

## Isang Yun



Isang Yun photo © Booseyprints

### The Dragon from Korea

\_by Walter-Wolfgang Sparrer

Isang Yun was the first composer from Eastern Asia to succeed in establishing an international career based in Germany. With the Seoul Cultural Prize in 1955, he received the most prestigious award conferred by his South Korean homeland. He used the prize money to travel the following year, in June 1956, to Paris, where he wanted to get to know the at that time latest compositional developments. Disappointed by what he received by way of instruction from Tony Aubin and Pierre Revel at the Conservatoire National de Musique, he went a year later, in July 1957, to West Berlin, where he was accepted into Boris Blacher's composition class at the College of Music. Blacher encouraged him to follow his own path, and from Josef Rufer, a pupil of Arnold Schoenberg's, he was able to learn the twelve-tone technique at the source, so to speak. While still in Korea, Yun had set himself the goal of combining the tradition of Eastern-Asian music with that of Western music composed to be performed in the concert hall. In the possibilities opened to him by the twelve-tone technique, he now saw the foundation for the development of his own, timeless musical language.

First performances in the then centers of the avant-garde strengthened his resolve to continue on his path: on 4 September 1959, the *Music for Seven Instruments* (1959) was premiered at the International Vacation Courses for New Music in Darmstadt; two days later, Herman Kruyt played the *Five Pieces for Piano* (1958), in which Yun compositionally drew upon the piano works of the Second Vienna School, for the first time during the Gaudeamus Muziekweek in Bilthoven. At the ISCM festival in Cologne in 1960, the legendary Novák Quartet from Prague, led by Dušan Pandula, premiered Yun's *String Quartet III* (1959). Pandula had heard Yun's *Music for Seven Instruments* in Darmstadt and henceforth championed Yun's music. The "Iron Curtain" was still permeable at that time. From the very beginning, Yun had outstanding interpreters who recognized the importance and intrinsic value of his music. In Darmstadt in 1961, Michael Gielen conducted the premiere of the *Symphonic Scenes* inspired by the painting style of Jackson Pollock; and Francis Travis directed that of the orchestral piece *Bara* in Berlin in 1962. The conductors of Yun's works have included Bruno Maderna, Heinz Holliger, Hans Zender, Zubin Mehta, Jesús López-Cobos, Myung-Whun Chung, and many more. It is hardly possible to list all the soloists who have mastered his very demanding scores.

The connection to the tradition of Chinese-Korean court music is very clear in *Loyang* for chamber ensemble (1962). Yun's individual style, which is indeed obliged to Eastern-Asian idioms, emerged in *Gasa* for violin and piano (1963) and in *Garak* for flute and piano (1963). In *Gasa* and *Garak*, he overlaid twelve-tone sound fields with a second, melodically dominated layer of (long sustained) main or central tones. Yun recognized this long sustained tone (or sound), which "is already life itself" and – flexible within itself – contains beats, colorings, dynamic nuances, and also ornaments (accentuated attacks, sub-beats, likewise emphasized decays), as an essential characteristic of the East-Asian tradition.

That he meticulously indicated in his scores the course of every individual tone center – Yun spoke of "main tones" – like the articulation of a word, was new in the history of music and created certain difficulties in the execution of his imaginatively delicate, and yet in no way merely playfully demanding ornamental music. The performers are compelled to become aware of the phrases that Yun strings together paratactically (this, too, is new in this abundance!), varies repeatedly, and derives contrastingly, as well as of larger formal contexts of ca. twenty to thirty measures: these are largely zones of soft dynamics, yet contained in them are almost always indications such as *mf*, *f*, and *ff* as tone passages, and *sf*, *sff*, or also *sfff* as short accents that begin with abrupt harshness. Yun's accents, which emulate the articulation of verbal language, are always *subito piano*, to be reduced to almost nothing before the original dynamic is continued. The dynamic specifications, too, have a different meaning than generally usual in European music: a crescendo hairpin in no way means a continuous increase, and a decrescendo hairpin in no way a continuous decrease in the intensity of the tone. On the contrary, a crescendo is to be implemented late, and a decrescendo as early as possible. "Asian" glissandi are also to be executed differently than those by Western composers: late and thus not uniformly as a continuous process, as seemingly suggested by the notation. The Asian glissando is rather a legato extension of the tone, either as a final sound fading into the indefinite or pressing forward to the next tone; the rhythm must remain distinguishable.

After the orchestral piece *Fluctuations* (1964), the premiere of *Réak* for large orchestra (1966), under the direction of Ernest Bour in Donaueschingen in 1966, marked the decisive international breakthrough. *Réak* is a work of self-discovery with respect to the stratification of the sound and the thinking in families of sound. In the vertical dimension of the composition, the harmony, Yun emulated the chordal structures and the tonal character of the East-Asian mouth organ. This main work of the 1960s is, on the one hand, a "composition of instrumental colors," that is to say, a piece of post-serial music for which the breathing, articulated organization of sound surfaces is characteristic. On the other hand, the Korean title has to be translated as "ceremonial music"; also compositionally, Yun's *Réak* points to the ancient Korean royal shrine music *Chongmyo-cheréak*.

In June 1967, a catastrophe of archaic violence occurred: simultaneously with other South-Korean citizens, Isang Yun and his wife were abducted from the Federal Republic of Germany and taken to Seoul, where Yun was tortured and accused of activity as a foreign agent for North Korea, which he had visited as a

tourist in 1963. "Activity as a foreign agent" probably has to be interpreted as "partisanship"; in any case, it did not have anything to do with espionage. For the military dictatorship in South Korea, which was instituted in May 1961 and lasted, depending of the point of view, until 1988 or 1992, it was a power-stabilizing measure that contributed to the weakening of the political opposition also within the country. Yun was the most prominent victim. Threatened with a death sentence, he was sentenced to life, upon appeal to fifteen years in prison, and ultimately, in the third instance in January 1969, to ten years imprisonment. After international protests and the efforts of his friends and the German Foreign Office, Yun was freed at the end of February, returning to West Berlin on 30 March 1969. Such diverse personalities as Igor Stravinsky, György Ligeti, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Bernd Alois Zimmermann, and Herbert von Karajan, but also the children of the Hamburg-Wellingsbüttel parish church campaigned for Yun's release.

In October 1967, Yun received permission to compose in his unheated prison cell. On 5 February 1968 he completed the score, started in Germany, of the opera *Butterfly* *Widow* (1967/68). *Riul* ("law"), for clarinet and piano, and *Images*, for flute, oboe, violin, and violoncello, were composed while under guard in a hospital after a suspended sentence for health reasons. The reference, associated with *Images*, to the frescos of the large tomb of Kangso from the Korean Koguryo dynasty became the symbol of his equivocal aesthetics. The fresco on the west side of this tomb from the sixth/seventh century shows a white tiger; interwoven in the tiger are three further mythological figures that are supposed to protect the soul of the deceased: a black tortoise with a snake, a blue dragon, and a red phoenix. In this illustration, Isang Yun found a multiplicity that simultaneously formed a unity, an iconographical legitimation for compositional strategies that he referred to as "Taoist" (as transformation states of Ying und Yang) and as "monistic" (as unified stream of sound).

For the musical theater, Yun composed four works on East-Asian mythological subjects. The double opera *Dreams – The Dream of Lui-Tung* (1965) and *Butterfly* *Widow* (1967/68) – was produced in 1969 in Nuremberg, followed by Berlin and Frankfurt am Main, in 1970 in Munich, and in 1972 in Vienna. The grand opera *Love of Spirits* (1969/70) experienced its premiere in Kiel in 1971 under Hans Zender. Wolfgang Sawallisch conducted the premiere of *Sim Tjong* (1971/72) within the framework of the cultural program of the 1972 Olympics in Munich. With the exception of *Liu-Tung*, Yun's publisher and friend Harald Kunz wrote the librettos.

Yun soon also took recourse to texts of European provenance, setting sonnets by Albrecht Haushofer, whom the Nazis murdered in Berlin during the last days of their rule, in the cantata *An der Schwelle* (1975), texts by Nelly Sachs in the solo cantata *Teile dich Nacht* (1980), in the choral works *Der Herr ist mein Hirt* (1981) and *O Licht ...* (1981), and again later in the Symphony No. 5, the "Peace Symphony," for high baritone and large orchestra (1987).

*Namo* for three sopranos and large orchestra (1971) was a song of thanks after his release. He dealt with the trauma of his imprisonment in the autobiographically motivated Concerto for violoncello and orchestra (1975/76). This was followed by important and frequently performed instrumental concertos such as the Double

Concerto for oboe and harp (1977), the Concertos for flute (1978), clarinet (1981), and oboe (1990), and three Violin Concertos (1981, 1983/84, 1992). In between, there were original orchestral pieces as, for example, the "dance fantasy" *Muak* (1978) in which Yun juxtaposes an imaginary, rhythmic-accented ballet music, informed by his occupation with Stravinsky, with a second "Asian" orchestral group dominated by the sound of the oboes.

Yun grew. His Violin Concerto No. 1 (1981) in three movements follows Classical-Romantic models, as does the Symphony No. 1 (1982/83), which was premiered by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. He filled the contours of seemingly depleted genres with his own idioms, whereby he increasingly replaced the twelve-tone tonal images with those of layered thirds (along with dissonant additional tones). This played a subordinate role in his linear compositional thinking, for which articulation and timbre were essential factors, but created new challenges for the performing musician.

Isang Yun was born on 17 September 1917 near Sancheong Gun, and grew up in Tongyeong. When his mother was pregnant, she dreamt of a dragon hovering in the clouds over the holy Jiri Mountain. However, it did not ascend to heaven, for it was wounded – the sign of a significant, but hard destiny. In South Korea, one took offense that Isang Yun, who was a German citizen from 1971 and persona non grata in South Korea up to the end of his life, traveled starting in the 1980s to North Korea for performances of his works, in order to acquaint the musicians there with his works and to open up the isolated country culturally. Disappointed by North and South Korea, he died in Berlin on 3 November 1995. In his hometown of Tongyeong, the Tongyeong Music Festival "in memoriam Isang Yun" was founded in 2000. Meanwhile, interpretation and composition competitions in Tongyeong and Seoul, respectively, bear his name.

(translation: Howard Weiner)