

# **MTSU Wind Ensemble Korean Tour 2005**

## **As noted by Professor Stephen Smith**

### **Wednesday, 10 August:**

Everyone arrives at Nashville airport as planned, checks baggage, and awaits flight to Korea. Unfortunately, we discover that the three faculty members who are to accompany the students on the tour, Reed Thomas, Todd Waldecker, and Stephen Smith, have tickets for a different flight to Tokyo out of Chicago. Dr. Thomas is able to get that worked out so that the faculty members are with the students for the entire flight. The flight itself is rather uneventful, except for the fact that Mr. Smith discovers about half way over the Pacific that his left hand, which had been stung by a wasp earlier on the morning of the flight, has begun to swell up like a balloon. Picked up some allergy medicine at Narita airport in Tokyo. It didn't help much, but at least we tried to do something. After a few days the hand looked normal.

### **Thursday, 11 August:**

Upon arrival at Incheon International Airport, we are met by a hotel employee, who shows us the way to the bus which will take us to the hotel for some much needed rest. We discover that many Korean buses cannot accommodate all of the group plus our luggage and instruments. Dr. Waldecker remains with the luggage that we are unable to get onto the bus, and the rest of us travel to the hotel. Dr. Waldecker's wait with the luggage ends up being over an hour and a half, but finally, he too is able to get to the hotel.

Most of the group stumbles around in the dark at the hotel until we discover that we must place our room key into a slot by the door in order to work the lights in our rooms. And there's something about water and hotel rooms in Korea. More than one of the group is introduced to a toilet that has a built in bidet. There's nothing quite like finishing up your toilet routine with a surprising shower from beneath, especially while sitting in the dark. Many of us will never forget our first Korean toilet experience – "wet and wild in Incheon," or "water, water everywhere."

We are all impressed by how friendly everyone seems to be.

### **Friday, 12 August:**

We awaken early this morning in order to get to the airport for the next leg of our journey. The van driver gets confused and unloads much of our luggage at the wrong terminal at Gimpo Airport, the domestic Korean airport outside of Seoul. We reload the van and join the bus at the correct terminal. All else goes very smoothly on our flight down to Jeju Island for the festival.

We are met at the airport on Jeju by our two Korean guides, who will be with us for most of our stay in Jeju. They seem very excited to be with us, and they escort us to the bus which is to take us to our hotel. Once again, the bus cannot accommodate all of us plus our luggage and instruments unless we load much of our luggage onto the seats of the bus, which we do. And it's off to the hotel, where we unload our stuff into the rooms which we will occupy for the next several days.

On the way to our first rehearsal of the tour we stop off at a local bank to exchange some dollars into Korean Wan. The bank has just closed by the time we get there, but one of our guides goes around to the back of the building and somehow gets into the bank. They agree to allow us to exchange our money, which is a good thing, seeing as how the banks are closed on Saturdays and Sundays, and the following Monday is a holiday as well. It is my first "back door banking" experience. We are taken to a local school for a rehearsal. The band room is small and if there is any air conditioning it not noticeable. It is cramped and loud in such a small space, but it is nice to finally run through some of the pieces we will be performing during the tour.

After the rehearsal we go out to a Korean restaurant for some authentic Korean fare. Elliot finds out that hot foods sometimes come in green.

### **Saturday, 13 August:**

"The Longest Day." What is it about Koreans and the water in their toilets? It's very hard to keep the seat dry when you're straddling the toilet as you shower. I guess it's an efficient use of space. And the towels, though smaller than we are used to, do get the job done.

The bunk beds a real treat for Smith and Waldecker, but we make the sacrifice so that Maestro Thomas can rest peacefully in his spacious surroundings as he prepares for the concerts. Talk about collegiality!

We arrive at our first concert venue, the Jeju Cultural and Art Center, for a sound check at around 10am for an 11am performance. The air

conditioning has not been running and it is rather stuffy in the Hall. They soon get the air up and running, and though it remains somewhat warm no stage, it is much more comfortable by the time of the concert. If you're not in air conditioned comfort in Korea in August, you're hot and wet.

Where have all the double basses gone? It is unfortunate, but Peter has to play his bass lines on a keyboard from time to time. The concert is well attended, and the students perform very well, though we are all a bit jet lagged and not as rested as we would like.

We visit a Buddhist temple. Many of us walk up the hill on the temple grounds in search of "enlightenment" only to find the peace that comes from construction site contemplation. Still, the visit is very interesting. For most of us it is our first visit to a place of worship that is not a Christian church. Besides, the exercise probably did us all a lot of good. On the way back from the temple we have our "Mysterious Road" experience. The bus driver shuts off the engine of the bus, puts it in neutral, and we coast. That's not all that "mysterious." But when you consider that it certainly does appear to all of us that we are "coasting" uphill, it is indeed "mysterious." Apparently our construction site contemplation (they are building a temple at the top of the mountain) and our "mysterious road" adventure paid off. At one with the universe, we head down the mountain in a less than straight, but certainly fairly narrow, path to our sound check at our next concert venue, the Cheonjiyeon Falls.

After the sound check, in which we have a very different opinion than some of the Korean technical staff about the value of sound monitors in the performance space, we head for dinner, once again a Korean feast.

We are all exhausted by the time we perform that evening, at around 9:40pm, the final group on the program. I notice several of members of the Wind Ensemble dozing off during the performances of the two groups which precede us. But our performance goes very well, in some ways even stronger than the morning concert. We had been told not to expect any standing ovations on this tour, as Koreans tend to be rather reserved in that respect. After our evening performance, however, numerous audience members stood up cheering. So much for Korean reserve. We leave them wanting more.

After the evening concert the ensemble spends time talking with several members of the all-girl ensemble that shared our concert. They are shy at first about speaking English, but our students put them at ease. And even though we are all dragging our feet at this point in the evening, the students take the time to talk with those girls. I am very proud to be a

part of this group. As I watch the interaction among the Korean girls and the members of the Wind Ensemble, I am reminded of one of the main reasons for our trip. The MTSU students are doing a great job as goodwill ambassadors, and all of us can be justifiably proud of them.

I notice a Buddhist monk in the audience during the concert. Dr. Thomas had purchased a beautiful piece of art work from him earlier that afternoon, and he apparently has decided to come to our performance. He is clearly enjoying the Ensemble's performance, clapping his hands in time with the music, and even joining those numerous members of the audience who stand to give us such a wonderful ovation at the end. He comes up to me at the conclusion of the concert and tells me how much he enjoyed our music.

Back to the hotel for some much needed rest.

### **Sunday, 14 August:**

Dr. Waldecker has agreed to give a young Korean clarinetist a lesson this morning. The young lady's father shows up with his daughter for the 9am lesson shortly after 8am. Dr. Waldecker cuts short his breakfast in order to give the girl an early lesson.

The bus takes us to a place where the buildings are supposedly built as they would have been built many centuries ago, with thatched roofs and what looks like bamboo and wood. There is a good deal of art work here, as well, primarily works made from lava flows.

Grape and green tea ice cream is a big hit with several of our students, as they discover after they make their purchases at a refreshment stand on the grounds. It's hot!!

We go shopping and sightseeing at a Korean market, with numerous vendors selling all manner of Korean wares. Among the most impressive items for sale are pigs' heads and live seafood. Old ladies lie on vegetables preparing articles for sale.

Sound check at the outdoor concert venue that we are to perform later in the evening, the Jeju Seaside Arts Center. No problem with the monitors at this venue, a huge outdoor space. We definitely need them here. The concert goes very well, one of our best, and for perhaps our largest single audience of the tour. And the audience is very appreciative. The students play superbly.

### **Monday, 15 August:**

After breakfast we take off to the beach, a beach with black sand. Dr. Thomas gets buried, for medicinal purposes only, of course. And most of the students get into the water and make a big splash.

After a Korean lunch we take off to visit the old city on Jeju Island. Very interesting collection of buildings that have been preserved for so many centuries. Souvenirs purchased by many at the gift shop on the grounds.

Late afternoon finds the Ensemble getting lined up for a parade, which includes all of the groups participating in the festival. The students don't play as we walk the parade route. They don't even have their instruments with them. But as we walk and wave to the people standing on the sidewalks, we pass out candy to most of them. It is well received, and there are many smiles all around.

We attend a concert at the Jeju Seaside Arts Center, which includes a couple of pieces commissioned for this particular festival and conducted by the composers. The Korean clarinetist, who performed a recital this past winter at MTSU, takes the MTSU faculty members out for a remarkable Korean feast by the sea. He calls a friend who has a friend who just happens to own a restaurant, and when we arrive for our meal we are treated like royalty. The platters of food, mostly raw fish, just keep coming. It's almost too much.

### **Tuesday, 16 August:**

We check out of the hotel early and head for the airport, where we board a plane for Mokwan University in Daejeon, where we will share a concert with the Wind Ensemble from Mokwan, performing together on several pieces.

After lunch we head to campus for a rehearsal. The music building at the university is undergoing some expansion and renovation. They are adding another floor to the building. There is a good deal of dust around the rehearsal room, and with both ensembles rehearsing together, it is warm and crowded. Still, the rehearsal goes very well.

After the rehearsal we are treated to a phenomenal banquet across the way from our upcoming performance venue. Such a spread I have never experienced before, and from the comments of many of the students, most of them had not experienced such incomparable hospitality and exquisite dining either. Every bite of food placed in our mouths seemed even more incredible than the last. As one of the members of the

ensemble was heard to exclaim, “this is just ridiculous!” The chefs are called out to meet us, where they receive a well-deserved standing ovation from our group.

**Wednesday, 17 August:**

We get to sit in chairs today at lunch. This would seem inconsequential under normal circumstances. But, as we have been sitting crossed-legged on the floor during most of our meals on this tour, it is a welcome change of pace. And, as it has been at every meal we have eaten here in Korea, the food, while different in many ways from our “normal” American fare, is excellent.

We have a rehearsal in the hall where the concert is to take place later in the evening after lunch, grab a bit to eat at a local Korean restaurant, and then, after Dr. Thomas pays a visit to a nearby doctor of acupuncture, we walk over to the concert hall.

The concert goes extremely well, and the audience is very appreciative. The performance is videotaped for a later Korean television broadcast. After the concert the ensemble travels to a local restaurant for a get together with the members of the Mokwan University Wind Ensemble. There is nothing quite like good food and a successful concert experience to break the ice, and the students, both Korean and American alike, seem to have a wonderful time together. Many in the group even get up and sing a little karaoke. Even Dr. Thomas jumps on the karaoke bandwagon and entertains us all with a magical rendition of “What A Beautiful World.”

**Thursday, 18 August:**

Getting used to the Korean use of air conditioning is taking some effort. In an effort to conserve energy, the Koreans generally do not run the air conditioning in areas that are not going to have people around for relatively long periods of time. Hallways in the hotels are often quite hot and stuffy. And the hotel rooms are usually rather uncomfortably warm until someone actually goes into the room and turns on the air conditioning unit. The difference in temperature from the hotel hallway and the hotel room can often be quite large.

We arrange for the Mokwan University bus driver to drive us to Seoul on the university bus. It costs us less than ordering another bus, and it also gives us a chance to get to know him better. On the way to Seoul, which takes about three hours from Daejeong, we stop at what I suppose

could be called a Korean rest area, with a food court and other shopping opportunities. In many ways it is almost like a small shopping mall.

The bus ride to Seoul is choppy for some than for others, the bumps in the road more noticeable for a few of us, but we make it in good shape despite the tremendous amount of traffic, which is especially bad several miles outside of the city.

When we arrive at our “hotel” we discover that though the building in which we will be sleeping is rather modern and clean, it has no elevators. And we are living on the fifth floor! We all get plenty of exercise carrying our luggage from the bus and into our rooms on the fifth floor. Everyone is once again reminded of the advantages of packing light. No one has actually packed lightly for this trip, I suspect many will do so on future Wind Ensemble tours.

And once again, our hosts display magnificent hospitality, making everyone in the group feel right at home.

We take the bus to a great shopping area of the city, and the ensemble takes off in search of bargains.

### **Friday, 19 August:**

The showers in our “hotel” are more public than private, and we end up learning more about each other than we ever really wanted to. The ladies end up having to walk down to the third floor for their showers, while the guys are fortunate to be able to shower on the fifth floor. It’s sort of like gym class all over again, only Korean style.

We hop on the bus and travel by the Korean “White House,” the residence of the President. The bus is unable to stop for us to get out and take pictures, but most of us do at least get a glimpse of the residence in the distance. We also travel to the Palace, where the former kings of Korea once resided. We observe the changing of the Palace Guard and take numerous pictures of all the beautiful restored buildings on the Palace grounds.

After a nice lunch we travel to the concert hall for a rehearsal and sound check. The hall seats about 800, but we are told that there may well be over a thousand in attendance.

After the rehearsal we walk over to an eating area, where the vice mayor of the city welcomes us and we are treated to, you guessed it, another fabulous Korean meal.

After the meal we all walk back over to the hall. It has begun raining fairly heavily, and our hosts have provided us with umbrellas.

The performance is amazing! There are well over a thousand people in the audience, including the mayor, who welcomes and thanks us all at a reception after the concert. The students play very well tonight. It's hard not to perform at your highest level when you see every seat taken and people sitting in the aisles and lined up standing in two or three rows at the back and along the sides of the auditorium. What a way to end a wonderful tour!

**Saturday, 20 August:**

Many of us decide not to sleep very much after we get back in order to try and make an easier transition to the M'boro time zone. We actually leave the "hotel" about four minutes earlier than planned because everyone is on the bus and ready to go ahead of schedule.

The bus takes us back to Incheon International Airport, where United Airlines has already taken the time to get all of our boarding cards in order for us. We simply have to stand in line and check all of our baggage. All goes very smoothly, and the plane takes off shortly after its scheduled departure time. We travel in three groups, the last group arriving in Nashville at about 11pm.