

**Laudatory speech
on Younghi Pagh-Paan,
Laureate Großer Kunstpreis Berlin 2020**



Younghi Pagh-Paan. Photo © Harald Rehling

Following the rotation of the six Akademie sections, the Berlin Art Prize – Grand Prize 2020 is being awarded by the Music Section and goes to the South Korean composer Younghi Pagh-Paan. Her life's work will be honoured.

Laudatory speech by Silke Leopold

'From whence do I – a Korean woman – derive my incentive to create?' This is the question that Younghy Pagh-Paan posed in 1980 in her commentary to her orchestral work *Sori*, which premiered at the Donaueschinger Musiktage the same year and marked her international breakthrough. The question might initially seem a surprising one: why should a Korean woman not be creative? In reality, however, this question was as justified then as it is today. Younghy Pagh-Paan goes on to explain that male-dominated Confucianism, which has shaped Korean society for centuries, has allowed women little room for their own creative development. On the other hand, women have had considerable influence in Korean folk culture, taking on important roles – as shamans, writers, musicians, and dancers – in shaping the culture of their country. These are the women, she writes, who were her role models.

This brief introduction contains much of what defines Ms. Pagh-Paan's artistic personality, what makes her life so extraordinary, and her compositional work so unique. She was certainly not born into her profession, which took her from the Korean countryside to the capital of Seoul, then on to Germany and Italy, and ultimately around the world. It is a career that could serve as a model for the mathematical theory of the butterfly effect, according to which the smallest occurrences, no matter how random, can set in motion new and significant developments: minimal turns in one direction or another can have maximum effect. With regard to a person's biography, it also means that each turn we decide to take opens up countless other possibilities for our development and takes us to places we could not even have imagined when we chose one road or the other.

In times like these, when we naturally see ourselves as citizens of the world, moving to one continent or another because we feel at home wherever we are, when any woman is entitled to reach for

the same stars as a man, it has perhaps been forgotten that this freedom is not even one generation old. When Younghi was born the eighth of nine children on 30 November 1945 (according to the solar calendar) in Cheongju, a medium-sized city in the heart of South Korea, that freedom certainly did not yet exist. In Korea, much like in Germany at the time, girls were expected to take a much different path than the one that she would chose. And at the time of her birth, living conditions were anything but comfortable. For Korea, the end of the Second World War meant liberation from Japanese colonial rule, but it also led to revolts, massacres, the division of the country, war, military dictatorship, repression, and lack of freedom. And in the midst of it all, people were struggling to live their lives, despite all the suffering that the war and its aftermath brought upon them: the brother who lost his life in the Korean War, the father who could hardly bear the hardship of existence, the mother who worked so hard she did not know if she was coming or going and whose dedication to the family ensured that her children could study. The father, for his part, instilled his daughter with a love of music, played the bamboo flute to her, and listened when she sang. And with her singing she tried to provide some measure of solace to her father when he was feeling forlorn. At an early age, little Younghi had already experienced how music could be a place of refuge and a source of healing, identity, and existential experience. And the classical Western music education she received at school – reading and writing music, playing piano, composition – did little to change this. The fact that she managed to study music at university in Seoul was the first unlikely turn of events, followed by another equally unlikely one: a DAAD scholarship that brought her to Germany in 1974, to a world that was so foreign that the questions of identity, of the foreign and the familiar, had to be answered anew. The Seoul National University in Korea demanded musical mimicry, the study of Western music, counterpoint and harmony, Beethoven, Brahms, and Schönberg. In

Germany it was initially the Korean traditions that shaped her musical thinking and her compositions, leading to the first in a series of ever greater successes. In Klaus Huber, professor of composition at the Musikhochschule in Freiburg, she found a teacher, her companion and later husband and artistic partner, who recognised and fostered her skills, giving her the space she needed to develop her own musical ideas. She owes him much and was able to give him a great deal back, before he died in his adopted home of Umbria in 2017.

A look at Younghi Pagh-Paan's catalogue of works illustrates just how much her artistic thinking was shaped by the tension between the familiar and the foreign. Nearly all the works of the first twenty-five years have Korean titles or refer to Korean or Chinese texts. And all of them attempt to mediate between the familiar and the foreign, to find a balance – perhaps the central theme in her entire life's work. The title of the first piece she wrote in Germany and included in her catalogue of work speaks volumes about this tension. *Dreisam-Nore*, created in 1975, connects *Nore*, the Korean word for song, with the *Dreisam*, the stream that flows through Freiburg. And what emerges is a solo piece for flute that explores and pushes the instrument's boundaries of tonal and technical possibility – a melody that is literally flowing, seemingly infinite, a wholly distinct musical language, neither Korean nor German, nor anything else that could smack of programme music: for although the title draws the listener's attention to water, the composition refuses to make a direct association with a babbling brook; instead, it transforms an idea of water as an element into constant motion, and stoic serenity into sound. Water, and nature in general, plays a central role in Younghi Pagh-Paan's work: the only work from her Korean period that she took into her catalogue of works is a 1971 piece entitled *PA-MUN*, which means water ripple. The titles of her compositions repeatedly speak of wells, floating islands, lotus flowers and water lilies, of the glistening light, the sunset,

blooming lilies, the horizon. But we should not let ourselves be fooled by these sweet-sounding poetic titles, for there is always much more at work here than a mere description of nature. Nature is a metaphor for the primal basis of life, for the essence of being human, for the genesis and demise of the world. This is expressed in numerous texts stemming from Far Eastern philosophy, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, which form the basis of her compositions, whether as sung texts or as the conceptual foundation of an instrumental composition.

The tension and the mediation between the foreign and the familiar comprise the most important pillar of Younghi Pagh-Paan's work. It is her lifelong theme, and one that she repeatedly addresses in interviews and in her notes on her work. It is, however, not the only one. A second theme is politics. Flight, displacement, loss of one's homeland, violence and resistance are recurring themes in her compositions – eminently political issues with which she grapples in her very special way. These are addressed in her only opera to date, *Mondschaten*, from 2006, in which she tied Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus* to Zen Buddhist haikus and texts by the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han; *Sori* is another good example. In the commentary to her work, Ms. Pagh-Paan describes a composition that at a musical level creates a single orchestral work by interweaving Korean and Western elements – Korean peasant music, funeral music, folk theatre, Korean rhythms, and Western composition techniques. The fact that a current political event suddenly descends upon the world, articulating itself with a brutal blaring of trumpets and the spread of a deadly silence, is something that the composer leaves unsaid in this commentary but which she later addresses. For this musical moment is a reference to the horrible Gwangju Uprising of May 1980, in which the military dictatorship massacred protesting students, farmers, and workers. The music is anything but descriptive; rather, it is a musical partisanship with the victims.

And yet, Younghi Pagh-Paan's music is never absolute music but, in the words of Eduard Hanslick from 1854, 'tonally moving form'. It is always inspired by other non-musical factors – poetry from East and West, philosophical and mystical texts, diary entries and notes, nature, politics, religion. The latter is the third pillar on which her work rests, and one which apparently has taken on more and more significance. And with her experiences from two worlds, from different religious cultures such as Zen Buddhism, the ancient world of the gods, and Christianity, she manages time and again to discover the commonalities between seemingly removed ways of thinking, which she makes fruitful use of in her own musical concepts. In her compositional examination of religion and the ties between Far Eastern philosophy and Christianity, she articulates once more and on a different level the tension between the familiar and the foreign, between Asia and Europe. And one might get the impression that Christian themes have become more important in her recent work. This is also borne out by her major project to gradually transfer the seven last words of Jesus to their own compositions in a way that is wholly unique. This group of works includes compositions as diverse as the piano solo *I thirst / Mich dürstet* from 2008 or the string quartet (her first) *Horizont auf hoher See* from 2017, which focuses on Christ's words 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do' and ties in notes written by the French philosopher Simone Weil and an antiphon by Hildegard of Bingen. Here too, religious ideas are blended with political overtones – *I thirst / Mich dürstet* is a reference to another massacre in South Korean history, the Jeju Uprising of 3 April 1948, while the title of the string quartet refers to Simone Weil's time in exile.

Hildegard of Bingen, Simone Weil, Teresa of Ávila, Edith Stein, Rose Ausländer – it is no coincidence that the authors who trigger something in Younghi Pagh-Paan, which is then shaped into sound, are in large part female. Europe has been a source of role models

for creativity and kindred souls who share the experience of a loss of homeland, the feeling of otherness, flight, persecution, or displacement. Which brings me to the fourth pillar of Younghui Pagh-Paan's work: the question of what role women can and should play in society has accompanied her all along her life's path, as has that of the tension between cultures. Until 1980 it was inconceivable that a woman could perform at the Donaueschinger Musiktage with a large orchestra and immediately enter the international spotlight. From today's perspective, this too must be recalled once more: in the music world, even up to a few decades ago, women only had a voice at best as singers or soloists on one instrument. But a female composer at the Donaueschinger Musiktage? The first time that had ever taken place was in 1968 – note the year – in the person of Cathy Berberian, who was allowed to perform her piece *Stripsody*, created two years earlier, and Tona Scherchen, whose chamber music piece *Wai* Cathy Berberian premiered at the same concert. And in 1994 Younghui Pagh-Paan became the first woman in the history of the entire German-speaking world to be appointed as professor of composition – in Bremen, where she is still at home today. There she founded the Atelier Neue Musik, which she headed until her retirement. And it has built up a large and unusually international group of students, from countries and cultures all over the world, many of whom have become composers of great renown and success. The fact that her students maintain close contact with their teacher, even after completing their studies, is testimony to her achievements in teaching. She taught each one of them that he or she is an individual, an artist, something special, but with this comes the obligation to commitment, unconditionality, crossing boundaries, and the relinquishment of the self.

It may well be true: nobody could have possibly predicted that the girl who was born in late 1945 in the Korean countryside would be standing here today to receive the Großer Kunstpreis Berlin 2020.

The path that Younghi Pagh-Paan has taken in life is rich in unforeseen turns, in fractures, in milestones. In retrospect, however, these winding roads form one straight path – the path of an artist who shapes her work from her own existence, her diverse experiences, her emotional state of mind and transforms it into sounds of profound structure and great beauty. Turning sadness into power, giving a voice to oppression, transforming the burden of the soul into a driving force for creative expression. But this is more than a dismal affair, for music also has a bright, a clear, a comforting side. Korea and Germany – two countries that describe not only Younghi Pagh-Paan's biography, but also and above all, her artistic path; two countries that in art as well as in life are engaged in a constant struggle with one another; two countries that profit from each other, enrich each other, and perhaps even fight with each other at times, but always produce something new.

'That which resounds', Younghi Pagh-Paan writes in September 2007 in her commentary to her orchestral work *Das Universum atmet, es wächst und schwindet*. 'That which resounds is praise for all life.' It could not be said more beautifully. Dear Younghi, from the bottom of my heart, I congratulate you for winning this award.