

## Shin Arirang

### Traditional (arr. D. Kim)

**A**rirang is a Korean folksong — and as is the case with many folk songs, its origins are obscure and its history is meandering. One theory traces it to the 19th century, when Heungseon Daewongun served as regent to the monarch Gojong (his son), a period that ran from 1863 to 1873. During that regency, a large number of Chinese workers were brought to Seoul to construct the Gyeongbok Palace. They brought with them the ancestor of this piece, a Chinese song titled *Airang*, which expressed the workers' sorrow at being separated from their wives or lovers.

Or perhaps it is much older than that, with at least its text reaching to the time of Park Hyeokgeose (69 BCE–4 CE; reigned 57 BCE–4 CE), the founding monarch of Silla, one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea. Maybe the title *Arirang* was derived from the tribal language of the Jurchen in northern China; in that language, the word *arin* means “hometown.” In modern Korean, the term *arirang* does not have a precisely defined meaning. Instead, it is an exclamation peculiar to this song, conveying roughly the same linguistic import that “lackaday” might in an English-language folk ballad — a word with meaning in its context, but not one that would normally be used in more general speech or writing.

The song may have been recorded for the first time in 1896, when the ethnologist Alice C. Fletcher had three Korean students come to her home in Washington, DC. There, she recorded them singing *Arrarang* (as she spelled it) three times, captured on Edison wax cylinders. Scholarly investigation has raised the possibility that Fletcher did not in fact make those recordings, but rather that they were made earlier — possibly by the anthropologist Franz Boas at the 1893 World's Columbian

Exposition in Chicago — and were simply passed on to her. In any case, these recordings stand as monuments of sonic history.

Whatever its beginnings, the song's popularity grew organically and it was embraced and adapted throughout the Korean peninsula. The lyrics, tune, and rhythms were modified depending on the region and the performer; yet, even when altered, the piece is recognized as part of the *Arirang* family. Musicologists and folklorists have catalogued and classified the variations of *Arirang* — about 60 different varieties of the song, comprising at least 3,600 variants. The principal varieties are typically identified with a descriptor that connects the version with a region of the Korean peninsula. The version called *Jeongseon Arirang* is widely viewed as the original, “pure” version of the song.

In this concert we hear the version known as *Shin Arirang* (*New Arirang*), from the region of Seoul. This setting, which uses words by Myung-Moon Yang, was arranged for orchestra by Dong-Jin Kim.

Over time, *Arirang* (with all its variants) achieved such popularity as to be considered an unofficial national anthem. Its popularity was boosted when it was used as the theme song for the feature film *Arirang* (1926), a classic of early Korean cinema directed by and starring Na Woon-gyu.

---

## IN SHORT

### *Shin Arirang*

#### Traditional (arr. D. Kim)

**Work composed and premiered:** unknown

**New York Philharmonic premiere:**  
this performance

**Estimated duration:** ca. 3 minutes

(Hugely popular in its time, the film is considered lost today, although a print is rumored to exist in a collection in Japan.) It was, of course, a silent film, but the audience was invited to sing the piece as part of the film's conclusion.

*Arirang* has been pressed into service as a song of political protest, an anthem of national solidarity, and a piece to display team support at athletic events. No matter what the context, it often retains elements of its fundamental topic, which is nostalgia in the face of separation. The song figures twice on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list, which accepted it in 2012

for the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and then again in 2014 for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). *Arirang* has also become a significant part of the history of the New York Philharmonic. The Orchestra, conducted by then-Music Director Lorin Maazel, performed it twice in February 2008: on February 26 in Pyongyang, DPRK, and on February 28 in Seoul, South Korea.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, harp, and strings, in addition to the soprano soloist.

---

## Text

### *Shin Arirang (New Arirang)*

Lyrics by Myung-Moon Yang (1913–85)

Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo . . .  
You climb the Arirang hill.

Standing at the twig gate, I am waiting for you!  
A flock of wild geese is flying through the moonlit sky in single file.

You, my love, whom I had met so happily at peony time, never came back to me,  
And now all white chrysanthemums are wilting and fading away.

The moon has set behind the western mountains and I am lonely and restless;  
There is no way to undo the love in which my heart is ensnared.

Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo . . .  
You climb the Arirang Hill.

Should I build a little thatched cottage at the foot of the mountain  
and live like a flowing stream?

Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo.  
You climb the Arirang Hill.