



A Study of “Jeongseon Arirang” by Min-Hyeong Lee: Elements of Korean Traditional Folk Music

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One of the pleasures of choral music is that we can sing a variety of music from many different cultures. Just a few decades ago, choral programming focused mainly on Western music; however, now choral performances often include music of various cultures.¹ More recently, American Choral Directors Association National Conferences and World Symposiums on Choral Music have introduced a variety of repertoires from different cultures. With this trend, using traditional musical elements from one's own culture is becoming an important stylistic factor of choral music. Even though Korea has a short history of choral music, it has become a leading proponent of choral music in Asia and has adopted the current trend of using cultural musical elements. Min-Hyeong Lee (b. 1990) has arisen as one of the most significant representatives of Korean choral composers, both in Korea and internationally. His composition *Jeongseon Arirang* exemplifies the traditional style of Korean choral music.

Though there are some dissertations written about Korean choral works that incorporate traditional

elements, there is limited discussion regarding the folk song “Jeongseon Arirang” specifically. Some general aspects of “Jeongseon Arirang” include varied texts, a musical mode specific to the Jeongseon region, a unique rhythmic pattern, and traditional vocal ornamentation and instruments.² These five elements typify this style of Korean choral composition, and this article will highlight the ways in which they are represented in Min-Hyeong Lee's composition *Jeongseon Arirang*. This article will also help conductors understand other composers' settings of the folk song “Jeongseon Arirang.”³

Historical Background

Using traditional elements is deeply connected to Korea's history. This was brought to the forefront when Korea was annexed by Japan from 1910 to 1945. Throughout history, Koreans were “united to defend their country, and their patriotism has been a part of their national consciousness.”⁴ This characteristic of the Korean people led to a movement of Nationalism, which

produced music for the purpose of enhancing independence and love for the country.⁵ Many composers have been encouraged to use traditional Korean music as a basis for their compositions in order to promote nationalistic ideals. This tradition remains an important trait of contemporary Korean choral music. For example, during the fall of 2019 at the Korean Choral Directors Association Conference, choirs performed thirty-nine Korean pieces, thirteen of which are based on traditional Korean elements.

Traditional Korean music includes both vocal and instrumental genres and can be separated into three different categories: *Kungjung Ŭmak* (court music), *Chŏngak* (aristocratic music), and *Minyo* (folk music).⁶ Minyo means “the songs of the people,” and reflects elements and values typical of a traditional Korean lifestyle.

One famous example of this latter genre is “Arirang,” which is the most well known and celebrated folk song in Korea. Its cultural importance is so great that it was inscribed on the “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

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of Humanity” by UNESCO on December 5, 2012. Because “Arirang” was transmitted orally, its origins are uncertain.⁷ Different versions of the song were sung in different regions of Korea, including Seoul, Jindo, Miryang, Jeongseon, Kyungki, Haeju, and others. Depending on geographic location, traditional performances of the song feature variations in the tune and text. The lyrics of “Jeongseon Arirang” have been altered and refined repeatedly over time, and there are currently more than ten thousand versions on record. These variations in text are improvised depending on the singers’ situations and feelings.⁸ In his piece, Lee sets the most popular version of these numerous texts.

For *Jeongseon Arirang*, Lee uses one

of the oldest versions of the folk tune, which may have existed for over six hundred years.⁹ Jeongseon is a mountainous region, and the song embodies the sentiments of people who lived hard lives in isolation. The song’s mellow melody, satire, and humor provided relief from a number of different hardships, including the difficulty of living deep in the mountains, the burden of married life while dwelling with in-laws, resentment and longing for spouses, and other agonies of life.¹⁰

MinHyeong Lee was born and raised in Jeongseon. A graduate of the Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary in Seoul, South Korea, Lee is Composer in Residence of the Jubilate Press. His works have been performed by

choirs worldwide. Lee composed his setting of “Jeongseon Arirang” for conductor Dong-Kyu Lee in 2018. It was premiered the same year by Dong-Kyu Lee and the University of Louisville’s Collegiate Chorale. The piece is written for eight-part unaccompanied choir, one soprano soloist, and Korean drum (Janggu), and features traditional Korean musical elements including *jo* (modes), *jangdan* (rhythms), traditional instruments, and folk song melodies.

Lee incorporates several traditional features of Korean music that can also be found in the original folk song. For example, the original form of the folk song is in two parts, and the form of Lee’s composition is separated into two contrasting movements. Traditionally,



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“Jeongseon Arirang” separates into two sections: “Gin Arirang” (Long Arirang) and “Yeokkem Arirang” (Compiled Arirang). See Appendix A for an example of the traditional “Gin Arirang” and Appendix B for an example of the traditional “Yeokkem Arirang.” “Gin Arirang” is an AB form divided into verse and refrain. Traditionally, singers can sing the refrain both before and after the verses.¹¹ Lee, likewise, includes verse and refrains in his first movement. *Jeongseon Arirang* begins with two times through the refrain, followed by one verse, then followed by two more times through the refrain before concluding with an extended coda. “Gin Arirang” (the first section of the traditional folk song) is usually sung slowly with long note values. In this first movement, Lee follows suit with many sustained tones successively in all voice parts. The typical form of “Yeokkem Arirang” (the second section of the traditional folk song) is also AB, split into a fast section and a slow section. The first part is sung quickly, in a storytelling manner, before becoming slow-paced and resuming the melody of “Gin Arirang.” The second movement of Lee’s setting similarly begins with an exciting opening and fast-paced passage followed by a slower section with the melody from the first movement. Lee adds another fast section at the end, turning the setting into an ABA form.

The composer not only adapts traditional poetic forms but traditional modes as well. The characteristics of traditional modes vary region to region just as customs and dialects do. *Menari Jo* (Mode) is a

traditional pitch collection native to the Jeongseon region, which did not have many cultural exchanges with other regions due to its isolated and mountainous geographical terrain.¹²

This mode influences both the melodic and harmonic structure of the folk song. Most traditional Korean music uses pentatonic modes but also sometimes uses three-note, four-note, or six-note modes.¹³ It also uses two main pitch collections: *Pyeong-jo* (sol mode: sol-la-do-re-mi) and *Kyemyon-jo* (la mode: la-do-re-mi-sol). The modes used in folksongs are based on these two pitch collections. The melody of the traditional “Jeongseon Arirang” is based on the mode “*Menari*,” which is based on the pitch collection *Kyemyun-jo*. Most phrases in Korean folk songs finish on la or mi, as shown in Fig-

ure 1. The notes of the “Jeongseon Arirang” refrain melody are “mi-la-sol-mi,” and the melodic line, which ascends by leap the interval of a fourth and then descends back to where it began, is distinctive of the pitch collection “*Menari*.” Also, in the last part of Lee’s first movement, the text “Arirang gogae gogaero nareul numgyejoogae” (“let me cross over Arirang pass”) features a melody ascending from d to g (a fourth) on “Arirang gogae gogaero” before descending on “nareul neomgyeojuge” to settle on the pitch d where it began (see Figure 3). This characteristic is preserved in Lee’s setting. As Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate, Lee used *Menari* in the melodic phrases of his *Jeongseon Arirang*. In addition, Lee includes the *Menari* pitch collection (with an added b-flat) as a har-



Figure 1. Min-Hyeong Lee, *Gin Arirang* (Long Arirang), Soprano 1, mm. 33–34.



Figure 2. Min-Hyeong Lee, *Gin Arirang* (Long Arirang), Soprano 1, mm. 6–8.



Figure 3. Min-Hyeong Lee, *Gin Arirang* (Long Arirang), Soprano Solo, mm. 72–74.

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monic structure in the opening of the second movement (circled notes in Figure 4).

In addition to his usage of traditional modes, Lee also uses traditional rhythms. Korean traditional music is constructed on groupings of unequal pulses called *Jang-dan*, which means "long and short."

Jang-dan is a different concept than "rhythm" in Western music. Because the folk song tradition in Korea was transmitted orally, transcription does not necessarily reflect the proper performance practices. *Jang-dan* indicates a rhythmic pattern, tempo, and mood, but excludes any meaning of mathematical proportions or

measure lines.¹⁴ Korean traditional music generally has six sets of *Jang-dan*, the one most commonly used in folk songs being *Se-ma-chi Jang-dan*, shown in Figure 5. The rhythm is best expressed in Western notation as being in 9/8 or 3/4. Lee sets his *Gin Arirang* (first movement) in 3/4 meter, as shown in Figure 6.

Allegro (ca. ♩ = 80 - 90)

Figure 4 shows a musical score for a choir with eight parts: Soprano 1 (S1), Soprano 2 (S2), Alto 1 (A1), Alto 2 (A2), Tenor 1 (T1), Tenor 2 (T2), Bass 1 (B1), and Bass 2 (B2). The score is in 3/4 time and marked 'Allegro (ca. ♩ = 80 - 90)'. The lyrics are 'Woo - ri Ji - bae Seo - bang - ni - meun_'. A red oval highlights the circled notes in the original image, which are the notes in measures 1 and 2 of the Soprano 2 (S2) part.

Figure 4. Min - Hyeong Lee, *Yeokkem Arirang* (Long Arirang), mm. 1 - 3.

Figure 5 shows the *Se-ma-chi Jang-dan* rhythm, which is a 9/8 time signature. The notation shows a half note followed by a quarter note.

Figure 5. *Se-ma-chi Jang-dan*.^{xv}

Figure 6 shows a musical score for Soprano 2 (S2) in 3/4 time. The lyrics are 'A - ra - ri -'. A red oval highlights the circled notes in the original image, which are the notes in measure 24 of the Soprano 2 (S2) part.

Figure 6. Min - Hyeong Lee, *Gin Arirang*, m. 24.

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He uses the basic rhythmic figure of *Se-ma-chi Jang-dan*, shown in Figure 5, which appears throughout the first movement. Additionally, Lee reuses *Se-ma-chi Jang-dan* during the B section of Yeokkem Arirang (second movement) due to its similarity to Gin Arirang, but this time in 9/8 meter.

The “Yeokkeum Arirang” movement begins with the text “Woori Jibae Seobangnimeun Jalnatdeonji Monnatdeonji” (“Whether my husband is handsome or ugly”) to express the numerous aspects of life that were not expressed in “Gin Arirang.” A full translation of the text can be read in appendix C. The faster rhythmic figures and small melodic leaps in this passage are reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan patter songs or Western rap music (see Figure 7). One notable difference, which sets this section of *Jeongseon Arirang* apart from the earlier one, is its lack of a specific *Jang-dan*.

Another rhythmic feature Lee’s piece shares with traditional Korean folk song is that all his phrases begin on the downbeat. All Korean traditional songs start this way, while many songs from Western music begin with an anacrusis.¹⁶ This derives from the natural speaking pattern of the language. For example, in European languages articles come

before their associated words (e.g., “the” or “a” in English; “le,” “la,” or “les” in French), which naturally leads to anacrusis function in music. In Korean, these modifiers attach to the end of a word as postpositions or suffixes, thus words begin directly and tend to fall on strong beats in music.

Another way language is highlighted in Korean folk music is the use of Si-kim-sae (ornamentation). Generally, Korean musical ornamentation can be categorized as six different types: *Chuh-song* (slow and wide vibrato, ascending glissando), *Toe-song* (descending glissando), *Jon-song* (a type of vibrato for short notes), *Yo-song* (a type of vibrato for longer notes), *Pyong-song* (no ornamentation), and *Gulim* (grace note).¹⁷ Lee uses the concept of *Chuh-song* and *Pyong-song* in the *Gin Arirang* section and *Gulim* in the Yeokkeum Arirang section. The first measure of the *Gin Arirang* section has the same rhythmic characteristic as *Chuh-Song*, which demands the singer approach the next note from above with a glissando. Although Lee does not indicate them in his piece, it is expected to be performed with glissandos according to traditional performance practice. The initial note of the glissando is typically more important melodically than what follows it.¹⁸ In mea-

sures 1-18, Lee uses many sustained notes, indicative of *Pyong-song*, which uses a slower melody and harmonic progression to establish a more resonant sonority than more ornamented sections of the piece (Figure 8 on page 68). The concept of *Pyong-song* is similar to straight tone singing in Western music, which requires little or no vibrato. In measures 17-19 of *Yeokkeum Arirang* Lee uses *Gulim*, which is a grace-note preceding the main note. The use of *Gulim* offers a strong accent on the first beat that is typical of the heavy downbeat of



Figure 7. Min - Hyeong Lee, *Yeokkem Arirang*, Soprano 1, m. 13.

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Korean-style vocalism.¹⁹

Another historically rooted element is Lee's usage of *Janggu*, the most common drum in traditional Korean music.²⁰ It is a two-sided barrel drum with a slim curved waist. The two heads, made of horsehide and cowhide, produce

different pitches and timbre.²¹ Lee's usage of *Janggu* creates traditional Korean sonority in his piece.

Despite Korea's short history of choral music, it has a rich history of traditional music. When Western choral music was introduced to Korea at the end of the nineteenth

century, the genre was unknown. However, Korean musicians adopted it and infused it with traditional musical aspects and performance practices. This nurtured the explosive growth of Korean choral music and contributed to Korea's growing reputation in the world of choral

Andantino con espressione (ca. ♩ = 70)

Alto 1: *pp* Woo

Alto 2: *pp* Woo

Ten. 1: *pp* Woo

Ten. 2: *pp* Woo

Jang-gu: Right hand [only use a stick] *mf*
Left hand [only use your left hand]

Sop. 1: *p* A - ri - rang

Sop. 2: *p* A - ri - rang

Alto 1: Woo

Alto 2: Woo

Ten. 1: *pp* Woo

Ten. 2: *pp* Woo

Jang-gu: *mf*

Figure 8. Min-Hyeong Lee, *Gin Arirang*, mm. 1–10.

music. Lee's *Jeongseon Arirang* is not only a brilliant example of choral composition, showcasing traditional musical elements of Korean folk music, but is also a helpful conduit to introduce traditional Korean music to international musicians. As shown in its premiere by an American choir, it can be performed by many choirs in the world. I hope this article can help non-Korean choral conductors recognize what sets Lee's *Jeongseon Arirang* apart from other choral compositions and assist them in their preparations of Korean choral works. 

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NOTES

- ¹ Marvin E. Latimer, *Excellence in Choral Music: a History of the American Choral Directors Association* (Glendale, CA: Hinshaw Music, 2019), 187-190.
- ² Jin Yongseon, *Jeongseon Arirang* (Jeongseon: Jeongseon Arirang Culture Foundation, 2017), Mun-Jae Maeng, "A Study on Theme of Jeongseon Arirang—Focused on long Jeongseon Arirang." *The Society of Korean Modern Literary Criticism*. Vol. 42 (2013), Hyejung Kim, "The Musical Structure and Characteristics of Jeongsun Arirang." *Korean Folk Song* Vol. 29 (2010).
- ³ When referring to the traditional folk song, the author has put the title in quotes ("Jeongseon Arirang"), and when referring to the setting by

Min-Hyeong Lee the author has put the title in italics (*Jeongseon Arirang*).

- ⁴ In-Soo Kim, *Protestants and the Formation of Modern Korean Nationalism, 1884-1920: A Study of the Contributions of Horace Grant Underwood and Sun Chu Kil* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996), 8.
- ⁵ Imgyu Kang, "Evolving Nationalism in Korean Music as Seen in Ahn Eak-tai's *Korea Fantasy* and *Missa Arirang* by Huh Cool-Jae" (DMA diss., University of Alabama), 16.
- ⁶ *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol. 6 (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 865-866.
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- ⁸ Sanghun Park, *An Analytic Study on the Musical Characteristics of Arirang of Each Country* (Ph.D diss., Chungang University, 2000), 42.
- ⁹ Jongyong Lee, *The Transmission and Lineage of Jeongseon Arirang* (Jeongseon: Jeongseon Arirang Culture Foundation, 2011), 24.
- ¹⁰ Jin, *Jeongseon Arirang*, 4.
- ¹¹ Hye-Gu Lee, "The Beauty of Jeongseon Arirang." *Korea Gukkawon Journal*. Vol. 12 (December 2000), 9.
- ¹² Jin, *Jeongseon Arirang*, 4.
- ¹³ "Traditional Korean Key and Mode," Korea National Gugak Center, accessed Oct 19, 2019, <http://www.gugak.go.kr/site/homepage/menu/viewMenu?menuid=001003001001001004001>.
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- ¹⁵ Seoung Yon Kwak, *Interpreting Elements of Traditional Korean Song in Contemporary Choral Music: Me-Na-Ri* (2005) (DMA diss., University of California, 2011), 12.
- ¹⁶ Dong-Hyun Son, *A study of "Missa Arirang" by Cool-Jae Huh: Elements of Korean Traditional folk music* (DMA diss., University of Kansas, 2013), 30. Minhui Choi and Emily Schmitt, "Postpositions and Word Order Variation in Korean." *Linguistic Portfolios*. Vol. 4, (2015), 109.
- ¹⁷ Changeun Im, *An Apporach to the Analytical Study of Jung-Sun Park's Choral Work: "Arirang Mass"* (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2006), 38.
- ¹⁸ Soyun Ham Kang, 35.
- ¹⁹ Dong-Hyun Son, 38.
- ²⁰ "Jangu," Korea National Gugak Center, accessed Oct 19, 2019, <http://academy.gugak.go.kr/dp/pds/HTML5-2-4-2/HTML5-2-4-2-3/index.htm>.
- ²¹ JinHee Shin, *Hyun Jaemyeong's Opera "Chunhyang-Jeon": Ancient Traditions and Western Perspectives* (DMA diss., Arizona State University, 2017), 31.
- ²² Jin, *Jeongseon Arirang*, 16.
- ²³ Ibid., 17.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 6.

Appendix



noo ni ol a na bi - ga ol a na - awk soo jang ma - jil la a - na - - -

man su - san geo meun gu - reu mi - mak mo yeo - deun - da

a ri - rang a ri - rang a ra - ri - yo

a ri - rang go gae go gae ro - na reul num gyeo ju gae

Appendix A. *Gin Arirang*²²



woo ri jib ae seo bang nim eun jal nat deon ji mot nat deon ji ul gu mae go jjik eo mae go

jang chi da ri gom bae par i no ga ji na mu ji gae e da yeop jeon seok nyang Kul mu ji go

$\text{♩} = 50$

gang reung sam check e so geum sa reo ga syeon neun dae

baek bong ryeong goo bi goo bi bu di jal da nyeo o se yo

Appendix B. *Yeokkeum Arirang*²³

Text Translation²⁴

1. Gin Arirang

Nonni olana, Biga olana
Awksoo jangma jilana

Arirang Arirang Arariyo
Arirang Gogagero Nareul
numgyeojogae

2. Yeokkeum Arirang

Woorijibae Seobangnimeun
Jalnatdeonji Monnatdeonji

Ulgumaego Jjigumaego Jangchidari
Gombaepari

Nogajinamu Jigaeeda
YeopjeonSeoknyayng Kulmujigo

Gangreung Samcheogae Sogeum
Sareo Gasyeonneumdae

Baekbongyeong GoobiGoobi Boodi
Jaldanyeo Oseyo

1. Gin Arirang

Will it rain or snow or will a long
spell of heavy rain begin.

Arirang Arirang Arariyo
Let me cross over Arirang Pass.

2. Yeokkeum Arirang

Whether my husband is handsome or
ugly

Whether his face is pitted with
pockmarks, his leg is stiff, or his arm
is deformed.

Carrying an A-frame of juniper wood
on his back with three hundred brass
coins on it

He has gone to Gangreung and
Samcheok to buy salt.

I hope he comes back safely through
the winding Baekbongnyeong Pass.