

INTERVIEW

Lee Soo-in, Korean Master Composer

‘Style may change rapidly, but *good is good*’

Dr. Lee Soo-in, conductor and composer of “Pyeuhl (Star),” “Kohyang ui Norae (Song of My Homeland),” and many other Lyric Songs beloved by Koreans, was born in 1939 in Korea’s southern port of Masan. He is today Principal Conductor of the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) Children’s Choir in Seoul, and chairman of the Bluebird Children’s Songwriters Association, a group of composers who write new Classical songs for Children.

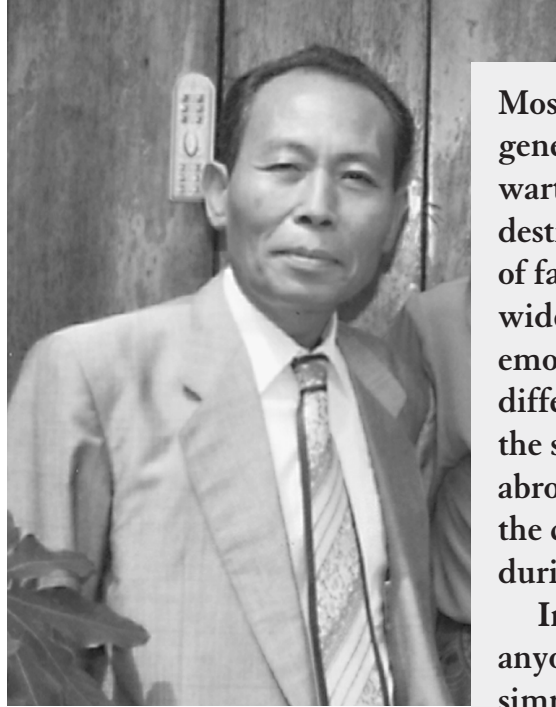
Maestro Lee was interviewed by Kathy Wolfe in Seoul on Aug. 7, 1996.

Fidelio: How did you become interested in composing?

Dr. Lee: My father was my elementary school’s principal, so I was able to play the small school organ. But, this was during the Korean War (1950-53), which ended when I was fourteen, so there were no other instruments or formal musical instruction. Then, in middle school, I was deeply interested in music, and was able to begin studies. I went to church and learned to sing hymns, and to play the church piano, so that my interest really grew. Around the last year of middle school, I wrote my first song, but after composing the melody, I was not satisfied and tore it up. I can’t even remember the name of it.

Fidelio: Later, you studied with the composer Kim Dong-jin?

Dr. Lee: Yes, Kim Dong-jin is one of our eldest living from the first generation of Korean Lyric composers. I’m from the second generation. I learned my first rigorous composition principles from Dr. Kim in college, in the late 1950’s, when he was teaching at Sorabol Arts College, now part of Jung-Ang University College of Arts in Seoul. He became a professor there shortly after the Korean War ended in 1953. I also received valuable instruction there from



Dr. Yi Hung-yeul and Dr. Kim Dae-hyun.

Kim Dong-jin was very strict; he gave the older students a hard time, for their own good. He taught a full, regular Classical music curriculum, and also made instrumental arrangements of other works, which was very useful for learning orchestration.

After college, I returned to my home town of Masan in southern Korea, near Pusan, and became a music teacher at Masan Cheil Girls High School. In 1962, I composed “Pyeuhl (Star),” my first published song [today found in every Korean Middle School music book—KW]. You see, Masan is to Korea, what Naples and the Neapolitan song are to Italy—it is by the sea, with a beautiful harbor. Whatever talent I have, is due to Masan. Masan, with the beauty and music of the sea, always gave rise to melodies within my heart. The famous

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Korean composer Yun Yi-san, who was active in Germany, is also from Masan. I used to compose and sing my songs on the beach there.

Fidelio: How did World War II and the Korean War affect your music?

Dr. Lee: This was a very difficult period for the Korean people. The childhood of Koreans born during and after World War II was very different from Americans of that generation. Most Koreans of my generation suffered wartime violence, the destruction by separation of family, famine, and widespread death. So my emotions are very different from those of the same genera-

tion abroad, which produced the culture of rock 'n' roll during the 1950's.

My way of thinking is also, of course, very different from that of the current young Korean rock 'n' roll generation.

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Fidelio: Do you think of your country when you compose?

Dr. Lee: When I am writing, I always have in mind the original emotions of the Korean people. It is very important that Korean artists not merely imitate Western music, but that they learn from it, and then express our own Korean national ideas and feelings.

Fidelio: In his book, *A Hundred Year History of Western Music in Korea*, the historian Dr. Lee You-sun says that Korean Lyric Songs are not simply copies of Western art songs, nor just native Korean songs, but rather a third phenomenon—an entirely new artistic creation.

Dr. Lee: Exactly. The theory, counterpoint, instrumentation and so on, is based on Western Classical music, but I then create a special, truly Korean music, when I compose a Korean Lyric Song. This is the creation of something completely new.

Fidelio: Your "Song of My Homeland," although written in the recent period, follows very clearly the rules of singing voice registration and the old tuning of

must admit I was not conscious of tuning as an issue when writing the song, nor had I heard about Verdi's legislation. It seems that in just following the laws of what is good for the singing voice, this was the natural result.

But I do remember reading somewhere that the great philosopher Confucius wrote: "Where the tuning pitch is raised, the State will be undermined or destroyed."

Fidelio: How did you compose "Song of My Homeland"?

Dr. Lee: In 1968, I had just left my hometown of Masan, and gone up to conduct the Children's Chorus at the Korean Broadcasting System, at the other end of Korea in Seoul, the capital.

Shortly after arriving in Seoul, I received a postcard from Masan, with a photo of its beautiful harbor, from a friend, a colleague who taught Korean literature at the same high school back home. My friend, the poet Kim Jae-hyo, had written a poem on the back of the postcard. This was "Song of My Homeland."

On seeing his poem in those circumstances, I had a sudden flash of the melody for the song in my mind, and I just wrote down the musical setting for the poem all at once.



Children's chorus, Seoul. Mozart's portrait decorates the wall.

Schubert, Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Buddhist, they will all be found in Heaven, regardless of religion or nationality, because they gave Beauty to their people, in beautiful songs. Great music is forever—it is Man's closest approach to God.

C=256 upon which Mozart and Verdi insisted. If we compare your use of the voice with that in Verdi's "Celeste Aida": Both Verdi and you make an opening statement rising to the F at the top of the center register, and then, when you come to the apposition, the first major new idea or poetic change, only then do you introduce the register shift to the F-sharp or G, in the high register.

Dr. Lee: I'm very interested in what you've told me about this today, but I

Fidelio: Given today's culture of rock, drugs, and immorality, what is in your mind, that you can go on writing songs which sometimes sound like Schubert?

Dr. Lee: I have a major belief, that although society and style may change rapidly, *good is good*. Eventually this will always be clear. Schubert, Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Buddhist, they will all be found in Heaven, regardless of religion or nationality, because they gave Beauty to their people, in beautiful



songs. Great music is forever—it is Man’s closest approach to God.

Fidelio: “Azaleas,” by Kim Dong-jin, speaks of longing for the beauty of Yongbyon in the North, and in “Song of My Homeland,” we see the geese flying north. Many of these songs seem to have a similar idea, of longing for Reunification.

Dr. Lee: Yes, that’s common sense. Patriotic feelings are natural to a Korean composer. However, this was not the literal purpose, or the specific target, of the melody, or of the music as a whole.

Fidelio: You are aiming at something higher than the literal meaning of the words?

Dr. Lee: Yes. This is music.

Fidelio: Were there any other great men, or major influences on your life?

Dr. Lee: Just music. Music is the light of my life. Since my student days after the war, music has been my guide. Music is everything for me.

By the way, my son is a violin student now at the Manhattan School of Music in New York. He was previously a member of the KBS Orchestra.

But, let me say that I am very anxious about the decline of culture in Korea today, which is deteriorating because of copying modern U.S. culture. Pop, rock, and rap music are, step by step, influenc-

Freedom of the arts, if taken to an extreme as it is today, is not healthy for society. The young people, who lack knowledge and experience, must be somehow governed by reason from the older generation, who should provide the youth with a full experience of Classical arts.

ing Korean youth, so that Classical music is slowly now disappearing, even here, in Korea. This is a major problem, and I’m very worried about it.

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The situation is similar to that in the U.S. The major problem we have in both countries, is the mass media. Television, radio, and films are promoting nothing but rock and rap, and there is not enough time spent for Classical music programming. It’s a big problem.

Fidelio: Please tell us about your work with Korea’s children to solve this problem.

Dr. Lee: We can’t solve this problem today, immediately. The only way is to

work for the future, to spread the love for Classical music to young children everywhere. That way, when those children grow up, they’ll carry with them a love of great music, and also teach it to their children.

That’s why I founded the Bluebird Children’s Songwriters Association (“*Parang se Chang-jak Tongyohae*”). It’s a group of new young Korean composers, thirty or so, who are learning to compose children’s songs in the Classical style, and I advise and teach them composition. This will also encourage them to create Classical compositions more broadly. I’m from the second generation of Korean composers, and it’s my job to train this new third generation, and to create the opportunity for the spread of their new songs.

Since 1994, the Bluebird Association has been fortunate to have a fine corporate sponsor, the Kolon-Met Life Insurance Company here in Seoul. They sponsor two events for us every year. In the Spring, our composers group writes new

songs and publishes them in books of children’s music; we also make an audio cassette of the songs, to go with the book. Then we distribute the music books and cassettes to every elementary school in Korea!

In the Fall, we then hold a Children’s Song contest nation-wide. We advertise the contest, and send invitation letters to each elementary school. At the first level, the children make tapes at school and mail them to us, and our composers’ group evaluates the tapes. From these we choose about a hundred contestants, and hold a second-level contest, in which they come to Seoul for live performance. The third and final contest is held with the thirty finalists.

Next, we’re planning to establish the Kolon-Met Children’s Choir, with the help of our kind sponsor, which will bring together a group of talented children from Seoul who can sing the songs we are composing on a regular basis.

Fidelio: Thank you, Dr. Lee.