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Navigating Performer Agency in Isang Yun's Monolog for Bassoon

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Abstract

Isang Yun's Monolog (1983/84) for solo bassoon is notated with extraordinary precision. Yet, it is in this hyper specificity that emerges a deeply interpretive work that demands a heightened negotiation between composer intent and performer agency. This paper investigates the performer's navigation of Yun's highly detailed score, asking: to what extent can interpretation reshape, reinforce, or complicate the meaning embedded in Yun's notation? Through comparative analysis of professional performances by Masahito Tanaka, Bram van Sambeek, and Stefanie Liedtke, the study reveals substantial divergence in phrasing, tone color, timing, and emotional affect—all within the confines of the same score.

This paper situates Monolog in Yun's intercultural aesthetic framework, drawing on his Hauptton technique and Taoist philosophy, while also interrogating its place in the "work concept," Werktreue, and the ontology of performance. The findings show that Yun's composition, far from prescribing a singular realization, invites a spectrum of expressive possibilities. Rather than being diminished by interpretive variation, Monolog is shown to depend on performer agency to activate its latent dramaturgy, philosophical nuance, and cultural hybridity. This case study ultimately argues that performer interpretation is not ancillary to the work's identity, but constitutive of it.

Keywords: Music, Isang Yun, Korean Music, Performance, Musical Interpretation, Bassoon