2015 organizational change implicated a bigger role given for the musical arts in state policy tools, and consequently the 2019 change implies a lessening of that role. That would be consistent with the observed lower level of published concerts and new compositions.

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