

The Improvising Eye – December 17, 2010
Dong-Won Kim Interviewed by Joshua Pilzer
Transcription by Andrew Sproule

Rebecca Caines: Welcome back. I'm so pleased that Dong-Won Kim and Joshua Pilzer could join us today. Dong-Won Kim, I know, is just in the country for a little bit longer, so it's fantastic he could make it out to Guelph and that Joshua agreed to interview him today, for our Symposium. So just let me tell you a little bit about these people.

Dong-Won Kim has studied various Korean traditional percussion music since 1984, (and you're going to have to excuse my pronunciation), such as Samulnori, farmer's carnival drumming and dance, and Shaman ritual music. He has been performing wildly—widely *and* wildly as a member of The Silk Road Ensemble with Yo-Yo Ma, and has also done many musical improvisations with a lot of jazz musicians. And Kim is a professor and the Wonkwang Digital University and currently teaches Korean music at the University of Toronto. And I found out, has also written some fairy tales for children, which is fantastic!

And Joshua Pilzer, who will be interviewing Dong-Won today, is an Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology at the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago in 2006 and his dissertation was entitled "My Heart, the Number One: Song in the Lives of Korean Survivors of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery." He's been a lecturer at the University of California in Santa Barbara, University of Chicago, and was a Mellon Fellow at the Columbia University before starting at the University of Toronto. And he's done extensive field work in Korea and Japan, speaks both Korean and Japanese, and apparently his next research project with the Jackman Institute involves Korean survivors of the atomic bombings on Japan.

Thank you very much.

Josh Pilzer: Thank you all for having us today. Thank you, everyone, and thank you in particular for making this happen. This is a wonderful opportunity for both of us. I just, I don't know if you want to say anything as well?

Dong-Won Kim: Thank you.

[Audience laughing]

JP: Excellent. Well I mean, we have a rather short period of time, and as you will find out, Dong-Won has a tremendous amount—putting it nicely, has a lot a lot of things to say. [Audience laughing] And really quite a wonderful way of talking about improvisation in a way that is both simultaneously theoretical and extremely practical at the same time. And quite down to earth and wonderful. So I thought I would just basically kick off with a very simple question for you, by which you can introduce the kind of improvisation that you do and sort of some basic things on how Korean Music, Korean traditional improvisation works in practice.

DWK: Yes, first I will, I'd like to ask you to excuse my poor English. Actually there are two different, I'd like to introduce you to two different kinds of Korean traditional music improvisation. One could be a music improvisation example in folk music, like a Shaman or farmer's carnival drumming. Mostly, when they improvise they improvise music in some kind of basement. So I would say, they improvise according to their habit or their tradition. Also another one is, I know [a] very good example of a very

weird music improvisation. Can I talk about “desperate mothers” music improvisation?

JP: Sure, sure, sure. Absolutely. But first, just to be clear, the first kind of stuff, the base that you're talking about, people improvising on, those are things like core rhythmic patterns, and [...] parallel moments and things like that. [...]

DWK: Yes. Actually the main poem or the most popular poem of a music improvisation in Korean traditional music is following the rhythmic pattern. But for example, the drummer plays a certain rhythmic pattern continuously, but everybody else, they're playing music improvisation. For example, there is a very common rhythmic structure, we call it *kukori* in Korea, and it's a slow three beats, it's kind of a slow twelve eight. [Demonstrates how to count rhythm with hands and sings over the rhythm.] This is improvisation. And so, there are six musicians, they all improvise on this typical pentatonic scale, but the rhythms and pitches, and how do you say? The bending techniques, the sliding up, sliding down, and using vibrato is really, really depending on their heart. This is a very typical way. So when the drummer changes the rhythmic structure, the rhythmic pattern, they also follow it. [Demonstrates improvisation over rhythmic pattern.] Something like this. So, as you could recognize easily, the rhythmic structure [is] fixed, or [is] suggested by the drummer, and although they are using improvisation they are still using very traditional, typical melodic scales. This is kind of a typical musical improvisation format in Korea.

JP: I think it's an important thing, you know, you mentioned the rhythmic patterns, but you also mentioned the spaces in between notes and sliding and things like this. There's a kind of conception of pitch in Korean music which is very, very different from the way pitch is conceptualized in Western music, and less so in jazz. I think in jazz there's a little bit of overlap in some places. But the tones are almost alive, so you, you know, it's not a series of fixed abstract pitches that you can do things to; it's a living organism.

DWK: That's right, that's right. For example, one of my grandmasters, when he— while he was teaching us, he mentioned like this one time. He mentioned that if you are making any type of song on the stage, [...] even if it is kind of ten thousand different songs or pitches or beat, you have a full responsibility. It's like you have ten thousand numbers of children. Even if you are a parent of ten thousand numbers of children, you are, you have a whole responsibility. It's like this. And on the other side, they also, the music grandmasters, the music masters in Korea, they used to say like this: on the other side, every single note could be a representative of the universe. Or my whole life. Or the society. Or the world where I belong. [Sings] I just improvised this song; it could reflect very clearly something meaningful or something that comes from my heart. So, giving a righteous vitality on every single note or pitch or beat is priority. Giving the vitality.

JP: So now you also want to talk about this second sort of somewhat stranger kind of improvisation that you heard of and experienced in the course of your life.

DWK: Yes, but honestly and very unfortunately I have no chance to listen to the music. I just heard the history. It was a very unusual music improvisation played by desperate mothers. Actually this tradition has disappeared already. [...] I heard that the last activity, the last time was 1970s? Something like that, because it is not a kind of an entertainment style music activity. Again, it's done by desperate mothers who lost their family members by war, or disease, or hunger, and everybody in the villages know the desperate[ion], the frustrat[ion] and when they lost hope, but! You know, even [though] the lady is weaker than any other people, [the] mother is the strongest human being in the planet. So although any other village people, they are physically very weak [...] and mentally [...] frustrated, all those mothers,

they really do something, finally. It's a kind of ritual ceremony to drive away bad energy or bad spirit which might cause the problem, the hunger, or disease, or local governors, dictatorship, all these things. So it's a kind of ritual ceremony but also, on the other side, it's a kind of protest. They prepare three different things in red—red colour, because they believe the red colour [is] the bad energy or bad host; they [are] afraid of this red colour, so they prepare three different things in red colour. One is a paper mask, very scary looking paper mask, fully painted in the red earth. And the second one is red bean soup, to feed the bad spirit. And the last one is, how do you say the, okay, the ladies menstruation pad, but bloody, it has to be bloody. So they hang up the pad, the cloth, at the end of a bamboo tree, and every single mother they are hanging—[wearing a] mask and carrying, some of them are carrying the bloody cloth, and some of them [are] spreading the red bean soup on the street or around the village, and then they prepare very weird musical instrument like a broken pot, or some piece of wood, or something good for making noise because they believe if they play typical rhythmic patterns or typical joyful, amusing music, the bad, they cannot chase away, they cannot drive away the bad spirit. So they play really scary music and scary vocalization. Scary vocalization, it's screaming. Desperate screaming. [Demonstrates screaming.] It's fully improvisational calls. And playing some— making some noise, but not typical, never in typical rhythmic pattern. [Demonstrates typical rhythmic pattern.] Not this one. [Demonstrates abnormal rhythmic pattern while improvising vocalization.] You know, with the crying, and if there is a kind of difficulty in life, in their lives that has been caused by local governor's dictatorship, they will make protest in front of the governor's office in the midnight, in the midnight. Their activity is strongly prohibited to watch by any other man and children, so the men they locked inside of house and taking care of their children, [so they can] not see. So it's only the ladies, the women's ritual activity which contains music improvisation. And then, I heard this story when I was twenty-three years old in Korea, so in Western Asia, twenty-two years old. We count from the pregnan[cy]. And I was just knocked out. I couldn't stop crying. And it was the very first moment that I could realize the music could reflect someone's life entirely, or the world entirely.

JP: I wanted to maybe have you continue on this train of thought. The idea that this was a ritual— nineteenth-century or twenty-century ritual—continuing into the twentieth-century, but one that you haven't had any personal experience of, but I know that in terms of music having social meaning and having an actual kind of practical role in protest, and the use of musical improvisation in protest, that is something that you have very specific experiences of from the 1980s, so I wondered if I could ask you to speak about those a little bit. About, even to tell the story of your participation in some of those kinds of things. What the political context was, you know, what the struggle was, and how music was employed in that situation.

DWK: Traditionally, when somebody was dead, playing music for the poor spirit is a very important thing. You know, not only just, you know crying or moaning or remembering their loss; but traditionally Korean people think that when somebody died, there might be, or there must be a kind of unresolved, yeah there must be unresolved feeling, or karma of the dead people, the dead person. So for giving the comfort, to give a comfort for the poor spirit, the dead spirit, or to cleanse the dead people's spirit or karma, they play music, and also in improvisation. In 1987 at the time South Korea was governed by military dictatorship, many young people who protest against, who made a protest against the government got arrested and tortured and punished or killed, and one of— in 1987, it was an August, one young man [was] killed by policeman and we were very angry and also we were very, very sad. So as a musician, we decided to make a funeral ceremony. And I was supposed to play music, but I couldn't play music because that place was totally interrupt[ed] and blocked by policemen, and finally I was arrested and I spent three months in the jail, a very small room, isolated. What is it? Solitary? Yeah. Very small room, as big as a single bed size room, and lots of punishment. And you know, I was supposed to play with other traditional musicians with whom I never played with ever, so I was

supposed to play some kind of music improvisation because it was, how do you say, it was just three days later of his death, so everything was just organized very quickly and instantly and without— with a very humble plan. But, especially, as I told you already I spent three months in the jail, which means, I had a lot of time to remind or look back myself what could be, what is the relationship with me and society and all these things? And also it is very, the desperate mother story is something— very surprising story to me, but it didn't happen in my life. But, that political event, you know being a political prisoner, arrested by policemen, lots of punishment, they almost broke my two ears and my spine, my spine bones, and feeling sympathy for that young man. And yeah, actually I played lots of music improvisation on my knees in jail. You know, if it really happened, if I had the chance to play the real music for the funeral ceremony, what should I play? So it was like that. And it was my very personal experience, which is strongly related to my music and this society.

JP: You know the use of improvisation in the sense of, very much reminiscing on some of the things that Ajay was saying in the film about aggrieved populations and using music to respond to the conditions of oppression... I wonder if we could bring that all the way up until the present day in Korea and think about the value, if you could say something about the value of improvisation in contemporary Korean life. And just to give you one very quick example that maybe will inspire your answer. If you go to a public park in Korea, one of the most surprising things is that, if you go up the mountain, one of the most surprising things is that you might be walking on something that you think is the trail, and someone will come burning past you like this and like this and then like this, and basically there are trails in every possible direction. So there is a kind of total freedom thing happening in these public parks. But it occurs to me that that is a kind of contrast to some other aspect of life, you know. To the [...] you know, to the division of the country, or to like, a very difficult work situation, or things like that, so I just wondered what you thought about that. Maybe improvisation in Korean music, also in life, you know, walking through public parks and the many, many, I think, other examples there are of this kind of freedom principle in Korean life. What animates it? What is its relation to social life?

[...]

DWK: So actually, I'm not sure I'm able to give you a righteous answer to your question, but you know, whenever I have the chance to introduce my music improvisations or whenever I have the chance to teach my students how to improvise music, [...] I always tell them that, there is no[t] any full improvisation. What could be the purity of pure gold? They never write down that it is 100% pure, because it is simply not possible. You can write lots of nines. You know, 99.99999, like this, but no 100%. What could be the purity of composed music? 100%? Not possible. So in the world, where we belong, where we are living, it's a... I see beautiful combination and harmony between improvisation and composition. I call it chaosmos—chaos and cosmos. So [...] for example since Renaissance in classical music field, they try to compose music, they try to develop the certainty of music, but when we are saying about music improvisation, in my perspective, it's about uncertainty of music, but I do not admire uncertainty of music only, as I do not admire certainty of music. What I do admire is the combination or the harmony between certainty and uncertainty. So even if I really do my best to make full improvisation, which is not possible, even if it is only a super tiny amount of, even it is very small, even if there's a small amount of composition, which means, while I'm playing music improvisation that something from my habit or something, a composed element could be rebuilt. And so, even if it is a very composed music [Demonstrates composed music.], even if it's a very composed music, I can improvise. [Demonstrates composed music with improvisation.] Even if it is an emphasized volume or lengths of a note, there is an improvisational element, something like that. So my question is, to be able to improvise music, I will always suggest to my student, please be aware what could be the natural composition of it. The composed, not composed, the compositional element of it. Stuff like that. So...

JP: Would you like a cup?

DWK: Uh, yeah. [Reaches for cup of water.] I prepared. I love the colour.

[Laughter]

DWK: Cheers.

[Laughter]

DWK: Mmm! Single malt!

[Laughter]

JP: Dong-Won has a philosophy of music that he calls seeing music, seeing Korean music through a cup. And so, this was, a part of the lead into that.

DWK: Yeah. Seeing music through a cup. That's my very weird approach to understanding music.

JP: So, the cup is the certainty and the contents and the emptiness in the middle is the...

DWK: Yeah. So I mean, it could be another example, which shows the combination of certainty and uncertainty. The shape of the cup is a certainty, is the word of certainty, but how about the emptiness of the cup. It contains unlimited possibility. What should I pour? How much should I pour? For whom should I pour? When should I pour? And after pouring, should I pass it to her or him or should I drink it, or should I shake it? Throw it away? Leave it there? There are unlimited possibilities. So, but you cannot pour, but there is an emptiness inside the cup, but also in this room it's full of emptiness, but you cannot pour something into the air, into the space, so you need, even if it's a very small amount or very humble amount, humble way, humble thing, you need something certain to contain it. For example there is my lovely wife, yeah, yes. I gave her ring, I think, I remember, I think, did I? Yeah.

[Laughter]

DWK: It's a diamond ring. But I didn't set the diamond on the pure gold, because pure gold is not solid enough. By adding some other metal thing, it could be a lot stronger. And reliable. So, so you know playing music improvisation, of course we can do that, you know if someone you never play with, someone you don't know, and you can play hours and days. You can do that. But, to be more responsible, or to enjoy the music improvisation more, sometimes having a very little tiny bit of a plan, or designing, is really, really helpful. I call it, having an anchor.

JP: So with that, with that in mind, with that emphasis on the relationship between certainty and uncertainty and that kind of thing, I wonder if you have, because you've done a lot, you've done so much cross-cultural collaboration, both in improvised music and composed music and as an improviser working within kind of composed frameworks and in more free environments and so on. So I wonder what kind of differences, what kinds of troubles do you face in those kinds of cross-cultural situations? What kind of differences between the improvisation that you learned throughout the course of your life, in a Korean traditional context or in a cross-cultural context, and between that kind of improvisation and between some of the other kinds of improvisation that you've encountered. Avant-garde

improvisation, or Indian improvisation. So all the different kinds of improvisation that you've encountered.

DWK: Well, whenever I have a chance to play music improvisation with a, in cross-cultural way, or... Anyway, whenever I have chance to play music improvisation, I try not to have any specific style, music style. I try not to follow or not to develop—no, not develop... not to plan, or not to define or describe this as avant-garde. I don't do that, I don't do that. For me, playing improvisation is about the real freedom, the real freedom, for me the real freedom means: I feel free when I'm aware of the beautiful combination between certainty and uncertainty of music. Not only the uncertainty. I'm not talking about, let's break any, let's break all the composed music. I'm not talking about that. It's totally the opposite. I'm talking about the harmony between certainty and uncertainty. So, and when I could do that, I feel really free. [...] But to do that, practically I really want to be familiar, get closer to the person, the other musicians. And to understand each other more, and then try to respect their music, their musical experience or their musical thought, and trying to learn their musical approach. And then, and then finally, I felt, oh we did something good. And then the audience or reviewers they said, they said, "Oh, it sounds something like this," but it's their business. I do not mean, my friends and I, we do not mean that specific style or something. We are really focusing on the [...] process of the music improvisation.

JP: Now I think the one thing that comes out of your conversations about the many conversations we've had about improvisation is the importance of listening and the importance of trying to listen in order to harmonize between, say between musicians, also to harmonize a kind of music to a kind of environment. And I wonder if you have found any kind of conflict with some improvisers who are more focused on what they want to express and some improvisers who are more interested in listening and in harmony.

DWK: That's right.

JP: If that has been an issue for you...

DWK: Oh yeah. It's actually one [...] priority. I believe that even if it is a music improviser or a composed music player, the good players, good musicians have to be able to communicate. Of course, playing music means expressing their musical ability, or musical mastery, or their emotions, all these things. So it's a kind of a basement. It's a very fundamental thing. But, it is not about shouting, "I'm here! Listen to me!" Not this one. How can I communicate with the audience, while I'm playing musical improvisations. [Sings] Yeah, I always try not to stay in the level of just showing, or just expressing.

JP: And the harmonizing, is the audience with certain aspects of certainty in music with your own body, with many things?

DWK: Yeah, with many things. Actually in Korean traditional music culture, music tradition, we call it breathing. We have this expression. You have to breathe the rhythm. Breathe the instrument. Breathe the melody. Breathe the audience. So the breathing, you really need to make harmony with the audience and your instrument, your music, all these things, not just expressing what you have practiced. Not this one. So that's why, again, I told you about one of the priority things as a musician is: how can I pour righteous vitality on every single note, every single sound, and to be responsible... And then after achieving that level of harmony, we feel, we usually feel the real satisfaction, not the masturbation-like satisfaction.

[Laughter]

JP: So, maybe not continuing in that particular...

[Laughter]

JP: But by way of connecting this with some of the other kinds of things we've heard about today: you've been talking about listening and understanding and these kinds of things. How do these musical processes, in your mind, relate to or become processes of cross-cultural understanding and these kinds of things?

DWK: Cross-cultural?

JP: Yeah, I mean when you are trying to understand another musician, or when you were trying to understand another person, you know, we are living in this kind of globalized world and we have all these kind of people contact, and you're a member of the Silk Road Ensemble and all of these international jazz ensembles. So to what extent is what you're doing an outcome of musical process of mutual understanding, and to what extent is it a kind of cultural process of mutually understanding each other, and each other's own histories, and cultures, and backgrounds, and hearts, and souls and that kind of thing?

DWK: For sure, one of the fundamental, one of the most fundamental things is learning their musical vocabulary or their musical— or history, or musical background, all these things practically. Learning all these things is one of the fundamental things, I think. So my music experience was really, how do you say, really rooted on Korean traditional music, but since I got a chance to play music improvisation with other musicians from all over the world, or from someone who's playing especially jazz, for example, I always try to listen to their musics, their previous musics. And then the secondary thing is, there is the inspiration, musical inspiration is everywhere. You can get musical inspiration from everywhere. But the question is: interpretation. How could you interpretate the inspiration into your own experience, or ability, or your music. This is, really, top priority question, at least for me. How can I interpretate the musical inspiration? It's like, like enjoying food. You know, I had a very delicious sandwich in downtown, what was it? Pulled pork sandwich? Yeah. Very delicious. And but, if I'm not able to digest the food, although I really enjoyed it, the taste, if I'm not able to digest it, it'll be nothing but poison in my stomach. So playing music improvisation on the stage without any composed plan, means I really have to be capable to respond immediately, which requires a constant, an instant interpretation or music digestion, and then I do something to harmonize my music with their music, something like that. So I really have to be creative. I really have to be creative. So yes, being creative is one of my keys to open the gate to music improvisation.

JP: I think looking at the tyranny of abstract time, here it is 3:52 and we've taken exactly as many minutes as we started late, and I wanted to do that, but I'm not sure if we need to stop now or if we could take a moment to have one or two questions?

RC: I think we could have a few questions. We'd probably have to make them quite brief so that we can get around to the library.

Audience Member 1: Hi, I'll try to make this brief. About the improvisation, and with the desperate mothers, and so on. You know, I've had family experience with trauma and things like that, and I know

in many traumatic experiences it's difficult to express your feelings in words, right? And sometimes, what can be more expressive is the sound— [DWK: That's right, that's right.] And I just wonder if there's a kind of connection in the sense of, you talk about certainty and uncertainty and so on, a kind of a sense that with these desperate mothers that there's a connection between singing and speaking. That you know in many ways are they kind of speaking what they can't say? You know? Or even in your own improvisation, you know, does that become a question, where you cannot express yourself in words and so this improvisation becomes a way of saying without language?

DWK: Uhhh, yeah. I'm not sure I can give you a right answer for that. But for example, personally, I have— I always notice that there is a limitation of language. So, you know, with a language you cannot express everything you want. So for example, when I do vocal improvisation, normally, mostly I don't sing any specific vocabularies. I don't speak, which means I just improvise the sounds by using mostly vowels, because you cannot sing the consonant without vowel. And then, it's also a very kind of traditional technique. When they express their, for example, sorrow. Without any specific language, or not language, speaking any specific sentence, or message. Just... [Sings to demonstrate.] You can feel, that person's vocalization, singing is like something between screaming and singing. You can feel that. Yeah. So, I think there isn't any boundary to express to do that kind of music improvisation. There is no boundary between language and music, and speaking and singing, and different types of emotions. No.

RC: We might have to just leave it there, but I know we are going to have more conversation as we go on this afternoon, and then we have the fantastic concert this evening as well. So please help me thank them. That was a fantastic interview.

[Applause]