Introspection Through the Prism of Sijo
Artistic Master Thesis

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ABSTRACT

For several years, my compositional practice was focused on the genre sijo. Since 2011, with the beginning of the cycle Sijo_Book I, this genre has lived in me, and grown and evolved with me. In this master’s thesis, I consider the sijo phenomenon, both through the traditional Korean genre and through the lens of my own works from 2011 to 2018. I reveal three main stages of the evolution of this genre in my works.

ABSTRACT

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Christian Utz of the Institute 1: Composition, Music Theory, History and Conducting at University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz. He consistently allowed this paper to be my own work, but steered me in the right direction whenever he thought I needed it.

I would also like to thank the experts who were involved in the validation survey for this research project: my both composition teachers Beat Furrer and Bernhard Lang, my composition teacher in Moscow Dmitri Kourliandski, and my colleague Dakota Wayne who helped me with English. Without their passionate participation and input, the validation survey could not have been successfully conducted.

Finally, I must express my very profound gratitude to my parents, to my wife and to my son for providing me with unfailing support and continuous encouragement throughout my years of study and through the process of researching and writing this thesis. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them. Thank you.

Sergey (Sehyung) Kim
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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Crisis and Inspiration

“A crisis is a signal that notifies us that we should not stand in the same place. We must be constantly in motion, must change. This is a natural phenomenon, which is impossible to predict or to anticipate. The confrontation with it always creates a strong psychological stress. If a person feels its approach, it means that the body is ready for change. Yet it is the vector of thinking that also needs to be changed, otherwise a person is not able to move to another level.”

Albert Einstein

A crisis is a signal that notifies us that we should not stand in the same place. We must be constantly in motion, must change. This is a natural phenomenon, which is impossible to predict or to anticipate. The confrontation with it always creates a strong psychological stress. If a person feels its approach, it means that the body is ready for change. Yet it is the vector of thinking that also needs to be changed, otherwise a person is not able to move to another level.

My personal experience of dealing with a crisis was very painful. It was a time (at the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011) when the logical end of my previous period (where I had simulated styles of other composers), drove me to something new.

I did not notice then that I was copying other’s music. When I realized, for the first time in my life I could not write a single note, practically for an entire year. I had deep depression. I later realized that this year was very necessary for me in order to rethink, reassess the current situation, and renew motivation with the desire to move forward.

1.2 Meeting Dmitri Kourliandski

At this moment, the composer Dmitri Kourliandski helped me a lot. He played an important role not only in overcoming my crisis, but also in my reincarnation as a composer. Like a psychologist, Dmitri convinced me that a crisis is not only the end of something, but also the beginning of something new. I realized that it was a time of radical change and I am very grateful to
Dmitri for having found the potential in me and motivating me to move further.

Dmitri taught me not to be afraid of colliding with something new, but, on the contrary, to accept it. He expanded my borders, teaching me how important it is to be open minded. This is especially important for me, because before the crisis I used to be a very closed and conservative person.

For Dmitri’s aesthetics, the question of authorship is very important: does an artist write a model, or does a model write an artist? Here the author/avatar dichotomy is found: existing patterns of writing and rhetorical figures of the distant and near past use us for self-reproduction, as avatars. Therefore, it is very important for Dmitri that a composer finds in himself his own models, finds himself as a model – with his own individual biography and psychophysics.

In the same way, he considers it important to consciously relate the system of interaction of performers with the text, and performers with each other, with the conductor, with the public, with the space.

Dmitri sees the conceptualization of composition and composition processes as an important stage of the work. But the main thing that I learned from him was to realize that composing starts before the sound.

1.3. Meeting the Sijo genre

After meeting Dmitri, he recommended that I start writing small forms: miniatures. At the same time, I became acquainted with the amazing genre of Korean lyric poetry – Sijo. It happened quite by accident. During my time in crisis, a good friend of mine presented me with an old Soviet book called Korean Classical Poetry translated by Anna Akhmatova. I had a special interest in this book for two reasons: I had never before encountered Korean poetry, and the translation was done by Anna Akhmatova, a very famous and important poet in the so-called Silver age period of Russian literature.
Sijo as a literature form

Sijo – is a Korean traditional poetic form. “The original meaning of the word sijo is a matter of debate. It is now written with two Chinese characters meaning ‘time’ or ‘period’ and ‘song’, and it has been variously explained as referring to the seasonal significance of the songs or the musical setting appropriate to them.”¹

The form of sijo consists of three lines of 14-16 syllables each, a total of 44-46 syllables. “Each line has a major pause in the middle and a subsidiary pause in the middle of each half-line. The number of syllables in each of the four subsections of a line varies from two to five of more, but the variation which occurs in each part of the poem is different.”² The usual pattern of syllabic distribution among the groups is generally presented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of syllables:</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Line 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 or 4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 or 4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Figures 1: The form of sijo

“This kind of description suggests that each line is composed of fourteen or fifteen syllables; much analysis of the sijo form proceeds as if this were indeed the case—as if syllable counting were the primary structural feature of the sijo. But variation in syllable count is the rule, not the exception, in sijo verse.”³

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¹ Richard Rutt, the Bamboo Groove, Introduction, p. 9.
² ibid., p. 9.
³ David R. McCann, The Structure of The Korean Sijo, p. 116
There are three verse forms called sijo:

- the standard, three-line p’yōng sijo;
- the slightly expanded variant ös sijo,
- and the greatly expanded narrative sasŏl sijo.

**Sijo as a musical form**

Sijo was originally written for song performance with musical accompaniment. As a musical structure, it has a dynamic unit sung as a single phrase. It can be characterized by a strong initial attack of a singer, reinforced by the combinations of accompanying bass drum, and stretched to the singer’s breath contour. “The focus of the performance is on this unit as a single continuum of sound as a chain or a stream rather than as a succession of separate sounds:”

“The singer uses two or three syllables to set up a pitch upon which he elaborates with the singularly Korean vocal techniques. This is by no means a recitation tone, since it is sung on a single syllable. The listener’s attention and the singer’s concentration are centered upon the treatment of that single tone, the technical term being ‘Yŏ-ūm’ (sic) or ‘Aftertone.’ Especial interest centers upon the wide vibrato and the microtonal inflections obtained with the ‘last gasp’ of the singer’s breath for each sung component.”

“Just as traditional description of the literary form of the sijo employs a somewhat misleading syllable count, the terminology of a beat or metrical measure has been transferred to analysis of the dynamic units of the musical performance, commonly in the form below.”(Figure 2)
“But in actual performance it is the singer’s sense of the breath ‘contour,’ a combination of physical capacity and aesthetic taste, rather than a set of equidistant, regular beats, that determines the lengths of the dynamic units. The accompanying drummer depends entirely upon his rapport with the singer for the placement of his "beats" and the success of the performance. The drum beats merely divide a given unit into segments; they do not determine the unit's duration.”

7 ibid., p. 125
II. The First Step

2.1 Conceptualization

“I can’t understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I’m frightened of the old ones.”

John Cage

When I discovered Sijo form, I decided to follow Dmitri’s advice and use them to start from small etudes. The genre itself fascinated me not only because of the construction of the poems, but also because of the fact that sijo was originally sung. It immediately prompted me to use the form of sijo in my writings. This is how the first idea about the cycle of pieces Sijo_Book appeared.

The purpose of creating the cycle was purely technical. The Sijo pieces were a kind of etude, preparing me for a larger, more fundamental piece. I naively assumed that these works were capable of supplying me with a technique which, as I then thought, I did not have. It was just a kind of draft for me where I could experiment freely. The choice for miniatures was made because I felt very close to this form. What excited me about this genre was a certain freedom within the framework of a rigid construction.

2.2 Sijo_Book I

In total, there are 21 pieces in this cycle. Initially, I set myself the goal of writing several separate solo pieces, but subsequently, the purpose and concept changed completely. The more miniatures I wrote, the more I realized they were more than etudes. And soon I realized that the whole time I had not been writing different pieces, but one. I also realized that I had been writing not only solo pieces but also a parts of a larger ensemble composition. Thus, the idea grew that these pieces would form a cycle and could be combined, connected, and performed at the same time.
Each piece has a title that reflects the exact date on which the idea for the piece came to me. This is important for me, because it is not the result itself that is important, but the way.

_Sijo_280412 [der Schnee kommt]

This is my third piece in the cycle written for piano solo. The subtitle of the piece _der Schnee kommt_ is translated from German as _the Snow is coming_. This is my purely associative perception and understanding of the character of the piece, where the subtitle is not accidentally written in German. The piece was composed in Austria after my entrance exam – as the certain point of my habitat changing. So, it is a kind of bridge or connection between my Moscow period (last stage) and new time in Graz (new stage).

“_Sijo_280412 is an egg of resonant simplicity. It’s a philosophical puzzle: while different keys of the piano are struck, the placement of a finger on different parts of the strings results in the same pitch (sort of) sounding for all of them. Are there eight different pitches or only various shades of one? Its organization is also elegant. The small numbers above each harmonic refer to their order in the overtone series – 7 was skipped presumably to keep the tight 4-to-4 ratio between the first and second staves intact (and it might have sounded gross). The pauses reveal an interesting architecture: decreasing in length in one way, increasing the next, and circling the drain in the third. The final line also circles the harmonics before bringing the piece back to the natural E. The wide spaces between the thunking, gong-like E’s perfectly evoke the muted, desolate beauty of a snowy landscape, the more disparate harmonics even reminding the listener of the crunch of a boot penetrating the surface. You can look in all directions and infer the changing landscape, but it’s all enveloped by the E-static, immense but ultimately fragile, as one slip of the finger on the string brings it all down.”

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The organization in this piece is relatively free. What I took from the traditional structure is only the syllable length (14) and number of sections (4) of each line. In each of the three lines, I divided the number fourteen into four sections according to the following principle: a decrease in the first line, an increase in the second, and some conditional circulation in the third with the following sequence:

```
   5  |  4  |  3  |  2  |
```

```
   2  |  3  |  4  |  5  |
```

```
   5  |  2  |  4  |  3  |
```

Figure 3: Sijo_280412, full score

An analysis of the piece reveals problems with the designation of overtones. At this time I still continued to designate the overtone not by the principle of the natural scale, but by the principle of the ordinal number, starting with “0”, as the main tone. For example, the very first overtone in this system will actually be the second. Structurally speaking, I organized the overtones following the aforementioned principle of a decrease and an increase. Over the course of the whole piece, the actual piano keys pressed descend. However, the sounding pitches (and the overtones themselves) ascend.
From the table above, it is clear that I am skipping the seventh overtone (eighth on the spectral scale). This is due to the fact that the overtone is under the damper and cannot be played. So I had to go for a "trick" in order to achieve the desired effect.

Overall, the structure of the piece is a kind of arch, an internal circulation. The first measure contains a pizzicato on the string, and the last measure a dampened note that mutes all overtones except for the fundamental. Both consist of the pitch E and both are not harmonics. It turns out, then, that the performer lives a micro-life, where in the end he returns to where he started from, albeit with different feelings and different experiences.

Pauses, about which I have not yet spoken, have played a particularly important role here. They are needed to maintain a common architecture. The fifth bar of each line is not only an end, but also a connection between the other two lines.

As for the technical side of the work, here two spaces intersect each other: dynamic and static. The dynamic space is one that requires completely different skills playing the instrument. From the viewer's perspective, we will see that the performer plays standing, making many movements, searching for a certain harmonic. In the static space, we hear only fragile and fading snowflakes of a suspended note. The farther away the overtone, the more muffled the winter landscape becomes, resting on the background of the single tone E.
This trumpet solo piece was composed during Impuls Festival in 2013. It is my 7th piece in this cycle. Before writing this piece, I set myself a definite goal – to study the instrument thoroughly. Therefore, one of my ideas was to use the entire spectrum of the instrument: its maximum capabilities. I began with a list of those techniques that I wanted to use in my composition. I planned almost every possible sound on the instrument: from the use of various reeds and mouthpieces from woodwind instruments to split tones. But in the end, after much work, I left many behind and decided to use only the following parameters:

1. Permanent breathing
2. Frullato
3. Multiphonic manipulations:
   a) split tones
   b) singing meanwhile playing
   c) split tones with singing
4. "wah-wah" mute
5. Bisbigliando
6. Using the third valve

It reminded me once again that composition is not only the ability to recruit, but also the ability to refuse.

Figure 6: Sijo_170213, bars 11-15
For the first time I decided to use the syllable structure of the vocal form of *sijo*, but with some changes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>(total 23)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>(total 26)</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(total 29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Figure 7: Sijo_170213, structure*

The form is based on the sonic development of the material, where the note A is the central tone. By and large, this is a kind of search for the very note that we hear in the pure form at the beginning of the piece. But every time it appears, we hear it differently with techniques such as bisbigliando, mute, or a combination of both. There is a kind of sound illusion where we lose that very first A in the crowd of its other counterparts.

For a long time, I was looking for an opportunity to realize my idea and perform the whole cycle simultaneously. I had the opportunity to do this in the ensemble project by Edo Micic in 2016. At this concert, I decided to act as a conductor, but not in the usual sense. Instead, I was conducting the ensemble through the mixing light console. For each performer, I picked a separate color in advance. When the light shined on the performer, they began to play, and when the light went out, they stopped. In case the light was longer than the piece itself, the performer repeated the material. I had complete freedom in organizing the form of the whole piece, while maintaining the individual material of each musician.
III. The Next Step

3.1 Reconstructualization

“The careful listening is more important than making sounds happen.”

Alvin Lucier

The end of 2014 was my turning point. If we look at the pieces in the cycle Sijo_Book I chronologically, we can see my tendency with each new piece to stretch the form. In other words, I was more and more going beyond the frame of a miniature. After I finished my first cycle, I realized I could not move further using the same model. One could say that it was another crisis, but this time a small one. It took a year for me to return to the sijo form and begin the second cycle. The period between the end of 2014 and the end of 2015 was a period of transition and transmission between the two cycles. Inside this period, I focused on composing text scores and conceptual pieces, and drew influence from American composers such as James Tenney and Alvin Lucier. It helped me to re-approach the sijo genre from a different angle.

3.2 Three Sijo

In summer 2015 I got a commission to write a piece for flute and piano for Doris Nicoletti and Frederik Neyrink. This was a starting point of my next cycle. The cycle Three Sijo includes the following pieces:

- Sijo_111115 for woodwind instrument and piano (2015-2016)
- Sijo_271015 [Pearl] for saxophone, piano and double bass (2015-2016)

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9 C. Cox and D. Warner’s, Audio Culture, Readings in modern music, p. 63
The three pieces share not only a similar general idea, but also a similar method of notation and the exact same structure, taken from the original sijo literature form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Line 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8: The form of each piece in the cycle three sijo*

A personal meeting with Alvin helped me a lot. I remember him saying that he intentionally does not use extended techniques, since he is not interested. What he was interested in was a “pure” sound and its interaction with other related sounds, creating beating patterns between the frequencies. I had a different position because I was always interested in the possibility of a particular instrument. Therefore, I wanted to combine these two things, frequency beatings and extended techniques, into one system. This monism is reflected in the notational system of this new cycle, where there is only one staff notated for all instruments.

In all three pieces I use the Ebow as a reflection of the influence of Alvin’s work. The other instruments interact with the sonic field of the Ebow, creating the frequency beats.

*Sijo_111115*

This is the first piece in the second sijo cycle. It was commissioned for a flute and piano duet, but the score can be performed by any woodwind instrument. Here I attempted to reconcile core concepts of the musical genre of sijo with my ongoing compositional work. As I already mentioned, I became interested in exploring beating patterns by using the Ebow. This allowed me to create a link to the way the voice functions in sijo.
With sijo, the voice and accompanying instruments only receive one line of pitch information. This information is usually quite limited: all the musical materials contain only two to four pitches in total, and only one or two pitches per line. Furthermore, the accompanying instruments follow the pitches of the voice imprecisely, ornamenting the vocal line with their own decorations. In this way, the sijo ensemble is performing a homogenous structure, but the orchestration is left up to the performers.

In my score, I do not notate any specific pitches. Before performing this piece, the woodwind performer should preselect the multiphonic he/she wants to play. This multiphonic should have only two notes and be flexible enough to also be performed bisbigliando. Meanwhile, the pianist should preselect two pitches on the strings corresponding to the flutist’s multiphonic and find harmonics for these two tones. The result is similar to that of sijo, in that the players are merely divisions of one entire structure, and much of the sonic detail is left up to the performer.

Before notating this piece, I had already precisely imagined the material and the whole form. All I had to do was transfer the idea to paper. With this, I was confronted with the problem of notation. First, I tried to write a piece on a standard 5-line staff. After a few bars, I immediately abandoned this idea for several reasons. Firstly, it did not visually reflect the idea of homogeneity, and secondly, I strongly wanted to avoid a 5-line staff system that implies a precisely pitched sound. Instead, I tasked myself with combining all the instruments into one staff and used a color notation with different stem directions. This way, with each new musician the sonic material will be rebuilt, while the integrity of the overall form will be maintained, producing a piece that is both highly structured yet extremely malleable. There are three layers in total:

- The red notes with stems facing up are for the woodwind instrument
- The blue notes with stems facing down are for the piano
- The black horizontal line indicates the Ebow, which plays the role of a hidden, third performer. The dynamics are determined by the degree
of transparency of the line. If there is no line on a bar, it means that the pianist should take the Ebow off of the strings.

The duration of each note is dependent on the length of the beam. The longer beam, the longer the note (Figure 9).

![Figure 9: Sijo_011115, the first bars of the first line](image)

**Sijo_271015 [Pearl]**

*Sijo_271015 [Pearl]* for saxophone, piano and double bass. Commission from Kazakh embassy in Austria for the festival *Kazakh’s Pearl*. For this commission, I wanted to find parallels between my music and pearls. When I discovered an image of a cut pearl, I was fascinated by its complexity, and its delicate layered construction.

Unlike the previous piece in this cycle, this piece contains only one main pitch, played on the piano by the Ebow. Also, it varies the notation slightly. Since this piece was written for trio, I set the following colored layers:

- The red notes with the diamond noteheads indicate piano harmonics
- The blue notes with stems facing up indicate saxophone
- The green notes with stems facing down indicate double bass
- The black horizontal line indicates Ebow

![Figure 10: Sijo_271015 [Pearl], beginning of the second line](image)
The composition is based on the principle of the formation of pearls. In the way that a foreign object enters the shell of a mollusk, a pure, sinusoidal sound gradually acquires a compacted shape over the course of the work, gaining many complex sonic layers. As the layers grow, the main sound becomes weaker. At the end of the piece the listener no longer hears the pure grain of sand that was the basis for the formation of the whole pearl. All that remains is the pearl.

_Sijo_020517 [Geori]

The last piece of this cycle is written for a duo for Korean bamboo flute daegeum and piano commissioned by the Korean ensemble Geori. The music consists of one homogeneous and meditative layer, divided into three levels: flute, piano harmonics, and sustained Ebow tones. Over the course of the piece, the material becomes denser, which results in a gradual transformation from a simple sound material to a very complicated one. However, due to the three distinct layers, the piece is more like a trio.

In general, this work resembles previous pieces, especially _Sijo_111115. Here again, the wind instrument interacts with the piano part within the framework of two pitches, using practically the same techniques, but in addition also others taken from Korean folk music, such as:

- *Jangshikeum* [장식음] – a small ornament that is chosen by the musician
- *Aksanggiho* [악상기호], which includes several symbols, including vibrato intensity and vibrato with a gradual glissando down.

Speaking of borrowing from the traditional music, I took not only techniques, but also the way they are notated in their traditional form.

![Figure 11: Sijo_020517 [Geori], the last bars of the third line](image-url)
CONCLUSION

2017 was characterized not only by the completion of the previous cycle, but also by the beginning of a new, third cycle, which continues to this day in 2019. This period is very different from the previous two. From the perspective of sound morphology, it is my first attempt to work with the whole prepared ensemble. In 2016, I began to experiment with different possibilities for preparing instruments. This process was inspired by the birth of my son; through buying him musical toys I discovered that some toy reeds are easily attached to some wind instruments and as a result produce hybrid sounds. The more I experimented with preparation, the more I delved into this strange and hitherto unknown sound world. Much like my son’s first experiences with ordinary musical instruments, I was like a baby apprehending something completely foreign. This observation pushed me to the idea of writing a piece, using a unique instrumental preparation that offers not only a new world of sounds, but also new angles of vision and listening. Thus, the pieces Sijo_310516 for 5 instruments, Sijo_171116 [the Face of another] for 7 instruments and my opera Consumnia for 4 soloists and 16 instruments, which consists of 3 scenes in 9 Sijo-episodes, were created.

With every new cycle, the concept becomes more ambitious in its duration and instrumentation. The first cycle consisted of mostly solo pieces, the second cycle includes chamber instrumentation (duo and trio), and the current period can be considered the period of larger ensemble (up to 20 musicians).

I found that my creativity evolves fractally, where each subsequent piece or sub-piece coincides exactly with a part of itself. That is to say that the whole cycle has the same form as one or more pieces in it. The three solo pieces for piano create a sort of a mini-cycle inside Sijo_Book I. The Three Sijo cycle resembles three lines of a sijo poem in its general form. Similarly, all three cycles are comprise one giant sijo poem. (Figure 12)
Looking back, I cannot say where I will go next or what awaits me ahead. It is impossible to predict. Perhaps this is the beauty of composition. I can, however, say with confidence that as the borders of my inner space expand by the day, I will always be exploring them. Sometimes to understand, I need the stressful jolt in the face induced by a crises, which I have learned not to fear. On the contrary, the crisis for me is a source of new ideas, new inspirations, and every time I will meet it with a smile on my face.
LIST OF REFERENCES


