

BY HAN LEE

# Korea's first original soundtrack

**SOPYONJE —  
FILM SOUNDTRACK**  
Nices Samsung 1994  
SCO-046KSC (Korean import)

One evening when I was 17, I was lured from my house by a mysterious sound. At first, it sounded like a rhythmic heavy pounding. It was dark, and the moon was dimly shining through a dense fog. A bonfire flickered. I could barely make it out in the early evening's near total darkness. There was a tall hedge between me and the sound. As I drew nearer to the source of the pounding, I also heard a song. I arrived on the scene and found out that preparations were ongoing for a new house, and the villagers were pounding the ground to establish a solid foundation for it. A heavy rock was harnessed with a network of ropes so that a couple dozen folks in a circle could hoist and release it onto the ground. They moved around with the rock and apparatus in order to cover the whole area of construction. The work was done in pace with their breathing, a singer calling out a line at a time to the workers, and the workers answering back and adding a chorus at the end of each verse.

It was the singing that shook me to the core. I was a tender adolescent, whose musical training was in *bel canto* tradition, full of tricky techniques. I had never heard anyone sing with his soul and with his entire being. Through an ancient voice, the singer put the fullness of his life experiences into the song. That evening for the first time, I realized how it is not technical mastery that makes music meaningful, but rather a commitment to put one's life experiences into one's music. Yes, his voice was ragged, raspy, yet, there was a joy that was unmistakably overflowing, and every bit of labor was lightened in the joy.

Once I was presenting a few dozen slides on traditional Korean architecture. One of the architects in the audience asked me how I "crit" (jargon for evaluate, or give criticism to) those buildings. My answer: I simply praise them.

*Sopyonje* (I would have phoneticized it *su-pyun-je*) was one of the rare Korean movies that enjoyed modest international recognition. The soundtrack in CD format is known by the same title. Yoobong, the hero of the movie, explains to his adopted daughter, Songhwa, in

track 10, "If one can say *dongpyun-je* (style of singing) is heavy, and clear at the end, it is also said that *su-pyun-je* is sentimental and full of emotions. However, once you overcome your *han* (a Korean word that defies translation, could mean unattainable dreams, bitter regrets, injustice of the world, etc.), there is neither *dongpyun-je*, nor *su-pyun-je*. What remains there, is the attainment of music..."

Movie music is somewhat different from pure music. Tracks one and nine are entitled Chun-ryunhak, perhaps meaning a thousand-year-old crane. In track one, the daegeum flute is accompanied by an orchestra, which I think is all right for a movie effect. But in track 9, which is the same music played on the daegeum flute alone, you soon realize how stifling the orchestra is to the solo instrument. Even though the orchestra's mighty strings swell into moving crescendo, it is not so powerful or moving as what the coloration and timber of the bamboo flute renders.

Tracks two and five should be heard as a pair. They are both Jindo Arirang. In two, Yoobong teaches Songhwa and his son the basic



singing technique, which is vastly different from the *bel canto* or any other western standard of music. So how does one understand this strange music? (My answer would have been "with praise.") I think it should start with the love of Korea, and strong interest in the Korean spirit. And then some hard listening. Soon one can hear the melody, the inflections, and the emotional depths. And this will be a new world, unlike any other you have ever known. Don't give up. Start right here. It is worth the trouble.

Samples of *pansori* (It is not a grand opera, sung by one singer, as some Westerners suggested. It is rather a highly stylized singing pre-

sentation of a story.) are on tracks six (The Prison Scene from Choonhyangga, or Song of Lady Spring Fragrance) and 11 (Two Scenes from Shimchungga). Track 11 has been abridged too abruptly. One moment you hear Shimchung throwing herself into the raging sea to make her father regain his sight, and the next, Shimchung and her father are reconciling at a party. The unabridged version should be heard to really to appreciate the music.

Samples of *chang* (song) are in tracks four and eight. Track four is sung by Songhwa, while entertaining men at a party, and eight is sung by Yoobong as they move into an abandoned house in a remote mountain area. *Han* is very well expressed in these two songs.

NOTE: It might help to view the movie before listening to the CD. I understand that the video tape is available at some Korean grocery stores locally (and probably in other large cities). ●