

# A REALLY BIG SHOW

The New York Philharmonic's fantasia in North Korea

By Suki Kim

**B**y noon on February 25, 2008, seventy-five journalists were crowding the Asiana Airlines gate at Beijing Capital International Airport. Many had their laptops open, since this would be their last chance to use the Internet for the next forty-eight hours. Some were pacing the floor with cell phones pressed tightly to their ears, knowing they would soon have to part with them, along with their passports. The correspondents had come from around the world for the chance to travel to the forbidden destination whose name was gleaming from the flat-screen monitors: PYONGYANG. Most of those gathered had never been there, and some had tried and failed repeatedly to gain access. Suddenly, cameras began clicking furiously as the 110 members of the New York Philharmonic approached the gate. Hauling instruments instead

of carry-on bags, the musicians were joined by an entourage of twenty-five wealthy patrons who had paid \$50,000

per person to accompany the Philharmonic into North Korea.



For almost a week, I had been following the orchestra on its Asian tour. Beijing, the final stop before Pyongyang, was a giant construction site. The Olympics were less than six months away, and China's capital city was consumed by last-minute preparations. The streets were plastered with BEIJING 2008 posters, as well as black-and-white photographs of Lorin Maazel, the Philharmonic's music director, in his youth,

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juxtaposed with recent shots of the maestro wielding a baton.

"What is being offered to you is a privilege," I was told by the Philharmonic's P.R. director, Eric Latzky, before my departure from New York. Apparently, the privilege didn't include the chance to speak freely to any of the Philharmonic's musicians, including the eight who are of Korean origin, a point made clear when Latzky insisted that I speak to the musicians only with his permission and assured me he would arrange interviews.

During the tour I got tired of waiting, and I loitered in hotel lobbies in the hope of chatting up a passing violinist or a cellist. Whatever was behind Latzky's stalling, he needn't have worried; when I asked the musicians about the planned concert in Pyongyang, their answers were the same:

"This is about music, not politics."

"We're bringing music to people who have no music."

"It's an historic moment, and we're happy to play a role in it."

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Their firm belief in their roles as cultural ambassadors echoed that of their maestro, who had made similar declarations in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed: “Artists . . . have a broader role to play in the public arena. But it must be totally apolitical, nonpartisan and free of issue-specific agendas. It is a role of the highest possible order.” Jon Deak, a double bass player with the Philharmonic for thirty-nine years, explained it this way: “Lenny would’ve done it”—“Lenny” being the late Leonard Bernstein, the music director who took the orchestra to the Soviet Union in 1959 and to Berlin when the wall came down in 1989.

“It’s a new frontier,” said Zarin Mehta, the Philharmonic’s Bombay-born president (and brother of its longest-serving music director, Zubin Mehta), when asked about staging a concert in Pyongyang, the city he called “a nice Orwellian fantasy.” While we were in Beijing, Mehta, whom Latzky had described as “the old world Anglo-Indian gentleman,” told me that it all began in August 2007, when an unnamed California-based mediator faxed an invitation from the North Korean culture ministry that Mehta then brought to the attention of Christopher Hill, the assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs. “Believe me,” Mehta said, “this was approved at the highest levels in the White House.” (According to reports in the South Korean press, the concert was first proposed in July 2007, during bilateral talks in Berlin, when the North Korean vice-foreign minister, Kim Kye Gwan, presented Hill with the idea of inviting the orchestra for a cultural exchange.) I expressed some surprise that the North Koreans had been so obliging. “Is it the country or is it the people I was dealing with? I can’t answer that,” Mehta acknowledged. “If I had to restrict my view of the country based on the people I dealt with, I would say that they were clever, engaging, and cooperative, but you know that the country isn’t like that from what you’ve read.” North Korea had promised that the concert would be broadcast live on state-run radio and TV. But electricity is scarce there, as are television

sets. And then there is the regime’s reputation for going back on its word. So why do it? He answered, his voice betraying nothing but relaxed earnestness, “World peace.”

Latzky had offered me a more elaborate story during our interview in his office at New York’s Avery Fisher Hall. “Zarin had flown to Stockholm to work with Alan Gilbert”—the conductor scheduled to succeed Lorin Maazel for the 2009 season—“and I flew to Venice to see the Biennale before heading to the south of France, Switzerland, and London. I was on a vaporetto surrounded by a boatful of German and American and British tourists, all these people with I LOVE VENICE T-shirts and cameras around their necks, and my cell phone rings, and it’s this man I had never spoken to, and he introduces himself as an official from the DPRK Permanent Mission to the United Nations.” Latzky paused briefly to offer me a violet-colored candy, which he said could be found only at a particular confectionery in Vienna. “I kind of stood up straight, and he’s calling to confirm that we had received the invitation. I had two friends with me, one of whom has a diplomatic background, and he’s in stitches laughing. It was noisy on the boat, and I am having this really loud, formal, diplomatic cell-phone conversation with the North Korean man. That was the first contact.” Latzky continued, shrugging once to add, “By virtue of who the New York Philharmonic is, and the fact that we travel around the world, we have diplomatic contacts on a regular basis.” He pointed to a wall of photographs. “That picture right there, that’s in Tokyo, that’s the empress of Japan attending one of our concerts. We regularly have heads of states attending our concerts. So the realm is not so unusual to us. We are a noted cultural ambassador of the United States.”

Latzky had invited me to a private reception in Beijing for the Philharmonic’s patrons, which was hosted by U.S. Ambassador Clark T. Randt Jr. at his residence. The event included a chamber concert featuring three stars from the or-

chestra, and the amount of goodwill and good food going around prompted Ambassador Randt to joke, “I hope you enjoy this dinner because it *will* be better than what you’ll get in Pyongyang!” Paul Guenther, the Philharmonic’s chairman and the former president of the PaineWebber Group, quipped, “I’m bringing my protein bar.” The former U.S. ambassador to Hungary, Donald Blinken, chimed in, “I’m ready for anything. I’ve got my long underwear with me.” The party was getting jolly.

In the middle of the room was Benjamin M. Rosen, an elderly man with a cheeky smile who introduced himself as a blogger for the *Huffington Post* (though he is better known as the former chairman of Compaq Computer), in a quandary over how many bottles of whiskey to purchase for his minders. Someone told him two or three, after which he walked around asking, “Which brand do you think North Koreans would prefer?” Pulling me aside, Sungeun Han-Andersen, the coifed young Korean wife of an investment banker, whispered, “My parents are from North Korea, but I wouldn’t dare look for my relatives. I’ve heard that they blackmail you. You know that’s what these people live on.” Accompanying one of the concert’s producers was a young man named Christopher who had once worked as an assistant to a celebrity photographer in Manhattan but was between jobs. He had come along to “experience a backward country.” “Beijing isn’t backward enough,” he said. “Shanghai was better because that was a bit more backward, but everyone knows that the real backward spot these days is Pyongyang.”

Holding court in a corner was a seventy-five-year-old Japanese woman reputed to have a \$190 million fortune that was inherited from her late husband, Count Ceschina of Venice. The countess was greeting everyone with “Yoko—no, not *that* Yoko.” A frequent contributor to Prince Charles’s charities and a former harpist, Yoko Nagae Ceschina was underwriting most of the cost of the Pyongyang concert and seemed elated about the next stop on the tour. “I

don't know about politics," she said. "But I think it's a good thing to go there. When Zarin told me about this, I said, 'I want to go to Pyongyang!'"

Back at the Grand Hyatt Beijing, I wangled an invitation to an oboist's room, where a dozen musicians had gathered around a case of Tsingtao beer. For months, the orchestra members had been debating the proper etiquette should Kim Jong Il attend the concert. They were unsure whether they should rise for this particular head of state, so they agreed to mount the stage together and remain standing until their concertmaster came out. Markus Rhoten, a twenty-nine-year-old German-born timpanist, told me, "When the Berlin wall came down, it wasn't smooth at all. I've been to Seoul, and I imagine that this isn't as simple as they make it sound." The others—whose names I promised to withhold because they were nervous about speaking to me without permission—expressed their own misgivings: "I had to undergo three therapy sessions to feel okay about this," and, "This is a job.

Let's just say we have no choice."

**O**n the two-hour flight from Beijing to Pyongyang, several South Korean reporters huddled together, adding up numbers. Asiana Airlines had spent about \$700,000 to provide the Philharmonic with a free charter flight to the event (although each member of the press had to pay the Philharmonic \$400 for a seat). The MBC network, the concert's main broadcaster in South Korea, had sent fifteen trucks of equipment and seventy-two crewmembers across the DMZ at a projected cost of around \$3.2 million. Kim Ki Hoon, a reporter for *Chosun Ilbo*, South Korea's national newspaper, explained that "who paid what" was "a key factor in dealing with the North." After all, the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit, for which Kim Dae Joong, South Korea's president at the time, won a Nobel Peace Prize, cost their government \$500 million in a secret payoff to Kim Jong Il. This morning, some of the reporters had been rerouted from covering the

presidential inauguration of conservative Lee Myung Bak, who had riled North Korea's sympathizers recently by proposing to shut down the Ministry of Unification altogether. Meanwhile, the two Koreas not only were still at war but were also locked in a battle wherein the North, despite FIFA regulations, was refusing to let the South fly its flag and play its anthem at the World Cup qualification match scheduled to be held in Pyongyang in a few weeks. The six-party talks had been stalled since the previous year, and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was in Seoul on her way to Beijing, where she would urge Chinese leaders to put pressure on the Kim Jong Il regime to fulfill its pledge of nuclear disarmament.

While the South Korean reporters were calculating the cost of the show, the American correspondents had other concerns. "I've gotta get a shot like the one in a Michael Moore documentary with a palm pressed against the camera," said a young CNN crewmember. A Fox anchor sat nearby; he kept pronouncing "Pyongyang" as "Piiaaang Yiiaaang," as if the extra nasal delivery would make the name sound extra Korean. The celebrity anchors Christiane Amanpour and Bob Woodruff were said to have already arrived, which then got a few reporters talking about how Amanpour and Woodruff might have negotiated such exclusive access and whether there would be a Kim Jong Il sighting after all. For the reporters on the plane, Kim Jong Il had become the world's biggest celebrity, and they were the paparazzi staking out the shot.

Seated away from the reporters was the P.R. legend Howard Rubenstein, whose gentle mien belied the luster of a client list that includes the Yankees and the Philharmonic. "I'm interested in how he"—Kim Jong Il—"keeps such tight control over his people," said Rubenstein. "I guess it's a professional curiosity."<sup>1</sup> Next to him was

<sup>1</sup> Rubenstein, contacted by a fact-checker, directed all inquiries to a spokesman, who denied that Rubenstein made this comment and emphasized that Rubenstein was on the tour not as a Philharmonic patron but in his capacity as the company's publicist.

Mrs. Rubenstein, an owner of New York's Peter Luger Steakhouse, nodding with girlish diffidence. "It's exciting. I've never even been to South Korea, and here I am going to the North." Everyone was chatting incessantly, as though we were children on the most thrilling field trip ever: "Our provisions must be coming on a separate plane, since there's no food over there"; "It sucks that we won't get to keep the visa for a souvenir"; "I'm already going through BlackBerry withdrawal." Soon, there was a barrage of questions. "Will there be an ATM?" "Will they charge for incoming calls too?" "Will we be able to walk around on our own?" The plane could have been heading for the moon.

Yet a hush of silence fell as the 4:00 P.M. arrival was announced over the PA system. Passengers paused mid-sentence. Their eyes widened. They held up their digital cameras. They turned their faces to the windows. For the few of us who had been to Pyongyang before, the place was still unfathomable. Six years had passed since my first visit, and here I was again beholding this land, the source of grief and longing for generations of Koreans.

On June 25, 1950, when North Korean tanks charged into Seoul, my grandmother packed all her belongings and took her five children, including my then four-year-old mother, to join the panicked crowds fighting to board an already packed southbound train. She had finally secured seats when someone shouted that young men must make room for women and children. Her seventeen-year-old son rose, telling her that he would get on the next train. Hers was the last train out. Her friends later reported seeing him being taken away by North Korean soldiers, his hands tied. My grandmother wandered around Seoul in search of her firstborn child and was appeased only when a local shaman told her that he was alive somewhere near Pyongyang. Until she died of a heart attack two decades later, she looked to the North as though the 38th Parallel would break open at any minute and return him to her.

The Korean War lasted three years

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and resulted in the death, wounding, or disappearance of 3 million civilians—roughly a tenth of the peninsula's population. North Korean and Chinese military casualties have been estimated at 1.5 million. South Korean forces suffered 415,000 dead and 429,000 wounded; U.S. forces, 33,000 dead and 103,000 wounded.

Whenever those speaking on behalf of the Philharmonic described their concert as “historic,” I wondered what they meant by the word. I thought of my grandmother, who was about my age when she realized that she might never see her son again. I imagined, though I never liked imagining it, the unforeseen and undeserved life that my seventeen-year-old uncle must have endured alone on the other side of the border. Six years ago, I had gone to Pyongyang only to learn that he was still missing, half a century after the armistice. This time, as the plane hit the frozen ground, I looked out the window from the South Korean charter plane carrying one of the largest contingents of Americans North Korea had seen since the war, remembering and feeling the dread of remembering.

**W**hen we arrived in Pyongyang, snow was falling softly. The hills loomed in the foggy distance, like shadows. The landscape could have belonged to the 1970s South Korean countryside, which is where I grew up before moving to the United States in 1983, when I was thirteen years old. A few planes bearing Air Koryo emblems were parked along the runway, like strange ancient flies. The bleak stillness was moody and colorless.

On top of the lone terminal building hung a portrait of Kim Il Sung, the original Great Leader, whose founding philosophy of Juche, meaning “self-reliance,” defined his country. Here, the year was Juche 97, according to the official calendar that begins with Kim's birth on April 15, 1912, “the Day of the Sun.” Since his death in 1994, Kim Il Sung has been relegated to the title of “Eternal President” or “Eternal Great Leader,” while his son, Kim Jong Il, whom the Western

media is stuck on calling “Dear Leader,” has taken over as “Great Leader” and “Great General.” The younger Kim, despite never having spent a day in the military, holds the rank of supreme commander of the Korean People’s Army, the fourth-largest force in the world, which drafts all women and men at the age of sixteen for seven or ten years of service.

We disembarked to find a group of men wearing Great Leader pins standing on the tarmac. As the photographers surrounded Maazel and the orchestra, I struck up a conversation with a North Korean Chosun Central Television reporter named Kwon Soon Ho, who was wearing a khaki jacket and dark sunglasses. “We’ve all been waiting for your arrival for two months. Everyone is looking forward to watching the concert on TV,” Kwon declared, and he seemed surprised to hear that the orchestra had just toured in other parts of Asia. I tried to ask him more questions, but he quickly ended our chat. “We have no hard feelings for the people of America,” he interrupted. “We are *dongbangaeyui-jiguk*—courteous nation of the East—and will treat our guests with respect. Let’s both hope for unification in our near future.”

After Maazel and his entourage were whisked into a black Mercedes to be taken to a private guesthouse, the rest of us were divided into small groups and assigned guides and translators. The patrons were booked at the Potanggang Hotel, which is owned by the North Korean-born Unification Church leader Reverend Moon, who has been investing heavily in the North, and most of the South Korean journalists were herded off to the Koryo Hotel. The remaining journalists and musicians were taken to the Yanggakdo International Hotel, which is known as “Hotel Alcatraz” due to its isolated location on Yanggak Island in the middle of Taedong River, where it is effectively cut off from the rest of Pyongyang. From this point on, our interactions were confined mostly to those within our group. We were told to stay with our designated buses. Mine was Bus #8.

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Although the road was relatively empty, more cars were in evidence now than they were six years ago. A shiny SUV passed by. A modern billboard bearing a photo of Pyonghwa Motors' "Cuckoo" car stood out among the other signs that read "THANK YOU, GREAT GENERAL KIM JONG IL" and "OUR GREAT GENERAL COMRADE KIM JONG IL, THE SUN OF THE 21ST CENTURY." I found this last sign confusing, as the North Korean calendar put us in the first century and the "Day of the Sun" hailed the birth of Kim Il Sung, not Kim Jong Il.

Amid the sparsely sprouting trees along the road were a few three- and four-story buildings in lavender and green. They looked freshly painted compared with the gray cement blocks that must have been apartment complexes. People were walking or riding bicycles. Even their faces looked healthier than I remembered them. No one was lacking a coat. For a moment, it appeared as though recent reports that the previous year's floods had worsened food shortages—leading to the cessation of rations and further malnourishment among the country's 23 million people—might have been wrong. A British reporter, who had been to Pyongyang before, concurred: "Certainly more traffic here than I've ever seen." The bus skipped the mandatory stop at Mansudae, where every visitor must bow to the statue of Kim Il Sung upon arrival.

**M**y room on the thirty-third floor of the forty-seven-story Yanggakdo International Hotel was heated so thoroughly that upon entering I looked immediately for a window, which was bolted shut and steamed over. From the hallway window I could see the murky horizon of gray buildings that surrounded the loop of the Taedong River, which a guide on the bus had described as "deeper and flowing from a higher source than Seoul's Han River." I would have liked to take in the view, but the itinerary provided by the Philharmonic left no time for lingering or reflection. It was now 5:30 P.M.; the welcome show by the Mansudae Artists was due to begin at Moranbong Theater in half an hour.

The Mansudae Artists performed traditional dances using fans and drums, dances that are typical in Korea. Not surprisingly, I saw a South Korean reporter dozing nearby. (What was surprising was that the featured folk music had nothing to do with the Great Leader.) With North Korean guides and translators all around us, there was no possibility of any of us wandering outside. Afterward, Maestro Maazel himself delivered a bouquet to the lead dancer onstage, flashing a smile to the cameras. As I left the theater, I spotted Michelle Kim, a Korean-American violinist whose parents had been born in Pyongyang, and I asked for her first impressions. "Awesome!" she said. I asked her what exactly about North Korea she found awesome. "It's beautiful here, and the people are really cool."

We were immediately led to a huge banquet hall adjacent to the theater where there were sparkling chandeliers, white tablecloths, and jacket-clad servers. The centerpieces appeared to be bouquets of Kimilsungia, a magenta orchid named after the Eternal Great Leader, surrounded by bottles of Taedong River beer, ginseng liquor, and wild mugwort wine. The room was so brightly lit that I could see every face around me. Peter Kenote, a viola player, muttered, "This is so embarrassing. I can't eat all this when people are starving outside." Markus Rhoten, the timpanist, seemed amused as he rolled his eyes at the mound of food on the table. The menu informed us that the sixteen-course dinner would consist of such delicacies as "floral basket shaped turkey," "fish jelly," and "lady crab gratin." The only North Korean specialties were Pyongyang-style kimchi, which was more watery than the version I had grown up eating, and a clear soup with balls of pheasant meat floating in it.

I was seated next to Kim Chul, a representative from the Korean Association for Art Exchange, North Korea's official hosting organization for the concert, and he wasted little time before giving me some terse advice. "You should write good things about us," he instructed, "and then

you'll be invited back." As the dinner progressed he became more loquacious. "How much are you being paid for writing your essay?" "Does your computer have the Internet?" "How much is a camera in America? I want to travel and take photos, but I have no camera." He had gone abroad once as an exchange student to Leipzig, Germany, though he wouldn't reveal whether he was allowed to travel anymore. The only glimpse he had ever had of South Korea was from TV news segments on labor-union protests there. He had "seen" the Internet (or the "Intranet," as North Koreans call their limited-access version), but it didn't show much. Cars cost between 10,000 and 20,000 euros, and a computer costs about 400 euros, which most people cannot afford. (I didn't see any evidence of the North Korean won while I was there, since all their currency transactions with foreigners are conducted in euros.) I asked him what his salary was. "We are socialists," was his answer. As the dessert of cakes and ice cream was served, he suggested, "Maybe you'd like to leave me your computer and camera as a souvenir."

During the five-minute drive back to the hotel, we saw monuments that were lit up as if it were Christmas. No other lights, whether from neighboring buildings or advertising billboards, interfered with the sparkling decoration. A German television crew, which had arrived the day before to set up, told me that the city had been dark and the lights suddenly came on as our plane arrived. From the hotel's thirty-third floor hallway window, however, all I could see was utter darkness.

Back in my room, I turned on Chosun Central TV, which was showing a dance performance almost exactly like the one we had attended earlier that evening. Even the dancers' heavily made-up faces looked identical. I watched it for about fifteen minutes before falling asleep, not certain if it was a taping of the same show

I'd seen or another show just like it.

**C**aviar for breakfast was the last thing I expected. Although it was

not quite 7:00 A.M., I was given no choice but to sit down before the lavish buffet. I had wanted to take a walk, but the guard at the hotel door told me that there was “nothing interesting outside.” The hall was decorated with ice sculptures of an eagle and a globe, as well as a mural of Jong Il Peak on Mount Baekdu, the supposed birthplace of Kim Jong Il. I could hear the low hum of a wordless melody. Offering me a cappuccino, one of the servers said that the song was “I Am Thinking of You,” which is “about how we want our Great General to take a rest from tirelessly working for us.”

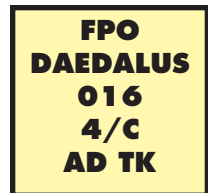
I was carrying a few back issues of *Rodong Shinmun*, the six-page official daily newspaper, and several reporters flocked to my table, wanting me to tell them what was written in Korean, despite the fact that there were translators everywhere. Almost every article in the paper was either about music or Kim Jong Il’s weeklong “2.16” birthday celebrations, which culminated on February 16 and included visits from various delegations representing Palestine, Bangladesh, Laos, Cuba, and Uzbekistan. On February 24, an editorial entitled, “Juche is the life of our music,” expounded Kim Jong Il’s position on music as a political tool. On February 25, the front-page article was titled, “South Koreans applaud Great General Kim Jong Il’s artistic genius,” and it listed a few of the countless books he has authored: *On Fine Art*, *On the Art of Drama*, *On the Art of Dance*, *On the Art of Cinema*, and *On the Art of Music*. This morning, February 26, there was an article on the overseas popularity of such classic North Korean hits as “The Song of General Kim Jong Il” and “Without You, There’s No Country.” On page 4, below a column entitled, “Our music, our way,” was a photo of the Philharmonic’s arrival and a three-line description.

At the Philharmonic’s press briefing later that day, I asked whether this concert had anything to do with the 2.16 celebrations, which typically feature foreign artists performing for the Great Leader. The dates were so close that the event

could be packaged as part of the tributes. Mehta firmly denied this, but Maazel later referred to the Philharmonic’s 1959 concert in the Soviet Union. “The Soviets didn’t realize that it was a two-edged sword, because by doing so they allowed people from outside the country to interact with their own people, and to have an influence,” he said. “It was so long lasting that eventually the people in power found themselves out of power.” Asked by another reporter if he was suggesting that the same would happen here, in North Korea, Maazel demurred. “There are no parallels in history; there are similarities. We are very humble. We are here to make music.”

**B**us #8 became a familiar sight. Following breakfast, while the orchestra was rehearsing, the journalists were taken on a two-hour city tour. One of the translators, aware that I had written a novel, sat next to me and opened a novel called *The Morning on the Frontier*. Regardless of his motives, I felt happy to see him reading a book, and I hoped that a conversation about it would divert us from this endless jostling for information. His job was to watch me and record my every misstep, and my mission was not so dissimilar. I was curious about the novel he was holding, and I wanted to know whether he was enjoying it. Handing it to me, he said, “Read the first paragraph and see how the book shows our Eternal Great Leader’s bravery and the sacrifice he made for us.”

As we arrived at Mansudae, the sixty-five-foot bronze statue of Kim Il Sung that we’d skipped on the way from the airport, a group of North Koreans walked up the steps to bow and offer their bouquets. I had happened upon a similar scene during my last trip, and it had seemed as curiously timed then as it did now. Everyone appeared to be watching everyone at all times. The guides and the translators followed us as we studied their people. Trailing us were the North Korean reporters, including twenty-seven-year-old Hwang Eun Jong, who



echoed what the Chosun Central Television reporter had told me when we first arrived at the Pyongyang airport. "I have no hard feelings for the American people. We are *dongbangyaeuijiguk* and will treat our guests with respect."

At our next stop, the Grand People's Study Hall, I ran into a few patrons who were on a separate tour. We were staying at different hotels, and our movements depended on our guides and our designated buses; with no email and no phones, we had no idea what anyone outside of our own group was doing. So it was refreshing to see some familiar faces, but before I could say hello the patrons were led away by their guides.

On the main floor of the Study Hall, several young people were hunched over a dozen computers. Except for the framed quotes by Kim Jong Il covering the walls, the hall could have been a public library anywhere in the world. Baek Hyang Lan, a senior at Kim Il Sung University, was looking up the Great Leader's writings. When I asked her why she was here instead of at her college library, she said, "This facility is free, as are all our educational institutions. I'm very lucky." Exhibiting none of the shyness one might expect of people in a country where foreign reporters are a rarity, she countered, "Are they free where you are from?" The only time she hesitated was when I asked her whether she could log on to the Internet, at which point Kim Seung Ki, the manager of the Study Hall, intruded with, "What nonsense! If we needed it, of course we could connect to the Internet. But the Internet won't bring about unification."

Whenever my questions strayed beyond a cordial greeting, the conversation inevitably turned to unification. It is a safe topic, because there is only one right opinion. I had grown up in South Korea singing a song called "Our Wish Is Unification." The desire for "one Korea" remains rooted in the Korean psyche, though the generation that remembers the war is mostly gone and the prospects for unification are increasingly remote. Unification is often in-

voked to arouse nationalism, since most Koreans have not forgotten that the United States created the 38th Parallel.

In August 1945, Truman and Stalin joined forces to liberate Korea from thirty-six years of Japanese rule and divided the country into two temporary occupation zones on either side of the 38th Parallel, which was chosen by U.S. military planners Dean Rusk (later secretary of state under Kennedy and Johnson) and Charles Bonesteel. The Soviets and the Americans set up their preferred governments in the two zones, with Kim Il Sung, the anti-Japanese guerrilla leader, in the North and the American-educated Syngman Rhee in the South. When the North invaded the South in 1950, Korea did not really belong to Koreans. Today, North Koreans are taught that the United States engineered the war and that the South launched the first attack. As Manager Kim put it to me, "The Soviets went home in 1948, but the Americans are still in the South today, so who has more at stake in keeping us apart?"

Rather than waiting for my response, Manager Kim began to tell me that the Study Hall had been designed by Kim Il Sung and constructed by Kim Jong Il. He claimed that the building held 30 million books, 60 percent of which were foreign titles such as *Gone With the Wind*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the works of Sidney Sheldon.<sup>2</sup> Over 10,000 people stopped in daily for research and complimentary classes. Currently in session was an English lesson by an energetic teacher before a roomful of eager students, who seemed oblivious to the clicking cameras. For a moment, I felt like we were in a zoo, looking at the North Koreans on display. A few reporters recognized the teacher, Choi Hyang Mi, from a 2004 Dutch documentary, *North Korea: A Day in the Life*, in which she taught an almost identical English lesson. Sitting in the front row, Park Chul Su, a taekwon do instructor in his mid-

<sup>2</sup> *The U.S. Library of Congress, recognized as the largest library in the world, holds 21 million books.*

forties with a shaved head and a compact build, said, "I'm here to learn conversational English because I have so many foreign students that I want to communicate with." I asked him who these foreigners living in Pyongyang were, but Manager

Kim again interceded and pulled me away.

**T**he final tour was a one-stop ride in an empty subway car. We were waiting to depart from Buheung ("Revival") station, which was devoid of people, but I could hear a faint recording of "I Am Happy," a song about finding happiness within the cradle of the Great Leader. I had been taken on this exact subway route during my last visit. The thing about revisiting Pyongyang—despite what seemed to be a brighter and warmer facade, as though somebody somewhere had turned a knob one notch higher—is that everything is on repeat. The sites one is allowed to see are the same. The images all bear the faces of the father and the son. The songs recycle the same chorus. Having spent the past week with the orchestra, subjected to their own mantras of "historic journey" and "cultural diplomacy," I paused in that underground station, whose only color belonged to the Kim Il Sung mural on the wall, and was seized by nausea.

When the train arrived at Yonggwang ("Glory") station, the platform was filled with a crowd. It wasn't clear where they had come from. The guides didn't stop me as I ran after a young woman in a fashionable pink parka and jeans. She identified herself as Lee Eun Ju, a nineteen-year-old student from Kim Chaek University. With a face free of makeup and shoulder-length hair neatly pulled back with a white headband, she was the picture of an ideal youth. She said that she was on her way to meet a friend at the subway exit. When I asked her where they were headed afterward, she wouldn't answer, and my repeated questions about the social life of Pyongyang's youth were met with a shy smile. I relented and inquired instead about her thoughts on the Philharmonic's visit, to which she

immediately replied, "I have no hard feelings for the American people. I am looking forward to watching the concert on TV." Finally, I asked what her major was. She answered "Music." I wondered at the coincidence that the one person I picked from the crowd turned out to be a student of music.

As the escalator reached the sidewalk, we faced a busy intersection opposite the Pyongyang train station. A tram was passing with a load of people inside. I saw a Pyonghwa Motors billboard like the one along the road from the airport, this one featuring the "Whistle" car. Bus #8 was parked nearby, and the guides were beckoning to us. The girl I had been talking to a minute before was gone.

**S**hortly before 6:00 P.M. that evening, rows of men in dark suits and women in outdated *hanbok* began streaming into the white marble lobby of the East Pyongyang Grand Theater. They seemed to know exactly which door to walk through, even though there was no sign designating a separate entrance from the one used by foreigners. The seventy-five journalists had been brought to the theater two hours earlier for a press conference, which had suddenly been added to the itinerary. We waited anxiously in the briefing room while preparations for the concert took place outside. When the minister of culture failed to show up after more than an hour, some of the reporters grumbled that the whole thing had been a ruse to keep us from wandering off and asking questions.

We left the briefing room to find the lobby bustling with foreign dignitaries. The North Koreans did not linger as they walked straight into the theater, but I managed to get a few of them to speak to me. No matter what I asked, all five people I spoke to brought up the "Arduous March," using the North Korean Workers' Party euphemism for the mid-1990s famine that reportedly killed 2.5 million. An elderly professor of music, who would not reveal his name, said, "We have survived the Arduous March that was

imposed on us by the Superpower. We are *dongbangyaeuijiguk* and will treat our guests with respect. But soon we will become a strong and powerful country under the guidance of our Great Leader." When I asked him where he had purchased his ticket and at what price, the professor fidgeted. "I just got it from an acquaintance," he said. I asked the same question of a woman clad in a sequined *hanbok*, who mumbled that "someone gave it" to her. The others, who claimed to be either performers or students of music, refused to answer the question and ended the conversation without a reply. A representative from the Korean Association for Art Exchange stopped me. "If you want to talk to our people, we will select ones for you."

Inside the theater, there were none of the usual sounds of pre-concert chatter. No one had donned the party uniform, even though there were said to be several party officials among the 1,400 audience members, including Pak Kwan O, chairman of the Pyongyang City People's Committee, and Song Sok Hwan, vice-minister of culture. I was seated between a translator and a pair of men in their mid-twenties, who were dressed in immaculate suits and Nike sneakers. They seemed nervous and were sitting stiffly in their seats, as though they were here for an exam. One of the young men leaned over and whispered something to the other, only to be hushed. I scanned the faces in the crowd, but I couldn't decipher their expressions. A few gave me reluctant smiles but quickly looked away when I held our gaze for longer than a few seconds. "Are concerts lit like this back in America?" the translator asked. I shook my head, glancing at the TV cameras aimed at the Stars and Stripes and the North Korean *Ingonggi* on either side of the stage. "Here neither," he said. "We usually do it the way you do it."

The audience rose for both national anthems, though "*Aegukka*" ("Patriotic Song") is hardly used by North Koreans, whose real anthem is "The Song of General Kim Jong

Il." They listened impassively as Maazel explained that the three works featured tonight—by Dvořák, Gershwin, and Bernstein—had been premiered by the Philharmonic. Maazel's attempt at saying "Have a good time!" in Korean got the expected laughs. The eventual requests for encores came across as perfunctory and automatic. The audience seemed unruffled when Maazel walked off the stage while the orchestra played Leonard Bernstein's overture to *Candide*, a bizarre ritual that Maazel explained was to make room for the spirit of his predecessor. If the audience noticed the parallel between Maazel's tribute to the dead maestro forever living within the orchestra's heart and their own worship of the Eternal Great Leader, they didn't show it as they politely smiled and clapped. Only once did I see the young man next to me wince. This was during the introduction to Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, when Maazel declared, "Someday a composer may write a work entitled *Americans in Pyongyang*."

After *Candide*, the Philharmonic began to play something that wasn't on the program. The men on either side of me seemed to know exactly what it was, which surprised me, because I didn't recognize the melody right away. Within a beat of the first note, the translator whispered, "Do you know what this is?" It took me a little while, because "*Arirang*" is almost always sung in a traditional *chang* style. It is a folk song that all Koreans learn, and each region has its own version. The one that the Philharmonic chose was the popular "*Bonjo Arirang*" from the Seoul region, arranged for orchestra by the North Korean composer Choi Sung Hwan in 1976. It was also the same version adopted by the U.S. 7th Infantry Division in South Korea as its official marching song.

The music sounded pleasant enough, but it had little to do with the "*Arirang*" that we, the Koreans in the audience, knew. For an American, it would be akin to hearing "Yankee Doodle" arranged for *gayagum*, a Korean string instrument.

The Koreans around me appeared amused, if not somewhat puzzled.

Later, I read report after report of the audience being moved to tears at that moment. The CNN headline read, "Music diplomacy draws tears..." The *New York Times* coverage described how "tears began forming in the eyes of the staid audience." The MBC news swore that there was evidence of this in film clips and later called me repeatedly to vouch for it. I read that a South Korean actress, Son Suk, who was seated in the VIP section, cried. She said that she did in several interviews afterward. I met a retired Korean-American minister from Binghamton who had traveled to Pyongyang for the 2.16 celebrations and ended up at the concert courtesy of his hosting organization. He admitted that he found himself choked up at several moments. I also heard about a South Korean reporter who claimed to have been nearly brought to tears, but by the sound of Dvořák, not "Arirang." I myself did not witness any tears nor did any foreign correspondent to whom I later spoke. The musicians, including Michelle Kim, gave a press conference about their own emotional crying-fest.

Until the finale of "Arirang" and the subsequent standing ovation, our delegation had remained largely skeptical. Everyone agreed that what they were allowed to see could not have been how things actually were. The overheated hotel rooms and garish banquets did not convince them. The brightly lit skyline reminded them of the lack of electricity in the rest of the country. They questioned the validity of the ticket sales and the real identities of the audience members. Yet their skepticism faltered when they considered music's power to move the audience. Everyone seemed to measure the success of this concert by the North Koreans' tears.

Once the concert was over, several reporters ran to catch the audience members, who were swiftly filing out in an orderly fashion, just as the orchestra had. I wondered why we kept asking questions. Our attempts were not unlike walking into

Disneyland and pleading with the actress playing Cinderella to tell us about something other than her missing slipper. We must have thought that if we asked enough times, they might finally break down and tell us what was really on their minds. There we were, a delegation that included the oldest American orchestra—or as Eric Latzky claimed, "the greatest orchestra in the world"—an orchestra that never would have passed up a chance to play their beloved Dvořák, Gershwin, and Bernstein; that never would have imagined that the audience might not be impressed by their beloved Dvořák, Gershwin, and Bernstein; that never would have considered how their beloved Dvořák, Gershwin, and Bernstein here in this land of the Great Leader might sound as incongruous as "The Song of General Kim Jong Il" would sound to our ears. How could we have expected to learn something that wasn't in the program? From the orchestra's performance to the audience's applause to the bright lights of Pyongyang—everything had been exquisitely staged, not only by the North Korean regime but also by the New York Philharmonic. The real audience turned out to be the media, whose role from the beginning was to bear witness to the whole production.

It seemed peculiarly American of the Philharmonic never to fathom that they might not be liked by those in dire need of economic and humanitarian assistance—that the North Koreans' tears, if they did indeed shed tears, might signal not gratitude but humiliation. North Koreans might politely endure an American presence and even court its company for their survival, but nothing short of a responsible American foreign policy would change the fact that for fifty-five years they have despised the United States and its politics. Maazel's casual reference to "Americans in Pyongyang" betrayed an astounding lack of consideration for Korea's colonial past, as though he and his orchestra were landing on the moon and hoisting the Stars and Stripes for the world to see. The international media did their part by

sending seventy-five journalists to cover what was, in the end, just a concert.

At the banquet that night, Zarin Mehta repeated the phrase "I'm over the moon." It was not clear whether Maazel, too, was over the moon, but upon returning to America, he would appear on a number of talk shows to say that average North Koreans saw and heard the concert, and he would blog about how South Koreans told him that "70 million Koreans will love you forever!" CNN showed its anchor watching the concert on TV with a North Korean family in their living room, thus proving to the world that this pre-selected family had access to a live broadcast of the event. The head of Radio Free North Korea, Kim Sung Min, later told me that according to his sources, a clip of the Philharmonic's rendition of "Arirang" was spliced into a North Korean documentary about the "Arirang" Festival, a commemoration of Kim Il Sung's birth, which took place seven weeks after the Philharmonic's departure. As for the radio broadcast, no verification surfaced afterward, except for a U.S. State Department internal memo reporting that at the time of the performance, Pyongyang Radio aired two programs: "Dangerous U.S. War Strategy Against Korea" and "Who Is the Ringleader Intensifying Tension?"

All of this would be revealed later. But at the banquet following the concert, the only thing anybody wanted to do was celebrate. Mehta proposed a toast to his orchestra: "To the best in the world." The North Korean vice-minister of culture, Song Sok Hwan, said that the Philharmonic "opened the hearts of the Korean people." Latzky announced that the DVD of the concert would soon be available for \$24.99. No one mentioned the absence of the Great Leader. Afterward, the foreign correspondents left the banquet hall to buy up the hotel gift shop's stock of the English edition of Kim Jong Il's *The Great Teacher of Journalists*. Meanwhile, the orchestra partied in Markus Rhoten's suite on the thirty-eighth floor, overlooking Pyongyang's rapidly darkening sky. ■