

Words and Music: When in Pyongyang
by Kate Julian, The New Yorker - March 3, 2008

With the New York Philharmonic slated to make its Pyongyang debut this week, Lorin Maazel, the music director, confessed to some trepidation about the visit. (“I wrote an opera called ‘1984.’ Can that be clearer?”) But, some weeks ago, with visions of 1971 Ping-Pong diplomacy in mind, Maazel decided that the concert, which will be broadcast live across North Korea, warranted a few remarks (“introducing music, not talking about North Korean gulags”) from the conductor. “It seemed only appropriate, with the North Koreans sitting in the audience and the Americans sitting onstage, that there be some kind of verbal bridge, a ‘We’re happy to be here and this is what we’re playing and hope you enjoy the concert’ sort of thing—just by way of breaking the ice,” he explained over the phone last week from Hong Kong, where the Philharmonic was halfway through a tour that was to culminate in concerts in both North and South Korea.



Maazel, who speaks French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Russian, but not Korean, didn’t want a translator in the middle of his ice-breaking. He resolved to deliver his remarks in Korean, assisted by a trick of his own devising: as he had for an appearance in Japan, he would write a musical score to complement a more conventional phonetic transliteration of his remarks in Korean. “The Japanese people couldn’t believe it, because it sounded very authentic,” Maazel said, recalling his first experiment with the method. “You know, pitch goes up, drops, gets faster, slower.” In much the same manner, his Pyongyang score would cue him on cadence and rhythm and all the other elements of speech that get lost in transliteration and can easily tip the scales between intelligibility and gibberish.

“You can’t know these things by looking at the phonetics,” Maazel said. “I used to go with my phrase book to small towns in Japan. People would be on the ground laughing so hard, because God knows what I was saying. They knew what I was trying to say, obviously. ‘Where is such and such a temple,’ or whatever. But the pronunciation was all wrong, and I was probably saying, you know, ‘The fishmonger is an idiot and ought to be hanged’ or something.”

A couple of weeks ago, Maazel had his Pyongyang remarks translated into Korean, and he downloaded a recording of them to his iPhone, then flew to Hong Kong for the start of the tour. In Taipei, he prevailed upon a few Korean-speaking members of the orchestra, foremost among them Michelle Kim, a violinist, to help translate his words into music.

This translation, which Kim and Maazel sketched out on manuscript paper, features a standard five-line staff dotted with a combination of ascending and descending quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes, punctuated by accents and breath notes (like commas, signifying pauses). As scores go, it is bare bones (no bass or treble clef, no key, no time signature, no measures, no tempo markings, no dynamics). The English transliteration runs along beneath the staff, like lyrics.

For example: “My colleagues of the New York Philharmonic and I are delighted to have the opportunity to perform in this lovely concert hall” became “Chung [quarter note with accent] joon [quarter note, same pitch, no accent] yuruboon [a pair of sixteenth notes a major third lower, followed by a slower, lower-pitched eighth note, followed by a breath] Juwa [accented sixteenth note, unaccented eighth note].”

With one week to go before the big night, Maazel, in Hong Kong, was listening to the speech on his iPhone, and consulting his score at every chance, but finding the task “certainly more awesome” than he expected. (Korean is a tough language for English speakers. The Defense Language Institute rates Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic, and Korean Category IV—the most difficult—languages; a basic course of Category IV study lasts sixty-four weeks, versus twenty-four for, say, Spanish.) “What I try to do is get the musical flow of it in my mind and then put the words to it,” Maazel said, sounding tired.

The cramming, alas, was in vain. Four days before the Pyongyang première, it was decided that Maazel would deliver his remarks in English, with a translator relaying them to the North Korean people. Maazel’s colleague Douglas Beck wrote in an e-mail that there had been “some concern about whether a North Korean audience would sufficiently understand him, even with all the preparation.” He went on, “One of the difficulties on every level of this Pyongyang concert is that there was no prior frame of reference.”

But, while the words-to-notes-back-to-words effort had been put aside, the real music was ready to go. “We’re doing ‘An American in Paris’ and the New World Symphony,” Maazel said. “The New World Symphony is basically about America,” he continued. “‘An American in Paris’ is about the curiosity Americans have to go to foreign countries. I’m going to say from the stage”—in English, now—“that someday someone will write a piece of music entitled ‘Americans in Pyongyang.’” Depending on how that remark goes down, there may or may not be an encore, or two, or three. The orchestra has prepared the Korean folk song “Arirang,” Bernstein’s Overture to “Candide,” and Bizet’s “Faran-dole.” ♦