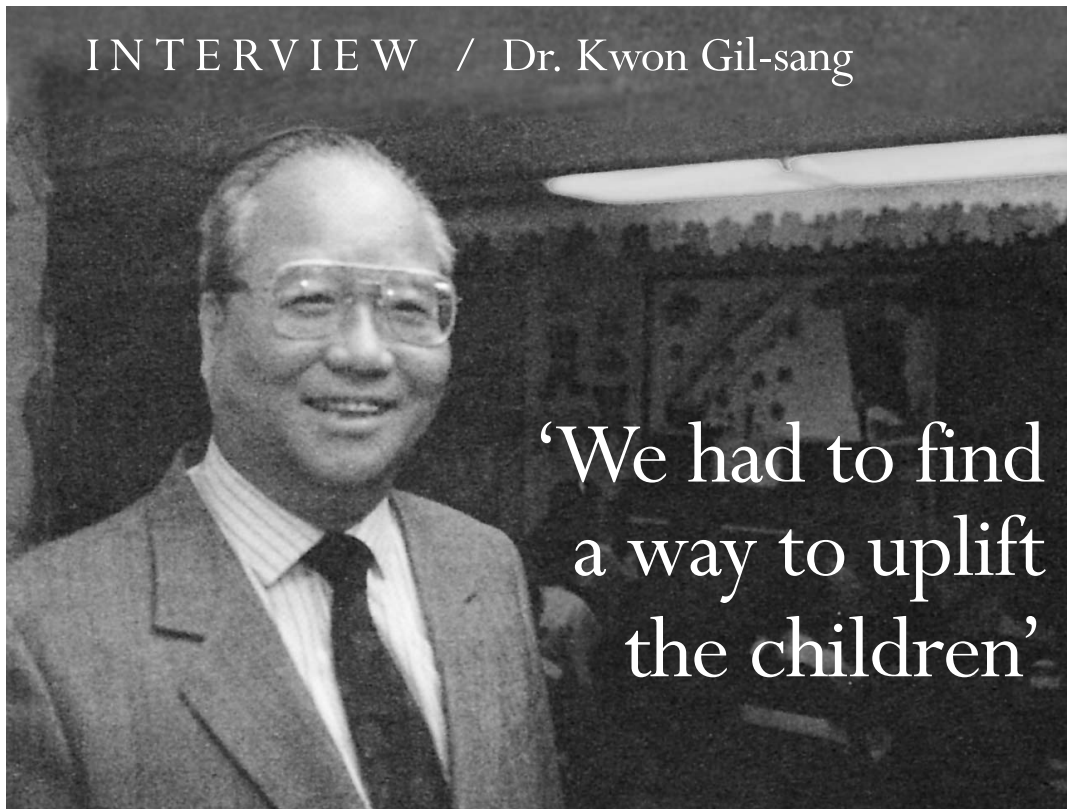


INTERVIEW / Dr. Kwon Gil-sang



‘We had to find
a way to uplift
the children’

DR. KWON GIL-SANG, *the leading composer of Korean children's songs, is the son of a Christian minister. He was born in Seoul in 1927, during the Japanese Occupation. He was a co-founder of the Korean Bong Sun Hwa Children's Choir in 1945, and graduated from Seoul National University School of Music in 1948. In 1953, at the end of the Korean War, he composed the children's song "At the Flower Garden (Kkot bat tai seo)," the unofficial national anthem of the Korean-American community.*

In 1964, Maestro Kwon emigrated to the United States, where he continues to found children's choirs throughout Southern California, and to publish his songs. In August 1995, he was honored as one of Korea's national treasures by the South Korean government at the Celebration of Korea's 50th Anniversary of Liberation in Seoul.

Maestro Kwon was interviewed by Kathy Wolfe, at his home in Los Angeles on July 13, 1995.

Fidelio: Dr. Kwon, how did you become interested in music as a child?

Dr. Kwon: Like so many other Korean musicians, I grew up in a parish house, for my father was a Presbyterian minister.

We had most of our music from the Western missionaries. As a child, every day in church I heard the foot-pedal pipe organ (we had no power organs). We had our church hymnals, with Christian hymns, and some Bach, and a bit of other classical music. From the age of five, I was playing and singing "Jesus Loves Me," "Rock of Ages," and so on. I played and sang through the entire hymnal book when I was very young. Mrs. Oh Shin, Jai-dock, the church organist, was a professor at Ewha Women's College [Korea's most prestigious women's school—Ed.].

Of course, we also have our ancient Korean folk songs, but they mix very well with Western music.

To this day, this is a common experience for children in Korea. Korea has an unusually high percentage of Christians, for an Asian nation, and many children come to love Western classical music very early, by singing in church every week.

When I entered first grade, my teacher Mr. Yun was, by chance, also very musical. I was so inspired when I heard him singing, that I wanted to be like him.

Fidelio: The African-American baritone Robert McFerrin tells the story, of how he heard Marian Anderson singing German *lieder* as a boy. "I had no idea what she was saying," he told me, "but I knew that was *it*."
Dr. Kwon: Yes, I had exactly that experience. We had music hour every day in that first grade class.

Fidelio: What kind of songs did you sing?

Dr. Kwon: Children's songs, and many simple Western songs, such as "Heidenröslein" by Schubert. This was in the 1930's, during the Japanese Occupation [Japanese troops entered Korea in 1895, and formally occupied it from 1910 to August, 1945—Ed.]. German *lieder* were very popular in Japan, and also in Korea. We also sang some Japanese children's songs, such as "Haru ga kita (Spring has come)." Many Japanese children's songs also, actually, come from the Western missionaries in Japan; in Japan, for example, all stu-

dents sing a song with the melody of “Auld Lang Syne” when they graduate from high school.

Of course, the terrible part of this was, that during the Japanese Occupation, the official language of Korea was Japanese, and never Korean. Newspapers were in Japanese; we spoke Japanese in school. So, we could not sing Korean songs in school, because the Japanese feared it would be too patriotic. Even today, after many years in the United States, as with so many Koreans of my generation, I find it easier to speak Japanese than English, since I learned it so fluently as a child.

Fidelio: In Los Angeles, many beautiful Korean Lyric Songs are performed, which sound as though they were composed by some friend of Brahms in the 1870’s. I was surprised to learn that many were actually composed during the 1920’s and 1930’s—in part, as a patriotic response to the Japanese Occupation of Korea.

Dr. Kwon: Yes, the composers put into music, what we could not say in words. It was always very poetic, it could never be specific; to speak openly of the nation was not allowed. Sometimes, they seem to be only simple love songs, a boy’s love for his sweetheart. But the people knew what the poems meant.

Fidelio: When did you decide to become a composer?

Dr. Kwon: Actually, I decided to be a music teacher; composing only came out of that, much later. My father wanted me to become an engineer. But I was so inspired by my teacher, Mr. Yun, that I decided that I really wanted to teach music—to be able to give that same joy, which my teacher gave to me, to others, especially to young children. So, when I was eighteen, in 1945, I enrolled in Seoul National University School of

Music—at that time it was called Seoul Music School—to get a music education degree.

When I arrived, Dr. Hyun Jaemyung, or Rody Hyun as he’s also known, was the head of the School. Dr. Hyun was a prominent composer of Korean Lyric Songs. He was born in 1902, and in the 1920’s, he came to the University of Chicago, and a year later moved to the Gunn School of Music. It was in Chicago that he composed the well-known song “Thoughts of My Homeland (Kohyang Saeng-gak)”; he composed

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Once I had this children’s choir, however, they needed new songs! So I had to learn to compose.

both the poem and the music, about 1928.

Another teacher of mine was a composer at Seoul Music School, Kim Sung-tae, who studied Western music in Japan during the pre-World War II period.

Kim Dong-jin, the composer of “Azaleas (Chindallae-ggot),” was also composing at that time. He was also a minister’s son, who studied in Seoul with the Christian missionaries there, and began studying music education, and then started to compose. He’s over eighty now; he’s been composing since the 1930’s.

Fidelio: There was a lot of composition going on at the school when you enrolled?

Dr. Kwon: Yes; and so there I was, studying Music Education, with Dr. Hyun and Kim Sung-tae. At that time, I founded a children’s chorus in the neighborhood of the school, to bring more children into the church.

You must realize, this was right after the war, in 1945; conditions in Seoul were bad. Food and fuel and clothing were scarce. We had to find some way to uplift the children.

Once I had this children’s choir, however, they needed new songs! So I had to learn to compose.

That same year, after the Japanese withdrew from Korea in August of 1945, the Seoul office of Japan state radio, Nihon Hoso Kyoku or NHK as it’s known in Tokyo today, suddenly became the Korean Broadcasting System. Of course Korea never

had its own radio network before; since the invention of radio, we had been occupied by Japan. We didn’t have a country, much less a radio station.

Now, for the first time, we had a national radio network—and for the first time, we could broadcast in our own language! That’s how KBS was founded—and our children’s group went every day, to the radio station, to sing on the radio for the people. For the first time, we could sing Korean songs publicly. That was the founding of the KBS Seoul Children’s Choir.

Times were bad during 1945-50; but we felt that, at last, now it’s *our* country; now we need our own songs. The composers began to write more and more. My first compositions were written then, during 1946-47. In 1945, U.S. troops were in the south, and Soviet troops in the north, but we did not think they would divide the nation.

Then came 1950, and the Korean War—and Seoul was destroyed. Everything was devastated during the [North Korean] invasion, millions of people were killed, buildings were flattened, it was far worse than World War II. In 1950, when war came, I was teaching music in high school. I was also the accompanist and teacher with the Seoul Children's Choir; Mr. An Byung-won, who later composed

around everywhere, singing for the troops.

Fidelio: And you wrote your most famous song, "At the Flower Garden (Kkot bat tai seo)," around that time?

Dr. Kwon: Yes, after the war, we returned to Seoul, and I went back to teaching high school. In 1953, at the end of the Korean War, I composed "At the Flower Garden." I had some

for her, and she was only in her twenties, but she began singing right away. "Everyone knows that song," she said. "Whoever doesn't know that song, must be a spy!"

Dr. Kwon: Yes, and the children had a good time, too. Many of them went on to become fine musicians. One of those kids is today the Korean soprano Lee Kyu-do, who performs often in Los Angeles and around the world. Another is the pianist Dong-il "Tony" Han, who became Chairman of the Piano Department at Boston University.

My next dream is to found a multi-ethnic children's choir, with African-American kids, Asian-American kids, Hispanic kids, and all kinds of kids, all singing together in harmony. That is my next project.



Dr. Kwon's Korean-American Youth Choir of California, on tour in Korea (1991). In addition to Korean Lyric Songs and popular favorites, their repertoire includes such Western classics as the Papageno/Papagena duet from Mozart's "Magic Flute."

"Uri e So-won Tongil (Reunification is our Fondest Wish)," a very famous song, was the Choral Director.

We took all the children from Seoul, to the port of Inchon, and escaped by boat, setting out to sea. We traveled by boat all the way south to Pusan, which was the U.S. headquarters at the southern tip of Korea. We had thirty children, between eight and fourteen years of age. All during the war, we stayed in Pusan, or on the boat, to keep the children safe. We travelled

other songs published beginning in 1954.

Lee Soo-in, who was also a long-time director of the KBS Children's Choir, was also composing then. He wrote "Song of My Homeland (Kohyang ui Nora)" in Seoul, about 1956. He's a close friend, I see him whenever I'm in Seoul.

Fidelio: Recently I was in a Korean restaurant in Washington, D.C., and I asked the waitress to translate "Flower Garden." I started to sing it

Fidelio: And much later, you moved to the U.S.?

Dr. Kwon: Like my father before him, my brother became a minister, in Los Angeles, at what was at that time, the only Korean-American church in L.A., the Jefferson Korean United Presbyterian Church. In 1964, I came to Los Angeles, and became organist at the Korean United Presbyterian Church, and studied music at the California Institute of the Arts. Since then, I have worked with many churches.

But my special love is the children's choirs. As a church organist here in Los Angeles, I helped to found several children's choirs. In 1982, we founded the Korean-American Youth Choir of California, and we've had an annual concert here every year since then. Since 1985 we've had several tours in Korea, Japan, and Hawaii, as well as around the U.S.

Now, I hope to realize my next dream. The Korean-American community is too isolated. For thirty years, I have wanted to found a multi-ethnic children's choir here, with African-American kids, and Asian-American kids, and Hispanic kids, and all kinds of kids, all singing together in harmony. We could call it the "Los Angeles International Children's Choir." That is my next project.