



## ***CULTURES THROUGH SONG: A KOREAN JOURNEY: THE PROCESS AND OUTCOME OF A STUDENT/FACULTY COLLABORATIVE PROJECT***

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A meaningful understanding of Korean culture, the historical importance of colonization, political subjugation, and effects of Western influences on the native arts seems, at first blush, a tall order for students living in rural Mississippi. However, in the spring of 2012, nine undergraduate voice students and three faculty members presented a lecture-concert of Korean art songs in Korean at a university located in the heart of the Mississippi Delta which communicated precisely those things. The songs, all written by Korean composers and based on Korean poetry, served as a perfect medium for the expression of both culturally traditional Korean elements, as well as Western elements synthesized together to create living embodiments of the hopes, dreams, and longings of a people. The transformative effects of the concert on those of us who created it are still being felt nearly two years later. In this article, we will describe the process of creating this event; evaluate the importance and effects of professional level collaboration on faculty and students alike; provide insights into the long term impacts of this cultural exchange on the lives of the faculty and students who worked together to create it; and propose ways in which this type of event could be meaningfully created in a variety of settings.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural, Art music, Korean culture, Professional collaboration, Cultural exchange.

### **Introduction**

Often in higher education settings faculty are plagued with lack of time, overburdened with teaching and service obligations, and constantly worried about creating better and more meaningful learning experiences that increase the involvement of students and provide them with a broader sense of the world and better understanding of the disciplines they study. This was certainly the case in the fall semester of 2011 at Delta State University where I was serving on the music faculty.

My colleagues and I were working hard in a small department in one of the many rurally situated colleges and universities in the state of Mississippi. Most of our students were first generation college students and had little-to-no experience with the world outside of their hometowns or home state.

Introduced into the demanding field of music, many of them initially struggled with the workload. As young singers, my voice students often struggled with the cultural aspects associated with their song repertoire. This was due in part to the historical nature of most of the music with which they were interacting.

What was needed was a project that could involve a group of students in a learning situation wherein they could identify with and tell the story of another culture. This idea is supported by the greater research which indicates that the more actively involved students are in the learning process the better students retain information because they connect the content with their own experiences (Collier, 2012). It was also necessary to create a project that would provide student agency within the process as well as accountability for achievable goals as it is generally believed that feelings of responsibility and accountability have a major impact on improving student achievement (Love, 2010).

The *Cultures Through Song: A Korean Journey* project was born from inspiration, fostered by partnership, nurtured through open collaboration, culminated in successful presentation, and motivated the students and faculty to be involved in more projects like this one.

**Inspiration:** Opportunities for great things are often inspired by events that can seem insignificant. In this case, it was a guest artist in a mini concert which inspired a single student in my voice studio to undertake the preparation of a Korean art song. When the student brought the song to his first lesson it sparked an idea. If a single student could find a way to search out and learn a song like this on his own, what would a group of faculty-supported students be able to accomplish? Of course, one faculty member alone rarely has all the skills necessary to create a large scale project, therefore partnership was necessary.

**Partnership:** As colleagues, faculty often partner together to create larger scale works and projects. When approached, my colleagues were initially excited yet concerned about the viability of this enterprise in addition to all of our other daily duties for the department and the university. In this instance, their concerns were easily assuaged by a scheduling and implementation plan that had been created before our discussion of the undertaking. By carefully constructing a timeline with specific goals and a plan of systematic implementation, we were able to quickly and easily understand the feasibility of the project and secure group cooperation. In much the same way, the explanation was presented to the students from my voice studio and they were eased into the idea of the project. This allowed us to get the project underway in under a week.

**Collaboration:** As there was no need for additional funding, the cost of the project was only the time commitment everyone agreed to make. It was important that the time we spent together be profitable for all involved. We set up specific workshops and master classes with the understanding that no matter who was leading, everyone else was an active and open participant. This provided the students with opportunities to see not only their colleagues but also their teachers participate as students in these preparatory interactions. These environments fostered a deep and meaningful collaboration between students and faculty alike and elevated each member through the steps of the learning process.

**Presentation:** The concluding goal of the project was to present a public lecture concert on Korean culture as represented through Korean art songs. Through the partnership and collaboration process, a group of students and faculty presented a professional concert with a lecture component which impressed not only the members of the university and community in attendance, but also a group of native Korean speakers who had also made a special effort to be present. The students remarked, both during and after the process, on the sense of being involved in something larger than just their own performances. While some of the students had had previous experiences with opera workshop productions, none of them had had a full role in the realization of a major musical production such as the concert we presented on the Delta State campus. It changed not only their perceptions of their own capabilities, but also their larger understanding of the world.

**Motivation:** After the concert, both the faculty and students were clamoring for other cultures through song projects. The department was so excited about the outpouring of support and delight from the community that they encouraged the process to continue each year. This type of motivation on the part of the students arose from their full investment in the process and the flat power structure for the role of student. Rarely are we able to show our students the professional approach to learning with which we all are expected to be acquainted. This project allowed the faculty to lead by example as they took on the roles of both student and master teacher. What the students mentioned over and over again was that it was a revelation to see that the teachers were also learners and that there was no shame in not knowing something so long as you were prepared and ready/willing to let go of pre-conceived notions and learn.

The project itself was a learning experience for faculty and students alike and allied the two groups in a deeply meaningful way. Even now, two and half years later, it is still the first thing discussed by members of the groups. A larger CD production project was born from it which will be culminating in the release of a new CD of these underappreciated works in the near future. By being aware of the opportunities and seizing the inspiration when it came, we were able to create something amazing using only our collected talents and skills. By partnering together to pool those skills, we made ourselves much more powerful than the sum of our parts. In openly collaborating with faculty and students, we were able to create young culturally aware professionals out of a group of students with almost no previous experiences with the larger outside world. This led to the intrinsic motivation to do more projects like this one - further opening the horizons of the students, the university, and the communities we served.

The most important takeaway is that this type of project can occur anywhere. It is in our hands as educators to create these opportunities for our students and ourselves.

## References

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