

Identity, Innovation, and Interconnectivity: A Conversation with Composer Hyowon Woo

by Rose Hellmers



For the past thirty years, Hyowon Woo (b. 1974) has built a reputation as one of the foremost composers in South Korea. Her works have been featured at major international events: her oratorio *CREO* was performed at the 2014 International Federation for Choral Music World Symposium; she served as official theme composer and music director for the 2023 World Choir Games; and her music was performed at the 2025 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation World Leaders' Gala Dinner, a gathering of the world's presidents and prime ministers. She also served as composer-in-residence for ensembles including the Seoul Ladies Singers and the Incheon City Chorale.

When did you first begin composing, and when did you realize composition could become your profession?

My mother was a professional pianist, and my father was an East Asian painter, so the arts were always a natural part of my life. Even in elementary school, I enjoyed writing melodies, and some of my early pieces were performed at school events. As a child, I was also interested in other artistic fields, particularly fashion design; I was drawn to form, color, and the shaping of space. Looking back, that interest is closely connected to the work I do now. Although the materials have changed, I have always been fascinated by bringing different elements together into a unified whole.

Eventually, with my father's encouragement to pursue a life as a creator, coupled with the realization that composing came most naturally to me, I decided to major in composition at Sungshin Women's University. In Korea, music majors typically specialize in a specific performance instrument. Instead of choosing an instrument, however, I wanted to focus exclusively on com-

position. By the time I completed my undergraduate degree in 1996, I was already working as the full-time resident composer for the professional choir Seoul Ladies' Singers, followed by the Incheon City Chorale, both directed by Maestro Hak-Won Yoon, a pioneer in choral conducting in South Korea. These opportunities launched my career, and this year now marks my thirtieth year as a professional composer.

How would you describe your compositional voice, and how has it evolved throughout your career?

My compositional voice is built around three central ideas. First, my work grows naturally out of my identity and cultural background as a Korean while existing within a framework of Western musical language. In Korean conservatory training, studying composition generally means learning to compose in a Western style. My goal has always been to combine that training with my own cultural background to create music that reflects my Korean identity yet resonates with performers and audiences from all around the world.

Second, I always strive to develop something modern. I ask myself, "What is new? What would make this more experimental and experiential?" When I begin imagining a piece, I rarely start with a melody or harmonic idea. Instead, I consider the space, the performers, and the overall experience I hope to create. I then search for the materials that can express that experience most precisely: choir, orchestra, percussion, silence, physical movement, lighting, and even the resonance of the venue can all become part of the work. For that reason, I think of myself not only as a composer of scores but as a creator of experiences. Throughout my career, I have continued exploring new possibilities within choral music.

Third, because much of my career developed from my work as a resident composer with ensembles such as the Incheon City Chorale, my music is centered on collaboration. Each composition is part of an interconnected relationship between composer and commissioner, shaped by its specific purpose, context, and occasion. More recently, projects for significant international events such as the World Choir Games and the APEC Leaders' Gala have expanded my work into different genres and settings, including collaborations with symphonic orchestras and solo voices. Still, across all these contexts, these three foundational elements—Korean identity within a Western framework, innovation, and collaboration—continue to guide my work.

For conductors who hope to commission new works, what does an ideal collaboration between composer and conductor look like, and how does that collaboration shape your creative process?

For me, composition is collaborative: every commission begins with a specific purpose and context. Before I begin writing, I want to understand as much as possible about the venue and its acoustic character, the size and level of the ensemble, the theme and purpose of the event, and even the nature of the audience. The same theme requires a different musical language, scale, and approach depending on who performs it, where it is heard, and why it is being created. These are essential points of departure for my work, which is why it is important for conductors and organizations to share the full context of the performance with the composer. The piece then becomes music for real people and a real space rather than for an abstract choir.

Within this framework, I consider text, imagery, and



the nature of the performance space together. Sometimes I write the text myself or develop an original text with a collaborator. Other times, I use existing texts, though I may select or reshape phrases according to the larger dramatic and musical flow. When working with text, I am interested not only in its meaning but also in how the words move in the mouth and where the breath naturally falls. I visualize the nuance and meaning of the words, almost as if I am seeing images in my mind, and those images become the source of my melodic elements. Yet not every piece begins with text; sometimes a work begins with a space, an image, physical movement, or the atmosphere I hope will remain after the performance.

I then choose the musical materials and build the structure, but the creative process does not end when the score is finished. Collaboration during the rehearsal process is equally important. Through many years of working with professional choirs, I have often had opportunities to listen, experiment, and revise my compositions alongside the performers, even as late as tech week. Through rehearsal, the piece encounters the interpretations of performers and conductors and the unique resonance of the venue. Once the music becomes actual sound, possibilities and problems that were invisible on the page become clear. I do not consider these revisions to be a failure or compromise. Instead, they are a vital part of the creative process through which the piece becomes the best version of itself.

As you mentioned, your music integrates Korean folk elements within Western compositional techniques. How do you approach this balance, and what would you like Western choirs to understand when performing and hearing your music?

I do not begin a piece by deciding that I must write something "Korean." Although I have never formally studied traditional Korean music, I was born and raised in Korea, within its language and culture, so those sensibilities already exist within me. Rather than intentionally trying to insert Korean elements into my music, they emerge naturally because they are part of who I am.

Traditional Korean elements like folk rhythms, *pansori* (traditional narrative singing), and *sigimsae* (Korean ornamentation) are woven into my natural musical language rather than added as decorative devices. For example, to me, *sigimsae* concerns the entire life of a tone—how it begins, trembles, moves, and disappears. My goal is not to reproduce these folk traditions exactly but to allow their sense of time, breath, and sound to live again within contemporary music.

Because of that, I am generally not overly concerned that Korean elements will be misunderstood or misrepresented by Western choirs. I hope performers approach the music with openness and sensitivity, trusting that the Korean identity is already embedded in the musical language. Ultimately, whether my pieces are heard or performed by Korean or Western audiences, the music remains Korean because it comes from my own identity and experience.

Thus, when Western choirs perform my work, I do not believe they must follow one prescribed interpretation. I believe singers and audiences should have the freedom to experience my music in their own ways. I fully respect the individual experiences that performers and audiences bring to the music, and I want them to take my music as they feel.

Is there a particular work that is most meaningful to you or that you feel best represents your artistic voice?

One work that was especially significant for me was *Me-Na-Ri,* one of my commissioned works for Incheon City Chorale's performance at the 2009 National ACDA Conference. This piece represented a turning point because it combined traditional Korean elements with a new idea of creating visual music for space, in a new genre I call spatial music. In this work, I had three SATB choirs separated throughout the performance venue with specific staging and lighting instructions, creating what I call a "four-dimensional" musical experience. This piece opened new possibilities for me as a composer.

The work also uses relatively limited musical materials: a folk-like melody, repetition, and a restrained harmonic language. I focused on how sound accumulates and disappears, how human breath continues

through the music, and how the resonance of the space becomes part of the composition. At that time, I still carried some assumptions that a strong piece required more advanced techniques and greater structural complexity. But *Me-Na-Ri* showed me that simple materials can contain great depth. Since then, I have thought less about what else I can add and more about what the work truly needs. Complexity should be used when the work requires it, but complexity itself should never become the goal.

What advice do you have for young composers who are seeking to develop their own artistic voices?

I tell younger composers not to define "their own style" too early. They should encounter excellent art across many fields—not only classical music, but contemporary music, jazz, visual art, theater, architecture, and the world around them. By remaining open and absorbing a wide range of experiences, their own artistic sensibility and language will gradually emerge.

At the same time, I emphasize that writing a good score and creating a good performance are not quite the same. A score may look excellent on the page and yet fail to come fully alive onstage. I encourage composers to hear their own works performed as often as possible and to bring what they learn back into the score. A strong work is not completed at the desk alone—it grows through people, spaces, and repeated performances. I hope younger composers will move beyond writing good scores and become creators of music that lives onstage.

What are your thoughts and strategies for balancing the popular American choral styles that are triadic and emotionally evocative with music that probes the further potential of melody, harmony, rhythm, and poetic/philosophical insights? (This question was supplied by the previous Choral Conversations interviewee. See "A Conversation with Robert Geary," *Choral Journal*, October 2026.)

Perhaps one of the hardest things to write is music that is both simple and truly good. Simple does not mean shallow. Sometimes the simplest melody or harmony can leave the deepest impression. But achieving that kind of simplicity is not easy. It may even be easier to make something complicated. To say more with less, and to write music that feels immediate but stays with you—that, to me, is one of the greatest challenges of being a composer. So rather than trying to find a balance between popular and more exploratory music, I am more interested in how deeply we can go with something simple.

Please provide a question for the next Choral Conversations interviewee.

If you could keep just one thing that makes choral music special, what would it be? CJ

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