

Isang Yun and the *Hauptton* Technique:

An Analytical Study of the Second Movement

from *Duo für Violoncello und Harfe* (1984)

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ABSTRACT

Composer Isang Yun developed an idiosyncratic musical language that blends Eastern-Asian and Western-European art traditions. Exiled from Korea due to political conflict, he continued his compositional career in Germany, where his music is renowned for its use of the *Hauptton* (“main-tone”) technique. Yun was the first to discuss this technique, which he interprets as a process rooted in East-Asian musical traditions, including Taoist philosophy. His music is remarkable in that it fuses this process within the context of Western formal structures. I combine Joseph Straus’s associational model with Yun’s *Hauptton* theory to analyse the second movement of *Duo für Violoncello und Harfe* (1984) in order to show the inclusion of Eastern-Asian and Western-European musical elements in Yun’s music. I begin by analysing several *Haupttöne* at the surface level through associational relationships, followed by a large-scale analysis of the entire movement with one fundamental *Hauptton*.

Keywords

Isang Yun, *Hauptton* Technique, Taoism, East-Asian Musical Tradition, Joseph Straus, Associational Model, Centricity, Twentieth-Century Western Music, *Duo für Violoncello und Harfe* (1984), Analysis, Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

This study introduces the *Hauptton* technique, a compositional device developed by the Korean-born German composer Isang Yun (1917-95). I argue that the *Hauptton* (“main-tone”) technique blends East-Asian and Western musical traditions, and also that a complete analysis and understanding of Yun’s music can be achieved only when both East-Asian and Western perspectives are taken into account. Before I introduce this technique, I first discuss East-Asian elements in Yun’s music in order to provide the root of the technique. I then explain the basic concepts of the technique, as well as its relation to Taoist philosophy, followed by an application of the technique in a Western musical context, using Joseph Straus’s associational model and the concept of centricity. I analyse select excerpts

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from the second movement of *Duo für Violoncello und Harfe* (1984) to show that several *Haupttöne* (“main tones”) occur at the surface level, but that one prevailing *Hauptton* persists throughout the movement.

1.1 East-Asian Elements

Many Western composers of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to create new sounds in Western music by borrowing from foreign or exotic instruments and incorporating these with conventional Western instruments; Yun, however, focused on the potential of Western instruments and developed unconventional instrumental techniques that would produce unexpected timbres.¹ With the exception of a few percussion instruments, Yun wrote his compositions exclusively for Western instruments.² He successfully reproduced the sound of Korean instruments with Western instruments through special performing techniques.

1.1.1 Instrumental Techniques

Harald Kunz explains Yun’s unusual handling of Western instruments, in the following:

“The frequently strange impression of Yun’s music is created by special performing techniques. In particular the expressive potentials of the strings are enlarged in Yun’s scores, and he also handles the wind instruments in an unusual manner, making them approach the sound character and playing techniques of East-Asian instruments... They often serve to create the feeling of the Far East... Almost every written note in the string parts has its ornamentation, its particular accent, its trill or glissando; the dynamics are very carefully graded. Yun employs every imaginable technique of string playing without making the instruments sound unnatural.”³

Yun’s goal in employing these performing techniques is the reproduction, or evocation, of East-Asian sound.

Various ornamentations created by these performing techniques in the cello are reminiscent of the *nong-hyun*, or left-hand

¹ Jeongmee Kim, “Musical Syncretism in Isang Yun’s *Gasa*,” in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, ed. Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 175.

² *Ibid.*, 178-79. Yun occasionally used Korean percussion instruments in his compositions, including *Loyang* (1962) and *Réak* (1966).

³ As quoted in Francisco F. Feliciano, “Isang Yun,” in *Four Asian Contemporary Composers: the Influence of Tradition in Their Works* (Quezon City, Philippine: New Day Publishers, 1983), 39-41.

ornamental patterns for Korean string instruments. The *nong-hyun* technique translates literally as “to toy with strings,” and consists of four types of sound: (1) vibrating sound, (2) rolling sound, (3) sliding to a lower pitch, and (4) sliding to a higher pitch. Ornamentations in Yun’s music resemble the use of the *nong-hyun* technique, especially because they involve microtones and micro-intervallic movements that are unfamiliar in the Western music tradition, but common in East-Asian music.

1.1.2 The Sound of Korean Instruments

In the second movement of *Duo*, the cello reproduces the sound of two Korean string instruments—the *komungo* and the *ajeng*—and some of the harp part resemble ringing Buddhist wind chimes. The *komungo*, as shown in **Figure 1**, is a six-string zither-like Korean instrument. The total size of the instrument body spans approximately 150 centimetres (or 59 inches) in length, and 19 centimetres (or 7.5 inches) in width. The six strings consist of twisted silk, and differ in thickness. The inner three strings (second, third and fourth strings) rest on fixed frets of sixteen different sizes, whereas each of the outer three strings is supported by a movable bridge. When playing the instrument, the performer sits cross-legged, and places the upper-right end of the instrument on the right knee. The sound results from plucking the right part of the strings with a small horn or bamboo stick, held in the performer’s right hand. With the left hand, the performer plays the *nong-hyun* technique by pressing, pushing, or sliding on the string to produce different tones, including microtones.

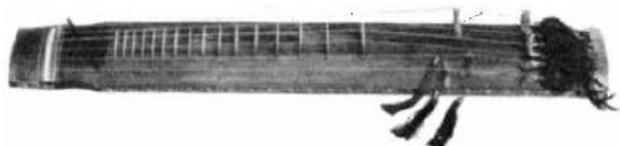


Figure 1. The *komungo*⁴

The cello part in the second movement of *Duo* resembles the sound of the *komungo* when the strings are plucked. The opening of this movement features the solo cello playing *pizzicato*, for which Yun includes a special direction. He indicates that the cellist should alternate between the left hand and the right hand when plucking the open D string, and also that the right hand must pluck the string near the bridge and with the fingernail. By applying Yun’s special performance direction, the cello produces *pizzicato* tones that are unfamiliar to the Western ear, but are perceived easily as the sound of the *komungo*. The bowed parts are relatively easier to associate with the traditional timbre of cello; nonetheless, Yun’s frequent use of microtones and glissandi suggests a non-Western element. I suspect that such tones resemble the sound of the *ajeng*, another zither-like Korean instrument that is constructed similarly to the *komungo*, but is played with a wooden bow.

While the cello reproduces the sound of the *komungo* and the *ajeng*, certain passages in the harp part are reminiscent of ringing Buddhist wind chimes. When the harp plays *bisbigliando* (or “soft tremolo”) between two chords, or plays arpeggios in the higher registers, it suggests the imaginary scene in which a number of light-weighted, small wind chimes ring through a peaceful and soft breeze. The various techniques used to evoke East-Asian sounds are supported by Yun’s use of East-Asian ornamentations.

⁴ Bang-song Song, *Korean Music and Instrument* (Seoul, Korea: National Classical Music Institute, 1973), 35.

1.1.3 Ornamentations in East-Asian Music

The composer explains that the instrumental techniques owe their origin to traditional Korean music and to the significant role of ornamentations in this music:

“Asian traditional music did not follow counterpoint or harmony, and therefore tones in such music had to be performed in a completely different manner in order to bring out its distinct character as living matter. There stemmed many differentiation of tones as well as countless types of glissando and vibrato.”⁵

Accordingly, ornamentations in Yun’s music function differently from the ones in Western music. It may be helpful to compare the Korean notion of ornamentations to the stretching or shrinking of an elastic band, and the Western notion of ornamentations to frosting or sprinkles on a cake. An elastic band, whether it is stretched, shrunken, or at its regular length, always remains the same object in terms of material; sprinkles are extrinsic material to a cake, but are applied on top of the cake as a decoration. In other words, ornamental movements in Korean music are organic and intrinsic portions of the main tone as a whole, rather than discrete elements that structurally belong to the embellished pitch, as in Western music. East-Asian ornamentations exist as an essential part of the main (or the embellished) tone, and only through their existence, the main tone achieves its true integrity as a musical entity. These East-Asian notions of an individual tone and ornamentations constitute the foundation of Yun’s compositions, expressed through the *Hauptton* technique.

1.2 The *Hauptton* Technique

Drawing from the East-Asian tradition, Yun considers an individual tone as a vibrant musical entity in itself, including ornamentations around it. In describing his compositional process, he explains that:

“The fundamental element of my compositions is, to put it concretely, an individual tone (*Einzelton*). A countless number of variant possibilities inhere in an individual tone, to which surrounding elements such as appoggiatura, vibrato, accent, after notes and other ornamentations belong, in order to establish the foundation of the composition. I call this individual tone a main tone (*Hauptton*).”⁶

Therefore, there are two elements involved the *Hauptton* technique: (1) the *Hauptton* (or the main tone), and (2) the ornamentations to the *Hauptton*, which are referred to as the *Umspielung* (“playing around”).⁷ The latter element consists of any musical articulation that embellishes the *Hauptton*, including glissando, tremolo, vibrato, trill, and microtones. As previously discussed, one should not mistake the *Hauptton* as a singly defined pitch. The pitch by itself does not possess any significance in the music; it is how the *Hauptton* is announced, continued, and/or disturbed through interactions with the other tones that confirms the entity of the *Hauptton*. In other words, the *Hauptton* technique is about the phenomenon and how the *Hauptton* is achieved, rather than only the identification of the

⁵ [trans.] Isang Yun and Walter-Wolfgang Sparrer, *Nauí Kil, Nauí Isang, Nauí Eumak*, trans. Kyocheol Jeong and Injung Yang, from German to Korean (Seoul: Hice, 1994), 58. All translations in this paper are done by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ [trans.] *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56; Injung Song, “In-Depth Study of Isang Yun’s *Glissées pour Violoncelle seul*” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2008), 47.

Hauptton. This technique plays a crucial role in Yun's compositional process.

Christian Martin Schmidt, a German musicologist, divided the technique into three steps: (1) beginning, (2) developing, and (3) fading away, as shown in **Figure 2**. Once the *Hauptton* is chosen (step 1), it progresses through ornamental movements with the use of *Umspielung*, such as glissando, tremolo, and vibrato, as well as the use of microtones (step 2). Then the tones (both *Hauptton* and *Umspielung*) gradually move away from the *Hauptton*; thus, the perception of the *Hauptton* continues to weaken until it completely fades away (step 3). Yun proposes that we may find these main tones by looking at his compositions from the beginning to the end, and by recognizing the overall contour and flow of the tones. Although the choice of the *Hauptton* may vary, the fundamental principle and process of establishing it always remain the same in Yun's works.

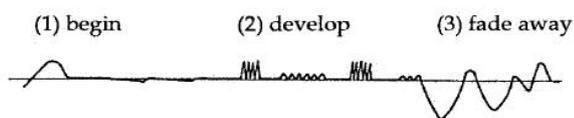


Figure 2. Schmidt's 3-step description of the *Hauptton*⁸

I extend Schmidt's description of the *Hauptton* technique by considering its application on sections of a composition (on the small scale), as well as on the full work (on the large scale). On the small scale, the *Hauptton* in a short passage may be explained by the aforementioned three-step process. On the larger scale, the several different *Haupttöne* (or "main tones") within the work, which are themselves ornamented, may be interpreted as either the *Hauptton* of the particular passage, or as *Umspielung* to the fundamental *Hauptton* of the work. This is analogous to Schenkerian theory and the concept of foreground, middleground, and background structures. Despite this analogy, however, Yun's music cannot be interpreted as prolongational middleground structures because the *Hauptton* technique does not necessarily exist within the realm of tonality. Instead, Straus's associational model is remarkably helpful in accounting for the interpretation of the *Hauptton* technique, as will be explained in the "Western Approach" section below.

1.2.1 Taoist Influences

East-Asian music, along with any other form of the fine arts, is closely connected to East-Asian philosophies, such as Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Although the topic of philosophy is beyond the scope of my research, I should at least mention that the *Hauptton* technique also aligns with East-Asian philosophies, Taoism in particular. Taoism contains the concept of Yin and Yang theory, which highlights the duality and interdependence of two opposing forces in nature. For instance, there would be no light without darkness, and vice versa. Yun's *Hauptton* technique aligns with the Yin and Yang theory in the sense that the *Hauptton* does not exist without the *Umspielung*, and vice versa. That is to say, it is essential to observe the relative and reciprocal connection between the *Hauptton* and the *Umspielung* in analysing and interpreting Yun's music through the study of the *Hauptton* technique.

⁸ As cited in Injung Song, "In-Depth Study of Isang Yun's *Glissées pour Violoncelle seul*", 48-49; Akira Nishimura, "At the end of the infinite cosmos," *Yun Isang ui Umak Segyae*, trans. Sungman Choi and Eunmi Hong from German to Korean (Seoul: Hangil-Sa, 1994), 157. The comments on the figure are added by Injung Song for clarity.

1.3 Western Approach

Although Yun's music is rooted in East-Asian traditions, most of his works were composed in the context of the Western culture. Joseph N. Straus's "associational model," as well as the concept of centrality, is incredibly useful for the analysis of organisation in Yun's works since it allows more flexibility in determining different *Haupttöne*.

1.3.1 Prolongational versus Associational

In his study "The Problem of Prolongation in Post-Tonal Music," Straus highlights problems in approaching post-tonal music from a strict prolongational perspective, such as Schenkerian theory.⁹ Straus argues that post-tonal music is not prolongational, and proposes an alternative analytical approach that is better suited for the new musical idioms of the twentieth century, which he refers to as the associational model. He distinguishes between the prolongational model and his associational model in the following:

"Given three musical events X, Y, and Z, the prolongational model claims: 'Y is structurally inferior to X and extends X; X is not displaced until Z arrives,'...whereas an associational model is content merely to assert some kind of connection between X and Z without commenting one way or another about Y."¹⁰

1.3.2 Associational Model and Centrality

Associational interpretations are not difficult to substantiate because the only necessary condition is continuity in some musical domain, such as timbre, metrical placement, dynamic emphasis, register, etc. The associational model relies strongly on the concept of centrality, which refers to any element that is strong or centric in a musical context that does not necessarily have an integral relationship to other surrounding musical events. In any music, pitches that are higher, longer, louder, or more accented tend to have greater structural weight, though they may not necessarily be prolonged. I label this type of structural weight "central weight" in order to distinguish it from the idea of structure with the concept of prolongation. The concept of centrality and Straus's associational model provide excellent tools for describing Yun's *Hauptton* technique and for analysing his works.

2. ANALYSIS

The second movement of *Duo*, which unfolds as a binary structure (A (mm. 1-26), B (mm. 27-51) and coda (mm. 52-54)), is clearly constructed through the *Hauptton* technique, as are all of Yun's compositions since the mid-1950s. The opening passage of the second movement of *Duo* centers on the *Hauptton* D. The melodic line begins with an accented D just above middle C, and descends to the D an octave below; therefore, the pitch is emphasized by means of an octave leap and repetition, as well as the previously discussed timbral effects achieved through the special *pizzicato* direction. By establishing the pitch-class D as the *Hauptton* through such contextual means, this movement progresses and develops the *Hauptton* D through various interactions between the *Hauptton* and the *Umspielung* of other tones, as in step 2 of Schmidt's description. However, there is not enough trace to perceive D as the *Hauptton* halfway through the movement in mm. 23-26, as other tones are not drawn to D any longer. In other words, the first half of the second movement (section A) follows Schmidt's

⁹ Joseph N. Straus, "The Problem of Prolongation in Post-Tonal Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 31, no. 1 (Spring, 1987): 1-21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, 13.

three-step process of beginning, developing, and fading away. However, this first half as a whole unfolds as the beginning process (step 1) when perceived with the other half (section B), and applied on the larger scale. In the second half, the *Hauptton* is developed (step 2) through several *Haupttöne* and fades away (step 3). The coda serves as the restoration of the *Hauptton*, allowing it to re-engage in the three-step process.

To support my arguments, I have compiled a sketch of *Haupttöne* (or main tones) in the second movement of *Duo*, on two different scales, through associational relationships (see **Figure 3**). The lower staff shows the small-scale associations and the upper one the large-scale. My sketch does not distinguish between a pitch class and a pitch; that is, some notes in the sketch represent the pitch class regardless of a specific register, while some represent the specific pitch. For most of the cases, the *Hauptton* technique is not sensitive to registers since octaves give central weight to a pitch, and the space of pitch class is generally sufficient for my discussion.

The *Haupttöne* are assigned with different relative central weights. For example, the empty note-head indicates the greatest central weight (not to be confused with the structural weight as in the traditional prolongational graph), and the solid note-head is used for tones of lesser central weight. I use stems and different sizes of note-heads in a similar manner as in Schenkerian notation in order to indicate relative central weights among the *Haupttöne*. This relativity of central weights is determined largely by duration, the musical domain which links the *Haupttöne* separated in time at the surface level. Dotted slurs are used in my sketch only between pitches that are separated by an octave as an indication of registral transfer (i.e. that the *Hauptton* remains on the same pitch class). We may conclude from this associational sketch that the pitch-class D prevails over all other tones throughout the movement, and thus becomes the fundamental *Hauptton*, around which the large-scale structure is established.

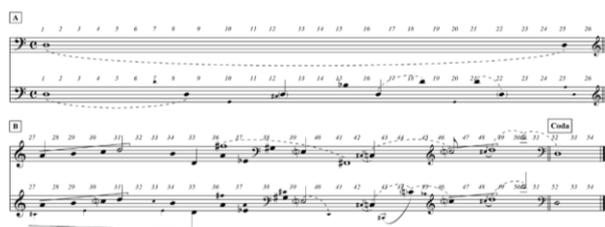


Figure 3. Analysis of the *Haupttöne* in Yun, *Duo für Violoncello und Harfe* (1984), II

3. CONCLUSION

Yun strongly claims that the *Hauptton* technique lies at the centre of his compositional process and amalgamates East-Asian and European musical elements.¹¹ The application of this technique involves the process of juxtaposing two different musical traditions, hence integrating East-Asian and Western elements. East-Asian traditions provide the root of the technique, as well as the philosophical inspiration behind the music; however, the end product of this East-Asian root is achieved in the form of twentieth-century Western music, as the composer intended so by adopting formal structures and instrumentations common to Western music, as well as the

occasional use of harmony and the twelve-tone technique. For this reason, the most complete understanding of the technique and Yun's music is achieved only when one comprehends characteristics of both Eastern and Western music.

Yun blended two musical traditions as a result of his life experiences, rather than as a simple means to create an original work. As a Korean exile in Germany who spent half of his life in his native country and the other half in Germany, he had a deep understanding of both cultures, as well as a profound engagement in both traditions, in the creation of wonderful works.

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¹¹ Isang Yun, *Bewegtheit in der Unbewegtheit: über meine kompositorische Entwicklung in Europa* (Offenbach am Main: West Germany, Korea Forschungsgemeinschaft, 1985), 25.

