An Introduction to Korean Traditional Music Through the Music of Black String

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Geomungo

To no small extent, the low-pitched Korean zither known as the *geomungo* accounts for the mesmerizing and beguiling tonal roots of the Black String. An instrument constructed from only natural materials, its twisted-silk strings are plucked with the *suldae*, a stick carved from sea-side bamboo to produce guttural vibrations which have undergirded Korean traditional music for centuries.

A mural dating back to the fourth century (Anak Tomb no. 2, Hwanghae Province) shows a six-stringed zither identified as the geomungo played as accompaniment with dancers as part of an ensemble sent to the court of the Sui Dynasty of China (581-617). The instrument also surfaces in the *Samguk Sagi* (1145), a written historical account of Korea’s Three Kingdoms period (57 BC-668 AD). Much like the piano is to classical music, the geomungo remains the unchanged voice at the heart of a cultural tradition which stretches further back than any equivalent Western form. In that “Geomun-go” literally translates to “Black String,” the band’s name represents both the intrinsic tonal darkness of the instrument itself and also the elastic qualities of the band: both lyrical and rhythmic, yet improvisational and non-linear.

Sanjo

At the heart of this hybrid form is Black String’s leader Yoon Jeong Heo. A virtuoso of the geomungo, Heo was trained in a line of master players that traces back to the very founder of geomungo’s most prominent contemporary form known as sanjo. This term literally translates to “scattered melodies,” and represents the improvisational nature of the genre, which crescendos slowly around melodic progressions and variations on rhythmic cycles. It is usually performed by a single lead instrumentalist and accompanied by a percussionist. Sanjo rose in popularity during the second half of the nineteenth century, when members of the fallen aristocracy (yangban) and middle class began performing a semi-improvisational form of musical storytelling known as pansori. Many of those who performed pansori were also involved in shamanistic music, most notably as members of a large improvisational ensemble known as shinawi who accompanied a female shaman (mudang) for large spiritual rituals. As the myth goes, sanjo originated when one instrumentalist in a shinawi ensemble, the husband of a shaman, began transposing the melodies and rhythm of pansori onto his string instrument. In time, this instrumental form was systematized using both many of the same tonal modes/scales, such as the pentatonic variations of...
pyeongjo and gyemyeonjo and the same rhythm cycles (jangdan): jinyangjo (slowest), jungmori (middle), jajinmori (faster), and huimori (very fast).

The title track of Black String’s album, “Mask Dance,” most closely embodies this form. Heo describes the song by stating, “We play together, we make contrasts, we share and follow pitches, and there is a minor thing going on which is very close to Korean traditional forms and scales.” Sanjo has been designated by the government as the “16th Important Intangible Cultural Property” and Heo is among its most valued preservers and pioneers. While Heo’s devotion to Korean traditional music is evident—“I want people to hear this music. It is powerful. It is beautiful and it is valuable”—so too is her desire to give it new meaning: “I want to know other cultures and music and collaborate with other musicians. When I play with great musicians that is when I grow, that is when I learn.” Indeed, in Black String, Heo alternates her playing techniques between the suldae and a bow, and also implements the modern element of looping, redefining and expanding the tonal palate of the instrument itself.

**Daeguem**

Black String’s sole wind instrumentalist is Aram Lee, who plays two different flutes, the large bamboo daeguem, and the smaller, higher-pitched danso, as well as a hammered dulcimer known as the yanggeum. His primary instrument, the daeguem is the largest of three indigenous bamboo flutes which would emerge around the tenth century as a central melodic component in developing forms of banquet music and court orchestral pieces. Adapted from previously existing indigenous bamboo-derived wind instruments, the daeguem (dae: large) combines with the sogeum (so: small) and junggeum (jung: middle) to form what is known as the samjuk [three bamboo]. In Black String, Lee implements unconventional techniques of play in the daeguem. These are most apparent on “Mask Dance,” where Lee performs using unvoiced breath, producing a haunting, visceral sound somewhere between steam pouring forth from an industrial pipe valve and a gust of wind through a bamboo forest.
Janggu

After the trio returned from their first performances abroad, Heo felt it necessary to bring out the rhythmic elements of the group. Thus, the final member to join the band was percussionist and vocalist Min Wang Hwang. The kit he plays includes the janggu, an hour-glass shaped drum which originated from musical exchange with the Sung dynasty of China (960-1279) and the jing, a brass gong used in a variety of traditional styles. The janggu is the typical instrument used to accompany pansori singers, and both the janggu and jing are two of the four components in the contemporary quartet form of samulnori, a percussion music long rooted in the folk traditions of farming villages. Hwang’s drum kit also contains hybrid components such as the tuur, a single-headed Mongolian frame drum. In moments of calm, Hwang’s drumming echoes steadily with undercurrents of suspense, while as the band swells up in thunderous moments of crescendo, his accompaniment raises the feverish hammering of Heo on the geomungo so that Black String’s intricate rhythmic patterns roll off in hypnotic waves. Min Wang Hwang has also been designated as a preserver of the Donghae Byeolsin-gut, a shamanistic ritual indigenous to the fishing communities in the Southern provinces of Korea and the “Important Intangible Cultural Asset No.82,” (Ra). On tracks such as “Mask Dance,” one can hear these emotive vocal styles tremble in echoes of Korea’s spiritual heritage.

Instruments:

- Stringed [Hyeon-aggi]
  - Geomungo - large zither
  - Yanggeum - hammered dulcimer

- Wind [Gwan-aggi]
  - Daegeum/sogeum - large/small bamboo transverse flute*
  - Danso - vertical bamboo flute adapted from Chinese duan xiao [short flute]*

- Percussion [Ta-aggi]
  - Janggu - hourglass drum
  - Jing - brass gong

*indigenous [hyang-aggi]

Forms:

- Court Music [jeongak]
- Folk Music [minsokak]
  - Sanjo - solo improvisational instrumental
Pansori - musical storytelling

- Shamanistic Music [musokak]

Shinawi - ensemble music for shamanistic rituals

Further links and reading:

- Daeguem sanjo: https://youtu.be/gDS010J0Smc
- Samulnori: https://youtu.be/F-q9tvKrZcQ
- Geomungo: https://youtu.be/AzHF2m3ZUVM
- Gut: https://youtu.be/hBuczvNoXZg