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Learning Contemporary P'ansori Pieces by Atherton and Lee: a performer's perspective

Lotte Latukefu

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate issues that arose during the preparation for performance of two compositions commissioned for the 2008 Aurora Festival *Chun-Hyang Ka*, by Lee and *Oku Ou Talanoa Mo Hoku Loto*, by Atherton. Both of these pieces began with P'ansori performance as the basis on which to write their music. While Lee chose a traditional P'ansori story and incorporated rhythms and style typical of traditional P'ansori, Atherton maintained the P'ansori framework of singer and drummer on stage, but chose a poem from Tonga, which reflected my own background. The discussion considers four of the attributes identified by Shin Chae-hyo, a nineteenth century supporter and patron of Korean P'ansori, as necessary for P'ansori performances, namely: presence, narrative, vocal attainment and dramatic gestures (Auh, 2005) and considers how these attributes can be transferred to the contemporary songs of Lee and Atherton. It also explores, which vocal techniques used in traditional P'ansori singing might be employed by a singer trained in *bel canto* style of singing. Killick (2003) describes P'ansori singing style as '(ch'ang) a distinctly husky and emotionally intense vocal timbre and stylised speech (aniri) (p. 45)'. The vocal technique that produces the husky timbre is called *pressed-type* singing and while in European style singing the ventricular folds and true vocal folds vibrate, in certain styles of pressed singing the vocal folds only approximate, but do not vibrate thereby giving a rough pressed sound to the voice (Sakakibara, Imagawa, Niimi, & Osaka, 2003). I chose not to employ this technique in performing Lee and Atherton's

songs but there were other vocal and musical techniques that were also common to P'ansori performances, such as *glissando* and *oscillation* in pitch, which I used. Finally the paper discusses some of the issues of interpretation and performance and how I approached the interpretation of Asian and Pacific- influenced music when my own training had been entirely from the European tradition of *bel canto* and Western operatic traditions.

Attributes of Korean P'ansori Singing

One of the early patrons of P'ansori music was the Korean musician, Shin Chae-hyo. He was a commoner whose family had managed to amass a fortune and he used his financial resources to patronise the P'ansori singers. He also directed performances, worked on P'ansori theory and revised P'ansori libretti (Pihl, 1994) It was Shin who identified and ranked the four major attributes¹ of a P'ansori singer in a poem he composed called Kwandae ka:

How delightful is the *kwandae's* way of life,
But how truly difficult!
The first requirement for a *kwandae* is good looks,
The second is outstanding skill in narration,
And the third musical talent and dramatic ability.
Dramatic ability means to be full of life and grace:
Numerous changes in an instant—
At one minute a fairy, the next a ghost;
He'll make his audience laugh and cry—
The brave as well as the emotional, both men and women, old and young,
Dramatic ability is indeed the most difficult of all.
Musical talent means the ability to distinguish the five tones,
To manipulate the six pitches, and
To sing by means of voice control from the body.
This too is a hard thing to do.
Narrative skill means to tell a story as clearly as fine gold and beautiful jade,
To make it beautiful by embroidering it with flowers,
As if a pretty girl adorned with the seven treasures were to emerge from behind
A screen,
Or the full moon from behind a cloud;
To make (the audience) laugh with his eyes.
Good looks are inborn,
And can't be changed.

These are the requirements for P'ansori singers. Kwandae Song in Pratt (1987, pp. 103-4)

Presence was ranked first in the list of attributes. A P'ansori singer needed a commanding and effective stage presence, which caused Pihl (1994) to comment that Shin must have regarded the P'ansori performer as primarily an actor, and therefore the performance as having to be highly theatrical.

This gave some interesting hints about the need to develop the Lee and Atherton pieces in a theatrical way. In both pieces there is only one performer and a percussionist so the theatricality must come from the interpretation of the character and the text, combined with the music. The distinction between the narrator and the character must also be made very clear. Both Lee and Atherton have maintained the framework of a narrator speaking and then a character singing.

In an experiment conducted by Davidson (1993) on visual perception of performance manner in solo instrumentalists, it was suggested that 'vision can be more informative than sound in the perceiver's understanding of the performer's expressive intentions (p. 112)'. Any aid to the understanding of the performer's intentions is important when singing bilingually, which is the case in both Lee's and Atherton's compositions. The use of gesture and facial expressions should assist the audience in understanding the songs. In a different research project that compared audio and audiovisual ratings of college level singers, researchers found that the audiovisual ratings were higher (Wapnick, Darrow, Kovacs, & Dalrymple, 1997). P'ansori calls for a visually expressive performance and in the compositions by Lee and Atherton there is an implicit agreement with this by the choice of text and the style of writing.

Narrative, the second ranked attribute according to Shin, must be elegant and clear. In traditional P'ansori it can take up to four or five hours for the narrative to unfold. The imagery Shin uses in his poem, such as the full moon emerging from behind a cloud, emphasises this luxury of time in which the story can be slowly and teasingly unfolded. While Lee chose to use a traditional P'ansori story, the narrative had to be distilled into three very short scenes. From the perspective of the performer, this made it difficult to find ways of telling the story without making it sound too simplistic. Atherton's use of poetry and images meant that the imagery could convey meaning to the audience in fewer words, but it also made it more difficult to dramatically communicate the meaning and intention of the piece. Both composers used the device of spoken voice in their compositions, Lee as a way of directing the narrative and Atherton in order to allow the non-Tongan speaking members of the audience access to the meaning of the sung text.

The last two requirements Shin had of a P'ansori singer were **musical** and **dramatic talent**. Shin advised that the performer needed, 'to sing by means of voice control from the body' (Pratt, 1987, p. 251). This is exactly the sort of advice that I give my vocal students. Fine motor control of the throat mechanisms and engagement of the body in supporting sound is important whether using *pressed singing* or *bel canto* (Chapman, 2006; Kayes, 2004; Miller, 1986).

During the preparation of these pieces, I sought advice from Dr Myung-sook Auh of the University of New England.² I had been reflecting in my performance journal.

What will happen to the character of the P'ansori if I sing it as a trained opera singer? Yet if I don't bring that training to the piece what do I bring? I will need to explore different timbres with my voice that still draw on the training, but without sounding like a Western trained opera singer who has given no thought to the origin of P'ansori.

Bruce and Jun keep telling me that it is a contemporary piece influenced by P'ansori, but not a copy of P'ansori, so does this in fact give me a warrant to do what I like? Or am I bringing power and authority from Western traditions to try and usurp the Korean flavour as if it is less worthy than what I consider to be normal?

How will a Korean person react to this? (Author's Journal, December 2007)

Dr Auh reassured me that the piece did not warrant a P'ansori singer and warned me not to attempt to sing in a P'ansori style. She explained that the P'ansori style of pressed singing is a specialised technique that takes many years to learn properly and that a singer attempting to imitate pressed singing without correct training would simply end up with a damaged voice. The Korean author Chong No-sik in his biographical sketches frequently tells of 'learners who not only sang themselves hoarse, but who vocalised in the wilderness or challenged the sound of a waterfall to produce voices of great power, often pushing themselves to the point of spitting up blood in the process' (Pihl, 1994, pp. 104-105) The vocal technique that produces the husky timbre is called *pressed-type* singing and while in European style singing the ventricular folds and true vocal folds vibrate, in certain styles of *pressed singing* the vocal folds only approximate, but do not vibrate (Sakakibara, Imagawa, Niimi, & Osaka, 2003). Dr Auh played me a number of recordings of P'ansori singing and I could hear exactly what was meant by pressed singing style. However I also became aware, as I listened to the voices, that they possessed an incredible mastery of the fine motor skills that are required to perform so many extreme techniques in a manner that was flowing and lyrical as well as incredibly moving or funny. The vocal range was quite extensive and while in chest voice the voice often sounded hoarse or pressed, it would suddenly soar up into a beautiful head voice and then *glissando* down onto a long note that would oscillate between two notes in a manner I found entrancing. I thought that the *glissandos* and oscillation on long notes were something I could definitely introduce into my own singing of Lee's piece.

Vibration and oscillation of pitch can be achieved in two different ways. The first is produced by the cricothyroid muscle and this is the vibrato used in operatic singing. The second type of vibrato is intensity vibrato which is produced by variations of subglottal pressure that modulates the amplitude of the voice source (Edgerton, 2004). In the present case I chose to use a slow wide vibration using the pitch raising cricothyroid muscle in order to oscillate around a central note and even sometimes trying to broaden the vibrato enough to oscillate between two notes. I had already decided that I would not even attempt to try any *pressed singing*.

The dramatic challenges came from the quick changes required to move between the role of narrator and character or between speaker and singer and will be discussed in further detail later on in the paper.

Ch'un-Hyang Ka by Jy-un Lee

Lee's song is an interpretation of the P'ansori music to which she was exposed in Korea as a child.

Lee followed the traditional P'ansori arrangement of solo singers plus drummer, alternating between spoken text to develop the story line and songs that are sung by the character Ch'un-Hyang. There was some discussion between Lee and myself as to how to achieve more drama in the spoken text and still be able to use the rhythms that she wanted in the spoken sections. I did not expect an Australian audience to have prior knowledge of the story, or the emotional attachment to it, in the same way as a Korean audience for whom this plot is very familiar. We compromised, with Lee writing out some rhythms she thought were essential for the P'ansori feel and with me incorporating these throughout the narrative sections wherever appropriate. Claire Edwardes who collaborated as percussionist in the performance and recording of the piece also found that this was a section where she could improvise using the framework and instruments suggested in the score in order to emphasise the dramatic narrative. This improvisation enabled me to use the declamatory style of the P'ansori narrator in some parts and then switch to a more naturalistic narrative style in order to increase the emotional intensity of the story.

Lee's main rhythmic effect was the use of *acciaccaturas*, which makes the pulse seem unsteady and challenges the performer to continuously begin bars before the beat. This effect was very helpful in portraying how unbalanced Chun-Hyang felt throughout the entire piece. In my interpretation the *acciaccaturas* became a vehicle for conveying Chun-Hyang's loss of balance from her changing circumstances, particularly her emotional reactions to love, loss, relief and joy and the physical horror of torture.

Example 1 *Acciaccaturas* in *Ch'un-Hyang Ka*, Bars 59-61

The image shows a musical score for two parts: Mezzo and Perc. The Mezzo part is in 4/4 time and spans bars 59 to 61. The lyrics are: "nam-pyun - dai - su - shi - - - - - doe - oh - nwe - nom - ie - mang - - - - - chae -". The dynamics are marked as *sfz* in bar 59, *sfz* in bar 60, and *mp* in bar 61. The Perc. part is in 4/4 time and spans bars 59 to 61. It includes instructions for "Crotales (brass rattle) 1.v" and "[wooden stick]".

Lee had been influenced by the rhythms used in traditional P'ansori singing. There is an element of improvisation in the performance of traditional P'ansori, but Lee was very precise in indicating the rhythmic notation. I found it difficult to keep to the strict rhythms and still manage to communicate the dramatic thought processes of the character. I wrote in my performance journal:

Had my first rehearsal with Claire and Jiyun, which was a bit intimidating. I think I just expected that Claire would accommodate my being a bit loose with the rhythms so that the drama could shine through. Instead she absolutely expected me to be as rhythmically precise as she is. It really made me lift my game and the amazing thing was that as soon as I did that, Jiyun's rhythms and acciaccaturas made the drama much more real than anything I was trying to do. (Author's Journal, March 2008)

The second section of the piece when Ch'un-Hyang was in gaol and being beaten for refusing to become the governor's concubine contains some very beautiful melodic phrases. Rather than singing them in a rich and beautiful tone, I made a choice that seemed appropriate to the text. The phrases became breathy and fractured, the sound of someone struggling to retain their integrity and love in the face of torture and beatings. Lee's reaction to this was very positive and she confirmed my own ideas that the piece needed to be theatrical and dramatic.

While Lee had indicated throughout the piece the need for use of wider vibrato, I felt that artistically it was more dramatic to save this till the final scene when Chun-Hyang was overcome with happiness at finding out Mong Yong was the new judge and she would not be sentenced to death. There is a feeling of wild uncontained joy that fills her broken and bloodied body and which can be expressed through the oscillation in pitch by using wide and expressive vibrato. I also chose to syncopate the rhythmic oscillation in order to give the sense of her emotions dancing. It was very satisfying to work closely with the composer and allow changes that we both agreed on, to occur organically in the piece.

Example 2 Ch'un-Hyang Ka, Bars 119-121

The musical score for Example 2, Ch'un-Hyang Ka, Bars 119-121, is presented in two systems. The first system is for the Mezzo-soprano (Mezzo) and features a vocal line in 4/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Joyfully' with a metronome marking of 68. The lyrics are 'Noi - - - la - - - wet - la - - - ah - ah - - -'. The second system is for the Percussion (Perc.) and includes the rhythmic accompaniment. The percussion part is marked with dynamic levels such as *pp*, *mf*, and *p*, and includes specific instructions for 'metal stick' and 'soft stick' techniques. The score shows a complex rhythmic pattern with syncopation and dynamic shifts.

Oku Ou Talanoa Mo Hoku Loto by Michael Atherton

My involvement with Atherton's composition began before it was written. This was a new experience as mostly I am presented with the completed piece and my work starts with its analysis and performance. Instead, in this instance there was some collaboration in the choice of the poem and discussion about whether or not to use Tongan poetry. There are some parallels between Korean P'ansori traditions and Tongan oratory, which is the medium Tongans use to express extreme emotions. According to Kaeppler (1993), the task of the Tongan orator is to make people laugh and especially to weep. If we refer back to Shin's poem he writes that one of the requirements of a good P'ansori singer is the ability to make the audience laugh or cry. Michael Atherton and I read through a range of Tongan poems in order to choose one that would be suitable for the composition and I was immediately attracted to a poem that had a strong female character as the narrator. The poem composed by 'Okusitino Mahina after the death of the Maori Queen celebrates, 'her unique royal trappings and great social achievements as an exceptional Maori heroine' (Mahina in Atherton, M., 2008).

One of my tasks as a performer is to use my imagination to embody the character of a piece that is to be performed. There are also life experiences that one has over time that may also contribute to the range of expression that is used. My personal background has provided me with multiple identities. I am part Tongan/Methodist, part German/Jewish. I was brought up in Papua New Guinea where I initially attended an experimental primary school, which included both Papua New Guinean and expatriate students. I am aware that my body and voice adapt according to the situation I am in. If I am in Tonga with my family I speak English with a rhythm that more resembles the way Tongans speak. The traditional female dress, with a ceremonial mat (Kiekie or Taovala) worn over it, also affects the way one holds one's body and I immediately adopt a different body posture. When I am about to step onto a concert stage for a recital, I can feel my body changing in reaction to the situation. It becomes more energised, more upright in posture, more confident and open as I try to engage with the audience.

Atherton used a very recognisable traditional Tongan rhythm and melodic shape in the piece.

Example 3 *Oku Ou Talanoa mo Hoku Loto*, Bars 82-86

E $\text{♩} = 45$

Pe-a-ma-he'a he 'ea'oe nga-lu ta-la mei Ton-ga ki To-ke-lau...

pe-a lo-ka tau He ru-'uu-ga ia 'e-te tau-gi lau-lau

As I was beginning to learn it, a physical reaction took place in my body. I could feel myself becoming more Tongan. I wanted to make certain gestures of Tongan dance that I remembered, from having seen so many of these dances. My vocal timbre instinctively changed and I used much more chest voice than I normally would in bel canto singing. I decided that I would try to reproduce this effect each time I sang the piece.

The main challenge with Atherton's piece was to work out how to shape the piece, because although there is a very strong sense of narrative throughout the piece, the alternation between spoken sections and sung sections and the minimalist quality of Tongan traditional rhythm and melodic line meant it was easy to fall into the trap of treating each section separately. While there was shape within each individual section, there was no sense of the poem as a whole building towards a climax and then an ending. This was something that had to be rehearsed and agreed on with the performers and I can imagine that each time this piece is performed with different performers this interpretation will change.

Interpreting Asian and Pacific-Influenced Music

I can recall that in the final year of high school in 1984, I made an appointment to see the head of singing at the Canberra School of Music to enquire about how to apply for a Preparatory Course that was being offered and he asked me to sing something for him. I chose to sing a Maori chant that had been the most popular piece in my Papua New Guinea High school cultural group's repertoire. It was full throated and passionate and I sang with all my strength to try and impress him and his wife, a noted pianist and vocal coach. They were intrigued, but asked me to learn something more classical for the audition that was to be held in three weeks. Then they gave me the name of a pianist who would help me learn the songs and told me to return for the audition.

For years afterwards I felt ashamed of having performed a Maori chant for them. I learnt to impose a cultural hierarchy onto music, in which European and Western opera traditions were at the top of the ladder and all my Pacific Island traditional performance at the bottom. This became more and more entrenched as I spent many years in training to become an opera singer. Now I was experiencing concern about appropriating a traditional music style and interpreting it through the lens of a European trained opera singer.

I was relieved to find that P'ansori had a history of transformation. Korea had never had a tradition of opera, but it had however had P'ansori singing. This slowly evolved when theatre came to Korea, adding orchestras, costumes and stage scenery until it became known as Korean traditional opera. Another transformation that happened during the nineteenth century was the training of female P'ansori singers who began to dominate the previously male art form (Killick, 2003). De Bruin coined the phrase hybrid-popular drama, which is a result of contact between Indigenous and Western theatre practice (Bruin de, 2000). Atherton's composition with its use of Korean P'ansori and traditional Tongan music is also a hybrid style and reflects the intercultural theme of the conference as well as adding to the body of work sharing Pacific, Asian and Western cultures. Shin's words of wisdom on the requirements of a P'ansori singer are not just relevant to a nineteenth century Korean singer. They are required of any performer, in any style. In the end we all need to tell a story as clearly as fine gold and beautiful jade.