



# The Korean Danso

by Victoria Shoemaker

Korea entered what became known as the Joseon (also seen as Chosun or Choson) Dynasty, the longest lasting dynasty in Korean history, starting in 1392 and ending in 1910. During those 500 years, there were many aspects of Korean culture that arose and became tradition, such as the alphabet that is used today and musical notation. It was during this time period that music truly became a serious form of study in the Korean culture.

The two main categories of Korean music are court music and folk music. Each of these categories can be further broken down, with court music being sub-categorized based on royal, religious, or military uses, and folk music sub-categorized based upon celebrations, social status, shamanistic rituals, and more. The instruments of Korea are also organized by category: wind, string, and percussion. Each category of instrument has uses in each music category, with many of the same compositional techniques used to create the unique sounds of Korean music. The music is known for its polyphonic melodies and harmonies with complex rhythms and unique instrumental timbres. With a pure, sweet tone and an extended range, one of the instruments used in multiple categories of Korean music is the *danso*.

The danso (or tanso) is a 15.4-inch notched, vertical flute that is frequently used in Korean music. In Korean, “dan” translates to “short,” meaning that the danso is literally a “short flute.” The origin of the danso can clearly be seen in the Chinese instrument “duanxiao.” The danso has four finger holes and one thumb hole. However, the bottom finger hole is not in existence to create different tones. Only the top three finger holes and the thumb hole are used when playing the danso, but this does not take away from the range of the instrument. The lowest note on a danso is a  $G_4$  and the highest note is the  $G_6$ . The scale of the danso, played without any alternate fingerings, is:  $G - A - B - C - D - E - F - G$ . In Western music, this is the mixolydian mode, a scale that is commonly used in jazz, rock, and blues music.

The danso has a small diameter, so to create a tone one must have a focused aperture in order to direct the airstream in a precise fashion. After placing the notched end against the lower lip, the flute should be held away from the body at an angle of approximately 45 degrees. The top opening of the flute should mostly be covered by the bottom lip, with a small opening through which the air can travel to create sound. Using a small aperture requires the corners of the lips to be firm, but not overly tight. Having tight corners will create a rigid aperture, which in turn will make it difficult to move between octaves with ease. It will also increase the difficulty in creating subtle nuances and pitch adjustments.

With the danso being made of bamboo, a readily available material, it was used as a training and teaching instrument within the schools. Considered easy to learn and easy to play, many students would master the danso before moving on to more challenging instruments such as the *daegum*. The pure tone of the danso allows it to be played in many different ensembles, as well as solo. As previously mentioned, this allows the flute to be played across genres of music in Korea.



At the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, Korea was centered around Buddhism, but was moving toward Confucianism. With this transition, strict boundaries and laws concerning Korean Buddhism were put into place. As the Joseon Dynasty began to decline, Korean Buddhism became less restricted. This meant that as the danso began to earn a place in Korean culture, it was being used for court music that had origins in Buddhist chant. One of these pieces is called “Yeongsan hoesang.” This composition uses eight movements to depict a chant that is based on a sermon given by the Buddha at the base of Yeongsan Mountain. To hear an ensemble version of “Yeongsan hoesang,” please visit:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2qPqf75p5w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2qPqf75p5w)

Not only is the danso used for court music, it is also used to play folk music. One of the most common folk songs, “Arirang,” is widely known throughout the country. This simple folk song has a deeply rooted history in both loss and hope. While the words tell of a painful abandonment, the melody itself sounds hopeful, although slightly melancholic. With a pure tone that can be manipulated through breath

control and extended techniques such as vibrato and trills, the danso is perfect for playing this song as a solo or with accompaniment. To hear this folk song, please visit:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKI86uUiR\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKI86uUiR_M)

While both the students and professionals use bamboo danso, the use of plastic has made the danso more accessible to anyone who would like to play the danso as a pastime. It has found increased popularity in Korea, and it can be found in homes and schools being played for personal satisfaction, as well as in cultured performance.



Danso Fingering Chart

Note: All pitches sound an octave higher than written.

## Arirang

Traditional Korean

Dr. Kathleen Joyce-Grendahl, arr.

Nakai TABlature System

NAF

Danso photos are from the Peter Phippen and Victoria Shoemaker instrumental collections.

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