

COMMEMORATING THE 117TH YEAR OF THE
INAUGURATION OF THE WESTERN MUSIC BAND
OF THE GREAT KOREAN EMPIRE

The 1st Tapgol Music Festival

HISTORY AND MUSIC
ACTING IN CONCERT

SPECIAL PHOTO EXHIBITION

7th ~ 10th Sep. 2018
Tapgol Park

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History and Music Acting in Concert

Yi Tae-jin
Chair, Advisory Committee
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The band on the move
for a concert



Tapgol Park



Music Director
Franz Eckert

After launching the Russo-Japanese War in February 1904, Japan incrementally eviscerated the sovereignty of the Great Korean Empire by force, while propagandizing the international community that Korea was a nation unable to modernize on her own. Such vile propaganda eventually produced the misconception that Kojong, who had led Korea's own drive toward modernization, was a "foolish monarch." This falsely conceived view on our history remains uncorrected even to this day, more than seventy years after the liberation.

In fact, Kojong was a monarch who, even as a young man in his twenties, determinedly pursued the vision of genuine self-rule and internally driven modernization. When receiving in audience a Westerner who was a Christian bishop, Kojong referred to missionaries as teachers of an advanced civilization and requested more such teachers. This was how mission schools came to proliferate in Korea, and yet few people realize this. We have been blinded by such false information as "Kojong the foolish monarch." During the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, when the Japanese troops virtually seized Seoul, a tragedy occurred in which the Queen was brutally murdered within the palace compound. Grieving for the Queen, the King lamented, "I could not protect the Queen in the palace. It is I who forsook the Queen." Feeling a threat to his own safety, Kojong moved under cover of night to the Russian legation, where he sojourned for one year while engaging in activities aimed at breaking up Japan's puppet cabinet and transforming Joseon into the Great Korean Empire.

To modernize the capital city of Seoul, Kojong expanded its electricity-generating capacity and broadened the city roads so that trolley cars could run through them. Following the example of the “President’s Palace” (White House) of the United States, the King had “Gyeong-un Palace” (Deoksu Palace) newly built as the hub of the radial road system so that the new palace could act as the focal point of Hwangseong, another name for Seoul meaning “the Imperial Capital.” He also commissioned the former members of first Korean legation to the United States to lead the urban development project, which included the formation of a public park in Tapgol, the area enjoying the heaviest pedestrian traffic in Jongno, the city center. In October 1897, the establishment of the Great Korean Empire was proclaimed, and in 1901, a western military band was set up and attached to the Palace Guard Regiment defending the capital. The national anthem was newly commissioned, and the brass sound of the military band reverberated through the new palace and Tapgol Park. The Korean national anthem thus performed raised the public awareness of their nationhood, and the band’s repertoire of national anthems, classical masterpieces, and folk music—all from western countries—drew the hearts and minds of the Korean citizens toward the West oceans apart.



Bandmaster Baek Uyong



Military Band
marching in the street



Emperor Kojong

The Tapgol Music Festival commemorating the 117th year of the inauguration of the western music band of the Great Korean Empire is a wonderful and admirable step toward regaining Korea’s proud “modern epoch.” The evidence demonstrating Korea’s innate capacity for successful modernization on her own terms disappeared through the machinations of the Japanese Empire. Nowhere to be found is the concert platform equipped with the then state-of-the-art brass acoustic reflector imported from Germany and installed in Tapgol Park. There is no mention of this fact anywhere in the park. Decorating the information board instead is the false information that the park was commissioned by a British financial advisor to the Great Korean Empire. It is to be hoped that this grand festival will offer, as an added benefit, an opportunity to correct all these errors.

Song Jaeyong, Director of the New Korea Philharmonic Orchestra, visited me late fall last year with a proposal for a festival, and an advisory committee was set up this spring to carry out his proposal. Thanks to the willing participation of many, of whom some majored in history and some in music, we have come thus far with cheerful steps. This is a unique cultural event where historians and musicians work “in concert,” and to celebrate such a rare occasion together with the public makes it even more meaningful. I extend my best wishes for the success of this festival.

Translated by Hacksun Cha

In Memory of the Unsung Heroes of the Palace Guard Band of the Great Korean Empire

- Where did the band perform?

Since its inception in 1901, the Military Band of the Palace Guard Regiment performed at such places as Gyeong-un and Changdeok Palaces, Tapgol Park, foreign legations, Myeongdong Cathedral, Sontag Hotel, and the Military Training Office. The band also performed requiems at the Altar of Exalting Loyalty (Jangchung dan) established in 1900 to commemorate the loyalists who died in the turmoil of 1894. Another notable venue for their performance was a trolley car then running through the city center.

- What are their memorable achievements that have hitherto been forgotten?

There are many. For instance, in March 1905, Prince Heinrich of Prussia visited Korea with the German Navy Band. At Tapgol Park, which was graced by the presence of foreign diplomatic ministers, consuls, and other dignitaries both domestic and international, the famed Navy Band of Germany and the Palace Guard Band of Korea, led by its German director Franz Eckert, performed in turn in a "showdown." Out came the verdict from the audience: the Koreans won hands down!

- What happened to the Palace Guard Band thereafter?

After the forced dissolution of the Korean Army in 1907, the band was attached to the Department of the Royal Household. After Japan's forcible annexation of Korea in 1910, the band became the Western Music Band of the Office of the Yi Dynasty (Yi wangjik yang-ak dae). During this period, the band performed mostly at Tapgol Park, where weekly concerts open to the public were regularly held, introducing western music to aspiring musicians. They also performed at Seoul YMCA. The Western Music Band was officially disbanded in 1915 and completely ceased to function in 1919, but Baek Uyong, the longtime leader of the band, started the Kyeongseong Music Band and continued his struggle to keep it alive until his untimely death in 1930. Former members of the band became music teachers at various schools, making a lasting contribution to the development of western music in Korea.

- What did they perform?

In addition to the national anthem of the Great Korean Empire, the band also performed the masterpieces we still enjoy today, such as the Hungarian Dances by Brahms, Wagner's Overture to Tannhäuser, Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," and the Radetzky March by Johann Strauss Sr. Their repertory was vast. According to The Seoul Press, in the eleven concerts held from September through November 1908, they played as many as sixty-nine pieces of music written by fifty-two composers.

"To the foreigners who congratulated His Majesty at the palace on the morning of the 7th, the most memorable part of the entertainment was the first appearance of the new military band which has been under the tutelage of Dr. Franz Eckert. The band consisted of twenty-seven pieces, well balanced and handled in a manner which caused astonishment that such music could be rendered by Koreans on foreign instruments after only four months' practice. The greatest credit is due both to Dr. Eckert and to the Korean musicians, for the result attained must have called for unremitting work on the part of the director and close and faithful application on the part of the Koreans. Handsome uniforms, polished instruments, perfect time, smoothness of rhythm and harmony, all combined to give an effect that was wholly unexpected and delightful to the audience. The repeated applause gave evidence of the pleasure which the music afforded. At this rate Seoul will soon have a band that can compete successfully with anything in the Far East."

Homer Hulbert, "News Calendar," Korea Review, September 1901 (Seoul): 412.