

Variations on a Korean Folk Song by John Barnes Chance



John Barnes Chance

Biography

John Barnes Chance (November 20, 1932 – August 16, 1972) was born in Beaumont, Texas. His first formal musical training was at the piano with Jewell Harned. He played percussion in the high school orchestra and also studied composition at age 15. He went on to receive both Bachelor and Master of Music degrees from the University of Texas. At Texas, his composition teachers included Kent Kennan and Clifton Williams. Before he became a full time composer he performed as a timpanist with the Austin Symphony and as arranger for the Fourth and Eighth United States Army Bands. Between 1960 and 1962, he was composer-in-residence in the Greensboro, North Carolina public school system at Greensboro Senior High School, (now Grimsley Senior High School). This appointment was part of the Ford Foundation Young Composers Project. Starting in the fall of 1966, he was professor of composition at the University of Kentucky. In 1971 he was made head of Theory and Composition. John Barnes Chance died by electrocution in a bizarre gardening accident in 1972. He and his wife Linda had two children. Five of Chance's 20 compositions have been published: *Blue Lake Overture*, *Elegy*, *Incantation and Dance*, *Symphony No. 2*, and *Variations on a Korean Folk Song*.

Historical Background of Piece

Variations on a Korean Folk Song is based on a folk song entitled "Arirang" (pronounced AH-dee-dong). *Arirang*, to some, is considered the *unofficial* National Anthem of Korea.

In reference to this work, Chance wrote: "I became acquainted with the folk song while serving in Seoul, Korea, as a member of the Eighth U.S. Army Band in 1958-59. The tune is not as simple as it sounds, and my fascination with it during the intervening years led to its eventual use as the theme for this set of variations." *Arirang* has historically been most popular in Korea when the country has been in a state of crisis. is an ancient native Korean word with no direct modern meaning. However, 'Ari' means "beautiful." 'Rang' can mean "dear". Because of those words, *arirang* could be interpreted to mean "beautiful dear." The song has many verses with a constant refrain.

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The following is a rough literal translation into English:

Refrain:

Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo
Crossing over Arirang Pass.
Dear who abandoned me her
Will not walk even three miles before his/her feet hurt.

Verses:

Just as there are many stars in the clear sky,
There are also many dreams in our heart.
There, over there that mountain is Baekdu Mountain,
Where, even in the middle of winter days, flowers bloom.

The song tells a story of a man about to leave his girlfriend who has pain in her heart. As he leaves for a long journey, she is upset that he will not let her accompany him on his travels. Chance wrote *Variations on a Korean Folk Song* in 1965. He won the 1966 American Bandmasters Association Ostwald Award for composing the work.

Stylistic and Performance Practice

Some pieces played by modern wind bands are transcriptions from other genres such as orchestral, choral, and keyboard music. Because *Variations on a Korean Folk Song* is an original work for band, we know that Chance had the instrumentation and the sound of a wind band in mind as he composed this work. It is scored for a full modern wind band with a minimum of 6 percussionists. One of the strengths and challenges of this music is that it requires from all players both very expressive (especially from the solo oboe and trumpet) and technical rhythmic playing (especially during the 2nd and 5th variations) is one of many original works for band that have become standard repertoire. The piece is 262 measures in length and takes about 7-8 minutes to perform.

Compositional Techniques and Musical Elements

Melody:

A large body of original wind band literature is composed using folk songs from different cultures. Many other prominent composers such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, and Percy Grainger are known for their abundant use of folk songs as sources for their compositions. Chance uses the popular Korean melody *Arirang* as the main thematic material or melody for *Variations on a Korean Folk Song*. The melody or theme is first presented in its unadorned state by the clarinets starting with measure 1. (Concert pitch):



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The melody is based on the Major Pentatonic Scale. In this case the notes are: Eb-F-Ab-Bb-C, (may be viewed as Ab Major). The prefix penta means five; thus a pentatonic scale is any scale comprised of five notes. One way to think about it is the major scale with the 4th and 7th scale degrees removed. For example, a C Major Pentatonic Scale would look like this:



Form:

Theme and variations is a centuries old compositional technique. Composers have employed this technique in their works for band since Pangaea was a continent. As the title suggests, Chance uses this common technique in *Variations on a Korean Folk Song*. After the first statements of the theme, (mm. 1-32) there are 5 successive variations, each portraying the melody in a unique way. The start of each variation is marked by a double bar and a new tempo marking. A brief skeleton outline is as follows:

Statement of Theme (Con Moto) – m.1

Unadorned melody

Variation I (Vivace) – m.38

The theme is sixteenth notes played in canon.

Variation II (Larghetto) – m.78

Theme is inverted

Variation III (Allegro con Brio) – m.116

Style change to a 6/8 March

Variation IV (Sostenuto) (3/2 time) – m.183

Theme is presented as a Chorale with driving timpani accompaniment

Variation V (Con Isancio) – m.199

Percussion intro followed by polymetric theme between woodwinds and brass

There is a potentially limitless amount of techniques that composers may use for their variations. Variations often include manipulation of rhythmic values such as augmentation or diminution, melodic embellishment, meter, accompaniment, canon, mode, or any other number of alterations. William Schuman's *Chester* (1957) and Norman Dello Joio's *Variants on a Medieval Tune* (1963) are two other well-known exceptional works for band that use theme and variation form.

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Rhythm:

Rhythm is an important element in *Variations on a Korean Folk Song*. It is one of the most exciting and driving features of this composition. Chance varies the simple rhythm of “Arirang” in many ways:

The **1st variation** transforms the theme into a series of rapid fire sixteenth notes. The melodic contour remains intact, but the character is changed from flowing and calm to a fragmented flourish. He then enhances the rhythmic excitement by presenting the new form of the melody in canon. This means that the second entrance of the theme enters before the first is finished; as in a round like *Row, Row, Row, Your Boat*. The combination of these two elements creates a very exciting first variation. The piece even ends with a quote of this rhythmic pattern.

The **3rd variation** also incorporates rhythmic variety. The accompaniment pattern is changed to a bouncy march feel driven by the low brass. The melody, now altered and embellished to fit the 6/8 march is presented by the trumpets. The woodwinds accent the melody with snare drum-like grace note rips.

In the **4th variation**, Chance presents the melody in 3/2 time with the wind section. This setting is very reminiscent of a traditional Bach chorale; however, the harmonies are slightly chromatic. This chorale is juxtaposed on top of a driving triplet rhythm timpani ostinato (repeated pattern).

The **5th and final variation** is possibly the most rhythmically complex and challenging. After the percussion introduction the second part of the theme is played in canon by the upper woodwinds. This part is felt as notated in $\frac{3}{4}$. This wouldn't be a problem except for the brass. At the same time, they are playing a chorale version of the melody in a rhythmic augmentation $1\frac{1}{2}$ times longer than the original. This combination of two meters at once is known as polyrhythm.