

“A Tale of Music”

Kwi-Mi Kang

Linda Ensor
Shore Regional High School
West Long Branch, New Jersey

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Grade 9: World Literature

Time requirement: Three 40-minute class periods

Summary

Kwi-Mi Kang's short story, "A Tale of Music," describes the life of two young *zainichi* (living as foreigners in Japan) Korean men who are talented musicians. Narrated by their sister, the story is a tale of nationalism, self-abnegation, and duty. The brothers study music while students in Japan following the Korean War, and their situation allows the author to reveal the prejudice of the Japanese towards the Koreans. Once the family returns to North Korea, one brother continues to follow a musical career. The other brother, however, eschews life as a professional musician and pursues instead a career as a mason in a granite quarry. The narrator of the story focuses her tale on this brother, who turns away from a career as an artist and chooses instead to work in a quarry for the state, discovering "the music in the rocks" as he builds monuments to North Korea's great leader, Kim Jong-Il.

Historical/Literary Context

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) came into being after World War II. When the Japanese withdrew from Korea, the Soviets moved into the northern region of the country and the United States moved into the southern region. In 1948, the DPRK officially came into being. Two years later, in 1950, the southern region declared its independence, and North Korean forces invaded the area, initiating the Korean War. In 1953, after two million Koreans had died in the fray, a ceasefire agreement established a demilitarized zone between the North and the South and ended the bloody conflict (CBC News).

"A Tale of Music" opens in the period following the Korean War; the narrator's family lives in Japan as *zainichi* Koreans. During World War II, many Koreans were conscripted into the Japanese army and munitions factories to supply much-needed manpower. Approximately 25% of these *zainichi* lived in extreme poverty. Yet, after the war ended, many remained in Japan, despite the hardships their status as foreigners brought them. Meanwhile, during this period North Korea strove to speed up its postwar reconstruction process and needed manpower to do so. In 1958 some of the young Koreans living in Japan wrote to Kim Il-Sung for permission to return to their homeland. Between 1958 and 1967, 88,000 people left Japan for North Korea; 6,000 of these were Japanese (Korean reader 60). It is during this period that the family in "A Tale of Music" decides to return to North Korea, motivated primarily by national pride.

The story's focus on North Korean nationalism is representative of the mood of the nation under Kim Il-Sung, who assumed control of Korea upon its creation in 1948 and continued as the leader of North Korea following the Korean War. According to Tatiana Gabroussenko,

In the first four years of the 1990s, North Korean literature pursued seemingly conflicting goals: xenophobic nationalism, worshipping Kim Il-Sung, Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jung-sook, the elder Kim's first wife and the younger Kim's mother; and anti-U.S. imperialism, scientific and technological advancements, economic development, food production by making land reclamation projects to expand farm land and crop diversification. North Korean literature reflected what North Korea lacked: internationalism, advanced science and technology, food, new leadership, and stability (Gabroussenko).

These conflicting goals appear in Kwi-Mi Kang's story. The poverty of the family is apparent while they live in Japan. Once they return to their homeland, the narrator says little about the family's financial situation. Instead, she directs the reader's attention to the process by which one brother decides to devote his life to the state. As this brother assumes his position in the granite quarry, the narrator reveals the North Korean emphasis on economic development and technological advances, as well as the people's worshipful attitude towards Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il and their disdain for what they see as American imperialism.

The actions the younger brother takes comply with the concept of *juche*. In 1955 Kim Il-Sung made a speech in which he mentioned *juche* as he urged the people to create a new nation, one modeled on Korean ideology and not grounded in Soviet theory. Ten years later, he called for the North Koreans to realize further their *juche*, or self-reliance and emphasis on all things Korean, in their economy, their political system, and their military (Kim).

Analysis of North Korean literature requires some review and/or discussion of the politics of the nation, for the country's artistic ventures continue to be directed by the political leadership and are infused with the values of the Communist state (Epstein). In keeping with this tradition, little is known about the author of "A Tale of Music." While critics generally assume the writer to be female, no facts about her have been released; this secrecy may reflect, at least in part, North Korea's "group think" mentality and its leaders' concerns that an individual not gain personal fame at the expense of the masses (National Public Radio).

"A Tale of Music" was published in 2003 in *Choson Munhak*, North Korea's official magazine. According to most literary critics, no literature other than propagandist pieces appears within the country's borders. Authors' bylines are printed in the *Choson Munhak* without biographical information (Harris). The story is included in the anthology *Literature from the Axis of Evil: Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Other Enemy Nations* (2006).

Discussion questions and answers

1. How do the various groups within the story respond to second brother's talent as a trumpeter?

Answer: The Japanese students are threatened by the musical abilities of this young Korean and subject him to hurtful comments and behaviors. The music teacher is thrilled by the talent second brother evinces and wants to see him remain in Japan to hone his abilities further. The district president of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan urges the family to return to North Korea so that the brother might perform within his native country and not be viewed as a Japanese performer. The parents want to support second brother in his artistic quest, and they ultimately decide to return to North Korea so that the children can pursue their dreams within their homeland. The responses of the Koreans (the district president and the family) reflect the spirit of juche, which is often translated as "self-reliance" and "independent stand." Kim Il-Sung encouraged juche in all areas of North Korean society: he wanted the people to put all things Korean first.

2. As the narrator describes the hardships the family endures while living in Japan, what are some of the details she includes as she depicts their harsh living conditions?

Answer: She says “I will have to go back far to a time when my family lived in abject poverty in Japan.” The family’s house “shrank under the weight” of their poverty. The parents held menial jobs: the father pulled a scavenger’s wagon, and the mother worked for a while in a sardine factory. (She was fired from this position because she was Korean.) Second brother would not eat the lunch his mother packed for him because he did not want to deal with teasing by the Japanese students (Korean reader 61). The parents wanted to send the children to a Korean school but could not afford the train fare (Korean reader 61). The older brother had to work in an iron works to help support the family (Korean reader 62). Second brother is called “dirty Korean” by the headmaster of the Japanese school (Korean reader 63).

3. How does Kwi-Mi Kang reveal the passion the North Koreans have for their nation and their government through her characterization of second brother and her parents?

Answer: Kim Il-Sung insisted that Koreans were to put their nation above all else. The family’s decision to return to North Korea, even though second brother could have had a successful career as a trumpeter in Japan, reveals the importance of this principle to North Koreans (Korean reader 67). The music teacher’s response to their decision echoes the importance of their homeland to the Koreans: he comments, “You made me think about music and one’s nation. Make sure to be successful in your home country” (Korean reader 67).

Second brother’s decision to work for the state instead of becoming a professional musician is motivated by a strong sense of nationalism. After the Pueblo incident, he and many of his classmates decided to join the People’s Army. Hearing the radio broadcast concerning the presence of an American military reconnaissance plane in North Korean airspace helped his parents and his siblings understand the basis for his decision. His father states, “My family should have at least one People’s Army soldier, because we have enjoyed only benefits after our return home.” His mother avers, “I agree that you should join the army. Our country comes first” (Korean reader 68).

In his first letter to his parents, second brother describes Kim Il-Sung as the sun, and he says that he will sing about the sun all his life (Korean reader 69). Upon his return from the military, second brother announces that he will devote his life to working for the state (Korean reader 69). As his sister reads his journal entries concerning his time in the military, she discovers his passion for Kim Il-Sung and his hatred of the Americans (Korean reader 71). In one of the passages in his notebook, the brother writes that his trumpet is “too weak to sing about the mercy of the great sun. It is helpless” (Korean reader 72).

4. The style of the language and its “musicality” (i.e., the author’s use of bold and/or figurative language) change when the family returns to North Korea from Japan. How

does this shift in language reflect the story's shift in tone and reinforce its nationalistic theme? (See pp. 11-12 for worksheet.)

Answer: While the family lives in Japan, their lives are difficult and dismal. This is reflected in the style of the language. Syntactically, the sentences in the first section of the story are relatively shorter than they are in the second section, and the images created within the narration are sorrowful and heavy. For example, the narrator describes her response to the sound of the flowing river, the trains' wheels, and the whistles as sorrowful (Korean reader 61). The sentences are direct, and the language is somewhat terse. In relating the discussions her mother has with second brother, the narrator is straightforward, and her sentences are simple:

“You mean unpack cooked barley and radish pickles in front of the Japanese kids?”

“Then you haven't eaten lunch this whole time?”

(Silence.)

“Answer me,” my mother said anxiously (Korean reader 61).

When the family departs from Japan, that event is related plainly:

At last, the ship left Niigata port. The land of Japan receded in the distance. The music teacher standing on the pier looked smaller and smaller until he became a mere speck. Eventually even the speck disappeared. Soon, the land of Japan was out of sight (Korean reader 67).

Once the family returns to North Korea, the language becomes bolder and, at times, florid. As the narrator describes her family's response to the Pueblo incident, she displays the national pride that had motivated her family to return to Korea: she states, “Our Socialist fatherland did not budge at all in the face of the American imperialists' threats, no matter what they were” (Korean reader 68). After second brother announces his plans to join the People's Army, the narrator observes, “Indeed the generation that experienced the loss of country thought differently. So my brother, fully supported by his parents, joined the People's Army together with his classmates” (Korean reader 68).

The most striking examples of this stylistic shift appear in second brother's notebooks and letters. In the first letter he sent home, he describes Kim Il-Sung as “the sun”:

“Looking up to the fatherly leader, who was standing there like the sun, I played the trumpet at the forefront of the ranks in the square. Only then did I finally meet the sun, which I sought so tearfully on the stage of a foreign country...I played my heart out from the beginning of the parade to the end. Father and Mother, I will sing about the great sun all my life. A person who sings the sun!” (Korean reader 69)

The shift in syntax, albeit at times subtle, creates a distinct difference in tone and supports the development of the nationalistic theme. As the family settles into North Korean society and second brother succumbs to the intense patriotism rife within the

culture, the tone brightens. The struggles of the family, so obvious in their time in Japanese, fade as quickly as their boat takes them to North Korea. Once they are in the land of Kim Il-Sung (and later, Kim Jong-Il), their troubles vanish, and the style of the narration reflects the freedom from despair in its relative lightness.

5. The concept of *juche* underpins most of this story. How does the constant insistence on “all things Korean first” affect the reader’s response to the story?

Answers will vary. Some students may still find the story to be a poignant tale of a young man’s decision to serve country over self and the emotional effect that it had on the character (and the reader). Others may find the propagandist approach of the story to be too heavy-handed, making the tale too political to be enjoyable.

Activities (All are based on curriculum ideas shared with the NCTA 2012 participants by Cecilia Boyce.)

Day One (40 minutes):

- The students will have read “A Tale of Music” for homework.
- The teacher will configure the room so that there are several groups of 3-4 desks throughout.
- As the students come into the room, they will receive a number that corresponds with one of the groups of desks and three blank “Four Squares” sheets (see p. 10).
- Each group will create three “Four Squares” based on “A Tale of Music.” These “Four Squares” will contain three details that are closely related to the story and one that does not belong.
- As each group creates these “Four Squares,” they will note on the back of each which detail does not belong and why it does not fit.
- After the groups have had 15-20 minutes to complete their “Four Squares,” they will present at least one of them to the rest of the class.
- The members of the class will discuss their responses to each of the “Four Squares” presented during the period.
- As time permits, each group can present another of their “Four Squares” and lead the discussion of the relationship of the details to the story.

Homework: *Re-read “A Tale of Music” and locate at least three examples of figurative language (personification, simile/metaphor, hyperbole, etc.) Note these examples in the margin and come prepared to discuss the effects of these devices on the tone of the story.*

Day Two (40 minutes—Today’s activities connect directly to discussion questions #3 and #4):

- As the students come into the classroom, they will seat themselves in small groups according to the nameplates the teacher set up on the desks.
- Within each group, the students will share their responses to last night’s homework assignment.

- After five minutes of sharing, for the remainder of the period, the students will participate in an “inner table/outer table” discussion of the connection between the author’s use of language and the propagandist themes of the story (see p. 13).

Homework: Re-read second brother’s journal entry on page 126 (Korean reader 72): “The revolutionary battle site...by the great general handed down forever.” Summarize in no more than four sentences what second brother is talking about in this entry.

Day Three (40 minutes):

- As the students come into the room, they will deposit their summaries into a basket.
- They will then seat themselves in groups of 3-4, according to the nameplates set out by the teacher prior to the start of class.
- On each desk will be a blank “Dinosaur Comic” template (see pp. 14-15).
- Each group will create a “Dinosaur Comic” based on one of the dialogues, scenes, or journal entries in “A Tale of Music.” One of the dinosaurs speaking must be second brother, Kim Il-Sung, or the narrator of the story.
- As time permits, the groups will share their comics with the class.

Connections to other literary works

The poem, “The Place Will Fit Everything,” also published in *Literature from the “Axis of Evil,”* can be used in conjunction with “A Tale of Music.” After reading the poem in class, students will discuss the differences in the writers’ approaches to their fatherlands.

The Place Will Fit Everything

--Ashur Etwebi (Libya)

The sound of the wind stretches its limbs.
 The jazz music withholds some of its ruckus.
 Hands move something in the dark.
 I say: just an old romanticism...
 No matter, the place will fit everything.
 Vision descends upon flaccid pathways
 and rides them on cheap metal.
 Dried out trees and others take their water
 from the drowned sand by force.
 I say: a passing depression.
 No matter, the place will fit everything.
 During the day the sun approaches the mountain,
 places its hand upon it,
 its cold hand of lovers,
 strikes stone with stone.
 Mountain scrub dances behind the stone.
 The sun does not see it.

Only the moon shines upon it all the way beyond the bend
and the guardian stones watch from afar.
I say: a passing coincidence.
No matter, the place will fit everything. (Etwebi 238-9)

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Appendices

Four Squares	p. 10
Analysis of Language	pp. 11-12
Table Talk Scoring	p. 13
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**FOUR SQUARES
(DAY ONE)**

Make a list of four details from “A Tale of Music.” Three of these details should be closely connected and the fourth does not belong. On the back of this sheet, explain the connection between the three and the basis for the exclusion of the fourth.

**EXAMINING THE EFFECT OF THE LANGUAGE IN “A TALE OF MUSIC”
(DISCUSSION QUESTION #4)**

The Music

Do the words sound pleasant? Do they sound harsh? Here is an opportunity to talk about rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance and the effects these sounds have the tone of the story.

Figures of Speech

You know these: personification, metaphor/simile, hyperbole, etc. How is the use of such devices involved in the creation of the tone of the story and/or its theme?




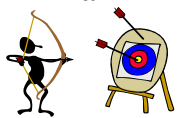




Consider how the author’s diction (her choice of words) reveals the message underlying the story and helps to create the mood or the tone of the piece.

Complete the chart on the back of this sheet with examples of diction from the two sections of the story (Japan and North Korea). Be prepared to share your observations in a whole-class discussion.

Locate at least six examples of memorable language within the story. Three of these examples should come from the first half of the story (the family in Japan) and three should come from the second half of the story (the family in North Korea). Write these examples in the appropriate columns (Japan or North Korea) and note the page number on which each appears. In the third column, note the tone or mood each example creates and, if relevant, how the example supports the nationalistic theme of the story.

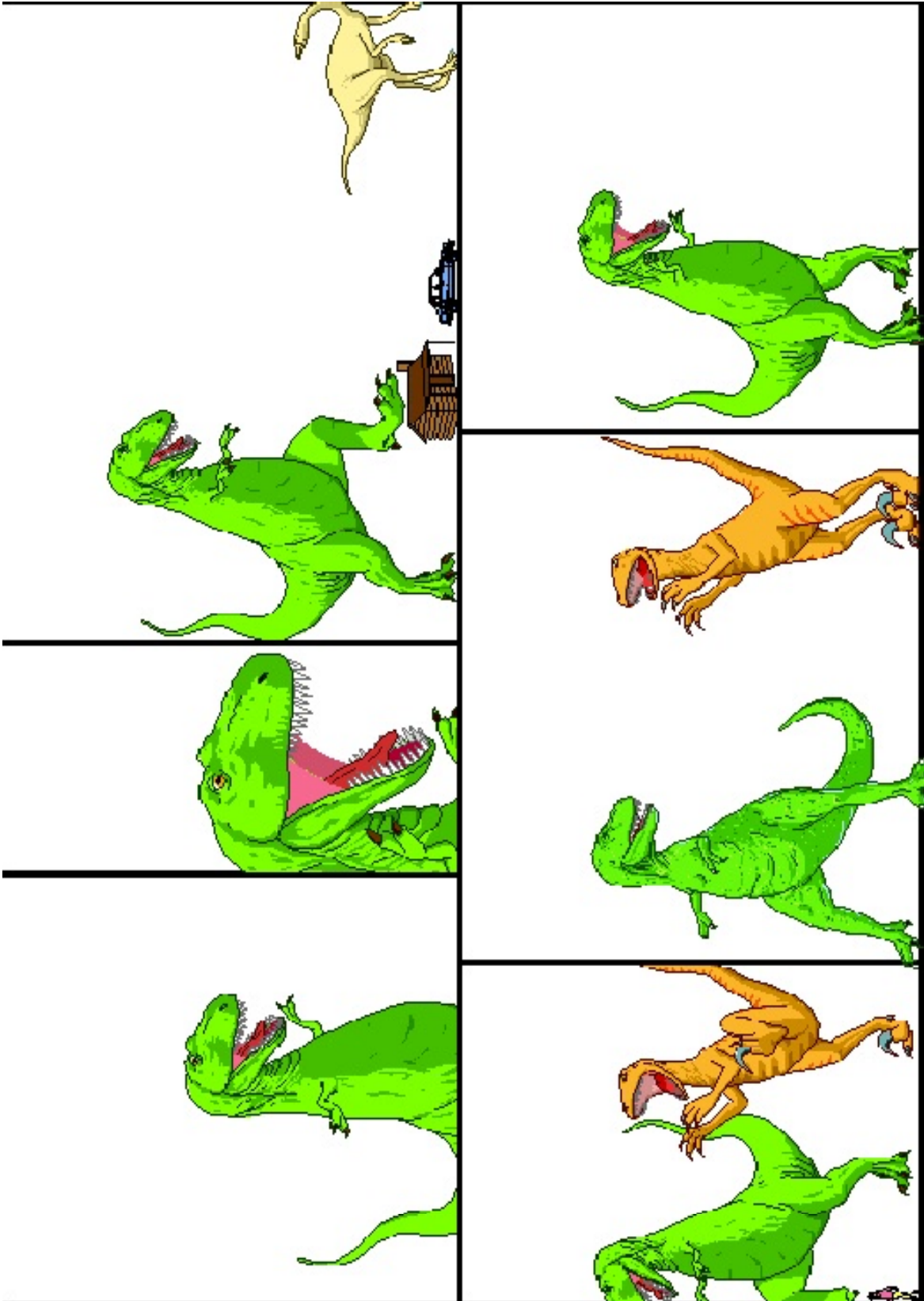
TEXT EXAMPLE (WITH PAGE NUMBER)	EFFECT ON STORY
FAMILY IN JAPAN	
1.	
2.	
3.	
FAMILY IN NORTH KOREA	
1.	
2.	
3.	

SCORESHEET FOR TABLE TALK (DAY TWO)

<p>Accountable to the Learning Community</p> <p>Choose one descriptor from this category.</p>	<p>Listen</p>  <p>Pay attention to the statements of others, maintains eye contact, uses appropriate tone & volume.</p> <p>___ 4 (consistently) ___ 3 (most of the time) ___ 2 (some of the time) ___ 1 (rarely) ___ 0 (not at all)</p>	<p>Summarize</p>  <p>Restates the ideas of a previous speaker in new language.</p> <p>___ 4 (consistently) ___ 3 (most of the time) ___ 2 (some of the time) ___ 1 (rarely) ___ 0 (not at all)</p>	<p>Build</p>  <p>Adds to the statement of a previous speaker.</p> <p>___ 4 (consistently) ___ 3 (most of the time) ___ 2 (some of the time) ___ 1 (rarely) ___ 0 (not at all)</p>	<p>Mark</p>  <p>Directs attention to the importance of another's statement.</p> <p>___ 4 (consistently) ___ 3 (most of the time) ___ 2 (some of the time) ___ 1 (rarely) ___ 0 (not at all)</p>
<p>Accountable to the Knowledge</p> <p>Must demonstrate starred descriptors.</p>	<p>Verify</p>  <p>Check your understanding of previous statements & knowledge.</p> <p>___ 4 (consistently) ___ 3 (most of the time) ___ 2 (some of the time) ___ 1 (rarely) ___ 0 (not at all)</p>	<p>Unpack *</p>  <p>Explain how you arrived at your answer.</p> <p>___ 4 (consistently) ___ 3 (most of the time) ___ 2 (some of the time) ___ 1 (rarely) ___ 0 (not at all)</p>	<p>Support *</p>  <p>Give examples & evidence to support your answer.</p> <p>___ 4 (consistently) ___ 3 (most of the time) ___ 2 (some of the time) ___ 1 (rarely) ___ 0 (not at all)</p>	<p>Link</p>  <p>Point out the relationships among previous statements & knowledge.</p> <p>___ 4 (consistently) ___ 3 (most of the time) ___ 2 (some of the time) ___ 1 (rarely) ___ 0 (not at all)</p>

**DINOSAUR COMICS
(DAY THREE)**

- Select one of the conversations or the events depicted in “A Tale of Music.”
- Create dialogue for each box in the “Dinosaur Comics” template on the back of this sheet.
- The comments made by each of the dinosaurs should reflect the tone and the philosophies of the characters involved, based on their roles in the story and within North Korean society.
- The big green dinosaur must represent one of these characters: the narrator, second brother, or Kim Il-Sung.
- Be prepared to share your group’s “Dinosaur Comic” with your classmates.



Interdisciplinary Connection: Music, Science, and Literature

Rocks can be actually musical. Sonorous, or lithophone, rock formations exist throughout the world. While second brother spiritually “listened” to the music of the rocks he shaped into monuments to the North Korean leaders Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il, many people have physically heard the music special rock formations can emit. Students who are interested in exploring such geological phenomena can research these formations and present a science-based report to the class.

Following is a partial list of locations where sonorous, or lithophone, rock formations appear:

1. Ringing Rocks Park - Upper Black Eddy, Pennsylvania, United States
2. Ringing Rocks Park - Lower Pottsgrove Township, Pennsylvania, United States
3. Bell Rock Range - Western Australia, Australia
4. Musical Stones of Skiddaw - Cumbria, England
5. Ringing Rocks Point of Interest - Ringing Rocks, Montana, United States
6. The Hill of the Bells (Cerro de las Campanas) - Querétaro, Mexico
7. The Ringing Stone - Tiree, Scotland

Lithophones are used to create music throughout the world. The Chinese were among the first to create musical instruments from stones; they created the stone *qing* (*bianqing*) during the Stone Age. In Korea, ritual music was performed on *pyeongyeong*, a stone instrument similar to the Chinese *bianqing*. Musically inclined students may find it interesting to research the use of stone-based instruments in various cultures.

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