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The New York Philharmonic in North Korea. A New Page in US-DPRK Relations?

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The New York Philharmonic Orchestra performed in North Korea on February 25 to much international attention -- and controversy. When news of an invitation from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, the official name of North Korea) surfaced last fall, it ignited a storm of North Korea-bashing as well as hope in some quarters for a breakthrough in DPRK-US relations modeled on the ping pong diplomacy that jump-started US-China relations earlier. The media coverage of the event recapitulated the regime change vs. engagement debates argued in the security realm. After examining the background to the events in Pyongyang, this article assesses Western responses to the proposed visit and its potential significance for the US-North Korea relationship.

The 400 visitors to Pyongyang constituted the largest group of Americans to visit North Korea since the end of the Korean War. Along with 105 orchestra members, were 80 journalists, and hundreds of staff, family members, and high-profile guests. The logistics challenged not only the symphony but also the U.S. Department of State, the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang, The Korea Society in New York, and South Korean businessmen. Much of the cost was underwritten by the Japanese Italian philanthropist Yoko Nagae Ceschina. For its part, North Korea completed substantial modifications of the concert hall. Barbara Demick of the Los Angeles Times detailed some of the moving parts that made the concert possible at a cost of $950,000 exclusive of the players' salaries: 15 climate controlled trucks and gasoline from South Korea and a specially outfitted 747, courtesy of the friendship between the orchestra's president and executive director Zarin Mehta, and Park Sam-koo, the head of South Korea's Asiana Airlines, which provided the craft.

Korean dancers welcome the New York Philharmonic

If some critics had had their way, the concert would never have taken place. As soon as word of the event surfaced, proponents of isolation and regime change in North Korea warned against handing North Korea a "public relations coup." Two of the most prominent, Richard Allen and Chuck Downs, argued in the New York Times that "Any outsider who reaches out to the suffering millions in North Korea must be cautious not to worsen their oppression." Their October 28, 2007 op-ed echoed Suzanne Scholte's 2006 warning that The Purpose Driven Life-author Rick Warren's planned trip to North Korea would "put the true church at risk and would be used as a propaganda piece by the Kim Jong-il regime." (North Korea later withdrew the invitation).

Allen and Downs proposed a number of conditions that would have to be met in order for the Philharmonic to accept the invitation: the orchestra should have sole control of the program; the performance must be broadcast, and the Western press must be allowed to attend. "Sole control" of the program was not granted – is that ever the case?—but the other items had already been settled prior to the publicly delivered advice. The concert was broadcast throughout North Korea not only on TV, but also on radio, the latter being more common in North Korean homes.

Allen and Downs offered their personal assessment of North Korea's musical culture. They (incorrectly) claimed that "concerts in North Korea are limited to performances of music that Kim Jong-il himself is (falsely) credited with having written or at least approved" and disdainfully prophesied that the orchestra would be asked to play nothing but Korean folk songs.

The contempt for Korean music was repeated by Wall Street Journal reviewer Terry Teachout, who determined that the NYPO shouldn't perform in the DPRK because of a mixture of concern about human rights and his evaluation of their musical taste. Whatever his intention, Teachout comes across more as a music snob than a humanitarian. Referring to a New York Times story discussing the potential trip, he sneered "unnamed Philharmonic officials admitted that the apparatchiks who run North Korea's State Symphony Orchestra "did not appear overly familiar with Western classical composers." (They go in for folk songs)."

Teachout credits Van Cliburn's 1958 visit to the USSR, where he won a Tchaikovsky Competition, with "teaching a generation of Russians that there was more to America than what they read in the pages of Pravda," then concludes with a heroic leap, "thus helping to bring about the ultimate collapse of communism." According to Teachout, however, Moscow in 1958 and Pyongyang in 2008 are not comparable, because the USSR celebrated classical music and "North Korea, by contrast, does not have anything remotely resembling a serious musical culture," and ordinary people don't attend concerts.

Commentators like Allen, Downs and Teachout, in their contempt for North Korean musical culture and isolation, ignore important

aspects of the DPRK's expanding exchanges with other countries as well as the fact that legitimate North Korean security concerns have been one factor in limiting its interactions with other nations. Growing North-South cultural relations are particularly important. The inter-Korean symphony concert in August 2000 was jointly broadcast in North and South Korea. Popular South Korean pop groups such as Shinhwa and Baby V.O.X. have performed their own music in Pyongyang. Although the New York Philharmonic is the most eminent American musical group to visit the DPRK, it is by no means the first. American music groups that have performed in the DPRK include "The Trail Band" (a blue grass band from Oregon) and a trio of classical musicians from Chicago. And, while the New York Philharmonic is rightly famous among aficionados of classical music, it is not the most widely known of the American musical groups to perform inside the DPRK. As Dr. Robert E. Springs writes in the National Committee on North Korea newsletter, the twice Platinum, GRAMMY award-winning band Casting Crowns performance of "Amazing Grace" in Pyongyang in the spring of 2007 was broadcast on North Korean TV.

The debate in the months before the concert was comparatively muted. However, as the day of the concert approached, coverage exploded. Debates about the trip, pro and con, sprung up in press. Bloomberg commentator Norman Lebrecht catalogued his concerns about North Korean human rights, and then concluded "Music is the loser in this transaction, a poisoned pawn on a dirty board." North Korea specialist Brian Myers, Dean of International Studies at Dongseo University in South Korea, was widely cited disparaging the concert as a cynical public relations tool manipulated by Kim Jong Il. In The Asia Times, Myers says "'It is much easier to invite an orchestra than to make concessions on the nuclear front,'" and Kim Jong Il sees the Philharmonic's trip as "'a perfect way to make the Americans happy for another few months.'" Economist Marcus Noland, as quoted in the Chicago Tribune, asserts that "The idea that anyone in North Korea will have any comprehension of the sly import of the Dvorak and Gershwin pieces is absolutely ridiculous."

But as the potential implications of the concert became clear, more people rose to defend the event. Some were experts on North Korea, such as The Asia Foundation's Ed Reed. Referring to accusations that "the admirable but naive expectations that music would soften the hearts of the North Korean people toward Americans, opening their eyes to a world beyond the tightly controlled one in which they live, will be dashed on the impermeable propaganda wall," Reed countered that this analysis seriously underestimates the intelligence of the North Korean people. . . Western classical and popular music, as well as some South Korean music, is widely known and appreciated; North Korea produces first-rate classical musicians and the best are trained in Russia and Europe. . .

After commenting on the emotional response that the Korean audience was likely to have to the orchestral performance of the Korean folk song Arirang, Reed offered realistic reflections on the possibilities of cultural exchange

> to create a window of opportunity whereby political leaders can take policy risks. Cultural exchange cannot change policy; policy will change only when political leaders act. The impact of cultural diplomacy is not one way. While we may be focused on the possible impact in North Korea, Kim Jong-il is hoping that the North's hospitality and accommodation will soften perceptions of North Korea among Americans. If they choose to do so, political leaders in Pyongyang and Washington can interpret to their citizens an event such as this visit to Pyongyang as a gesture of goodwill, justifying concessions necessary to move the political process forward.

And Financial Times journalist Anne Fifield quoted Kim Cheol-woong – the North Korean musician who defected after hearing jazz in Moscow – as calling the concert a "great" idea. The Financial Times article continued:

> 'Given that North Koreans and Americans don't know much about each other, this will be a good opportunity for them to find something in common through music,' Mr Kim says, adding that he is particularly happy it will be broadcast live on North Korean state television.
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> 'Ordinary people will be able to watch it and they will think, 'oh, Americans listen to the same music we listen to, they are not so different from us,' which is different from what they learned at school about Americans,' Mr Kim says.

Perhaps the most robust challenge to the critics came from classical music reviewer Anna Midgette, whose Washington Post article questions the cultural condescension of even some who supported the trip:

> On one side of the debate are those who aver that the New York Philharmonic should not be dignifying the Kim Jong Il administration with its presence. The other side maintains that this North Korea performance, which will be broadcast nationally on North Korean television and in this country by PBS, is an act of cultural diplomacy, proving that music is a universal language with the ability to spread peace and harmony (think Leonard Bernstein going to Moscow with the Philharmonic in 1959).
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> The problem with this argument is that it partakes of the idea that we, the noble West, are going to bring the good things of classical music to the benighted North Koreans. . .
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> And another problem with this argument is that, like many opinions, it is not informed by facts. For there is evidence that North Korea does actually have a considerable music life.

Midgette goes on to interview British opera singer Suzannah Clarke, who has performed in the DPRK and who is planning a September tour of the State Symphony of North Korea to the United Kingdom, and Mark Stringer, a conductor who teaches at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Austria where he has taught nearly twenty North Korean students. Stringer observes that "The students also do not fulfill anyone's expectations of politically guarded wards of the state." 'They have a completely normal experience,' he says."

If the concert was a propaganda coup for neither Kim Jong Il nor for the United States, what was it? It was a cultural exchange – one country sharing some of its music with another.

North Korea is not alone in contemplating musical diplomacy. Also in February, in a little noted musical first, Dmitry Medvedev, now the President-Elect of Russia, brought the British rock group, Deep Purple, popular in the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s, to perform at the Kremlin. With questions reverberating about the meaning of Medvedev's election regarding the transfer of power – or lack thereof – Medvedev may have been realizing the long-held dreams of a fan, or he may have been sending a diplomatica signal to the West.

After all, Teachout got it wrong – Van Cliburn's performance in the USSR didn't "help to bring about the ultimate collapse of communism," nor was that the purpose of his trip. His victory in the Tchaikovsky competition *was* seminal, and won him, as well as the United States, a huge following in the USSR. However, US claims to have achieved a political victory in the musical competition may be viewed in light of a recent New York Times article regarding the fifty-year anniversary of the performance. Cliburn reports that "he was oblivious to the political ramifications of his triumph. . . . 'Oh, I never thought about all that, he said. 'I was just so involved with the sweet and friendly people who were so passionate about music. They reminded me of Texans.'"

Van Cliburn in the Soviet Union

Given the vast psychological and cultural distance between the two countries at the time, the concert perhaps became a touchstone between two peoples who had little positive contact. Hear and view the concert live here. The possibilities of music as a vehicle of communication again became clear in Russia in the 1990s. When Peace Corps volunteers and their Russian colleagues ran out of language, they could communicate by singing "Smoke on the Water" together. Last month's Deep Purple concert at Medvedev's invition was simply a high profile example of the band's reach.

By all accounts, the most powerful moment in Pyongyang last month was the Philharmonic's performance of Arirang. Their rendition of the well-known and achingly poignant Korean folksong brought tears to the eyes of many in the audience. The audience continued to applaud and cheer long after the performers had left the stage. According to the Korea Society's vice president and executive director Fred Carriere, some orchestra members said they had never before experienced such a strong connection with an audience. Casting Crowns likewise received an enthusiastic response to their performance of the Korean song "White Dove." A musical exchange is far more eloquent than a one-way transmission.

The New York Philharmonic performs in Pyongyang

In the United States, the concert gave Americans a new context for thinking about North Korea that did not involve weapons, terror, crime, or human security. Suddenly, North Korea, which typically appears in the press only when there is bad news, was not just in Section A, but also in the cultural sections. And, for the first time, there were long-running "conversations" about North Korea on-line, with people weighing-in on their reactions to the concert, both pro and con. The news that the DPRK had invited Eric Clapton to perform in Pyongyang made a particularly big splash. While "Layla" may not have the emotional resonance for Americans or the British that Ariang has for Koreans, the invitation to Clapton suddenly alerted rock fans – a far larger contingent, nowadays than fans of classical music – of North Korea's existence. Journalist Tim Shorrock attributes a noticeable spike in hits on his policy-oriented blog to his first-ever reference to Eric Clapton.

Over the last year the United States, North Korea and other parties to the six-sided talks have taken important steps to resolve a sixty year war. Clearly, there is more work to be done. The two countries are still negotiating their differing interpretations of what items should be included in the Declaration of North Korea's nuclear programs; the United States and the ROK still performed joint military exercise and the DPRK still protested those exercises. Thus the concert became a lightning rod for arguments about the best approach to ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the six decades of US-North Korea hostility.

Many remain unconvinced that the concert was – in the words of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "a good thing." However, the sheer volume of coverage the concert engendered may have contributed to a positive atmosphere that will help contribute to the momentum for the difficult negotiations in the months ahead. The concert itself did not resolve deeply held national security concerns on either side –nor should anyone expect a concert to have such an impact. And it may not have made as strong an impression as Cliburn's performance in the USSR. What may have changed, incrementally, is that a few words have been added to a common cultural vocabulary. Now each country has an additional image of the other country, a new cultural point of reference to add to the customary images of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Ultimately, exchanges such as these prepare the people in both countries to sustain the peace that we hope will be brokered by our respective governments.

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This article, written for Japan Focus, reflects the personal views of its author, and is not necessarily endorsed by the National Committee on North Korea and/or its individual members. It was posted at Japan Focus on March 11, 2008.

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