

Cementing the Sounds of State-Building: Early North Korean Mass Music and Staged Works of Music, 1945–1949*

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Upon exiting the newly established Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948, the Soviet Civil Administration (SCA) compiled a detailed report on the North's economy, politics, and culture, noting that roughly twelve thousand music "circles" had emerged since 1945, more than all other mentioned local organizations combined. Due to the Soviet Union's expertise in political and labor mobilization, the embryonic North Korean state relied heavily on it during the post-liberation period; however, this was also a critical time when the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) established its hegemony in a way that could readily translate into statehood. In this article, I demonstrate how the DPRK's attainment of statehood was inextricably linked to music development. I illustrate how, on the one hand, the KWP's utilization of marches and mass songs saturated the populace with routines of empowerment, buttressed by potent depictions of democratic praxis. I then explore the DPRK's quest to showcase so-called grand and national classics, which essentially functioned as a rite of passage to become a well-respected member of the wider Socialist Bloc community. Although the implementation of all these initiatives was top-down, individual musicians made a name for themselves by harmonizing their artistic inclinations with party directives.

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