Current high status of the piano in East Asia

The three-yearly Leeds International Piano Competition in 2006 awarded first prize to Mr. Sunwook Kim from South Korea. This followed on from the dominance of young Asian pianists in the 15th Chopin International Piano Competition in October 2005, in which four Japanese, three South Koreans and a Hong Kong Chinese were among the twelve finalists, and two Korean brothers finally took equal third prize. A similar outcome was seen in the Sydney International Piano Competition in 2008. Even piano competitions for young learners in Melbourne are dominated by Asian-background children. This is an indication of the prominence of piano in contemporary East Asian culture, and the sense of striving for international recognition in piano performance. In August 2009, three young Korean pianists took first, second and third places in classical music competitions in Melbourne.

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Kraus discusses how “the Chinese value international prizes as evidence that Asia’s musicians can master the art of the West”; and documents the euphoric reaction at the national level towards the gaining of third place in the Chopin competition by 18-year-old Fou Tsong in 1955. As the “first Asian musician to be honoured in an important international competition by Westerners for playing European music” he became a national hero, and was perceived as having acquired not only cultural, but also political capital by Chinese authorities. The same attitude can be found in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. This chapter argues that Western music has become an important part of modern Asian culture and that already in prewar Japan the piano had become a symbol of cultural modernity. Further, it argues that Japan’s model was taken up by Korea, Taiwan and China: what is striking about music in East Asia today is how the lead taken by Japan has been followed by Korea, China and other countries. Western classical music is privileged above all other high cultural forms, and like sport provides an arena for international competition and display of national pride. The lionization of the piano in Japan was caught by Korea and by China. There is intense national rivalry on the world and regional stage between these countries, but there is also a common culture, a sharing in a global musical modernity and musical educational values. However, this is not functioning as an agent of regional integration. It is a vector to the West, not intra-regional; even though the shared common features of Western Music culture are so strong.

Whether we look at some recent Japanese, Korean and Chinese TV dramas (Winter Sonata, Spring Waltz, Peking Violin), manga (Piano no mori, Nodame cantabile), or think of a Korean children’s song, or consider the fact that in China over thirty million children are learning piano, or look at the Shanghai

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3 Kraus, pp. 79-83.
4 I have argued elsewhere that the narrative of the piano as a symbol of musical modernity is central to the Korean television drama series, Winter Sonata, both as a plot device and as a pervasive element of the sound track. Alison Tokita, A. “Music in Fuyu no sonata: the Piano as a Bridge to European Culture in Borderless Musical Modernity”. Festschrift for Tokumaru Yosihiko (special issue of Ochanomizu Ongaku Ronshū), Tokyo, Ochanomizu University, 2006, pp. 201-212.